

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“Taming the Tongue”

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James 3:1-12

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The third chapter of James opens with “Not many of you should become teachers my brothers and sisters.” Here on the second Sunday in September, smack in the middle of a month of focus on the DaySpring Chart, let us be clear, “Many of you should become teachers!” And many more of you should become Cleaners, Mowers, Greeters, Decorators, and Organizers. So, let’s just say that, in this case, this verse applies to the context of its original writing and has nothing to do with us. Can we agree to that?

Well, even while we do encourage you to become teachers, we do hear James’ caution. But let us hear it for what it is: Not many of you should become teachers. You know that teachers will be judged with greater strictness. And you know that we all stumble. We all make mistakes. If anyone doesn’t stumble in what they say, they are perfect in every way.

Get that? James says “we” all make mistakes. This is no knuckle-dragger talking. James’ writings would become scripture, part of the New Testament. So someone who has the capacity to be a mouthpiece for God is someone who also stumbles and makes mistakes with what he says. What chance do any of us have?

In a sense, none. But we already knew that. Is there a person among us who hasn’t said something or written something they wish they could take back? I’ve said things that I wish I could take back. Sometimes, I’ve said something that came out wrong, and when I went back and thought about it, I wish I’d said it a different way. In that sense, saying something wrong isn’t so much a matter of sinfulness as just a lack of carefulness or understanding. More time and more reflection produces a more thoughtful statement. As James has already said in chapter 1, be quick to listen and slow to speak.

I’m aware of a story of a man on a subway in a major city who was growing increasingly irritated at the antics of two children in his subway car. They were jumping around, carrying on, whining, fighting. And the observer was even more irritated with their irresponsible, unresponsive father, who just sat there staring off into space while his unruly kids bothered all the other passengers on the train. Finally, the man had had enough. He had to say something. What is this country coming to, when kids can’t behave themselves and a parent just sits there? “Sir, would you please take control of your children. They are being disrespectful to everyone else who is trying to sit quietly and enjoy the ride.” “Oh, what? I’m sorry,” the father replied, as if waking up from a trance. “I’m sorry. We’ve just come from the hospital. My wife, their mother just died, and I guess they don’t know how to act. Sorry.”

We’ve all talked when we wished we’d just been quiet. Other times we react to something someone says too quickly and spout back the first thing that comes to mind rather than pausing, considering, and praying about what to say or whether to just be quiet and let it pass. The decision to respond in the moment is usually the voice of pride—often wounded pride—or at least the voice of anxiety, worry, concern, or insecurity.

Responding in this way turns discourse into a bloodsport. If I can jab with a pointier stick, maybe I'll draw more blood than I'm spilling myself and I'll win. If you spend much time watching talking heads on television or listening to them on the radio, you are being formed in this way of conversing. Be careful. You aren't just neutrally consuming an entertainment product. It's getting inside you. It's shaping how you see the world and how you treat people who disagree with you on something. It's all over the place so be careful how you expose yourself. It is not going to form you in the virtues that shape Christian community. It's going to form you in the vices that shape argument, belligerence, and anger. Rather than learn to listen, you will learn to wait impatiently until the other person quits talking so you can score your points. This is very different from listening with the ears of the Spirit to what is actually happening in the relationship beyond the words being spoken.

I keep thinking about the story one of you told this week about a co-worker, who was just being hammered by a client about a business issue. As the two went back and forth, the exchange got more and more heated until the client delivered nasty personal attacks against the co-worker. Right at the moment he could have really gotten into it, like most of us would have most of the time to fight back, he just stopped his mouth and sat there and took it. After the client was done haranguing him, the two just sat there in stony silence, looking at one another. Then the client, now realizing what he was doing, admitted, "I'm sorry. I was over the line and I shouldn't have said that." And the two then were able to work toward resolution of the problem. The disciplined suffering silence of one gave room for the other to look inside himself.

There's always more going on than just what is evident in the words that come from our lips and more than the words that come from someone else's lips to our ears. That is what makes human communication so very wonderful and so very difficult.

In my house for several years it seemed that this movie with Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks came on TV almost every week on some channel. It's a classic Hollywood love story—boy meets girl; boy and girl can't stand each other; boy and girl unknowingly meet in an internet chat room and like each other on email, but can't stand each other in real life; boy discovers that girl he can't stand in real life is the same girl he likes on email. Boy likes girl on email and in real life. And you can figure out the rest . . . I'll give you a hint. They kiss at the end. Hope that didn't spoil it for you. I doubt it did. My wife knows that they kiss at the end and she keeps wanting to watch it. I can't figure that out.

There's an interesting subtext to the movie that is true to real life. It's part of what James was talking about 2000 years ago. It's the desire we have to say something hurtful when we are hurt—to deliver just the right zinger and get back at the person who demeaned, insulted, or otherwise stepped on our toes. And then the regret that comes from having done it. In the movie the boy is really good at it. He has just the right comeback at just the right time to inflict maximum damage. The girl wishes she were good at it. She always thinks of the best comeback too late. And you know, once the moment has passed, it's too late. And so as he wrestles with the regret of spouting off eloquent, nasty attacks, she struggles with the frustration of not being able to do it when she wants. The climax of the story is the moment he's figured out she's the same person in real life and email, but she doesn't know who he is yet and she's about to say something nasty to him and he stops her—out of his own experience of having hurt people—he stops her—shhh. Don't say something now that you'll regret tomorrow. And isn't that just plain old good advice that would make our lives better and easier in all

sorts of ways. James says, “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire. And the tongue is a fire.”

Did you know that investigators believe that the forest fires burning around Los Angeles in recent weeks, fires that scorched over 200 square miles, burned over 100 homes and claimed the lives of two firefighters, were set intentionally? Someone did it on purpose—just a little spark was all it took to set ablaze such a fire. Just as often these massive fires are set unintentionally. Someone absentmindedly tosses a cigarette out of a moving car and the forest is ablaze again. On purpose or absentmindedly, all it takes is a small fire to do great damage.

What did James mean “We all stumble”? Maybe he meant that every teacher at some point hears himself or herself explaining something and then realizes that they’ve just spouted heresy. We all stumble and hear ourselves say something and think, “Why did I just say that?” That’s not right. So maybe that’s what he meant—that we make mistakes so be careful if you are going to teach because it matters what you teach.

Maybe he meant that sometimes a teacher will teach something and later learn that what they taught just isn’t true. They got their facts wrong. Surely there was some teacher in front of a class in 1543 teaching about the glories of the solar system revolving around the earth when Copernicus’s book hit the shelves at the bookstore. My world history teacher in the 10th grade in the late 1980’s told us once, I may not know a lot but you can be sure of two things, Europe will never again see a united Germany and the Chicago Bulls will never win a championship with Michael Jordan. Maybe that’s what James meant. Be careful when you teach because you might say something that turns out to not be true.

Maybe what he meant was that we all say things we are going to wish we hadn’t said in all sorts of ways. That’s part of the messiness of life and relationships. Our words are not the Word of God, which is as the psalmist says: always perfect, sure, right, clear, pure, true and righteous. We are more often like Peter standing there taking a tongue lashing from Jesus whom Peter had just had the temerity to take aside and rebuke. Get behind me Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but human things.

Sometimes, in our speech, we must heed the words of Jesus who told us to deny ourselves. Deny ourselves the pleasure of the quick jab, the easy response, the defensive attack. Deny ourselves the pleasure of seeing someone else hurt so that we can feel better momentarily. Deny ourselves the desire to strike quickly. Deny ourselves the momentary things of man that we may see the long-lasting things of God. It’s hard. That’s why Jesus calls this sort of thing a cross to bear. Take up your cross and follow me.

There’s a broader implication and lesson to this teaching on our speech. The sequence of James 3 is a very Christian-shaped sequence. Be careful because we all make mistakes with our speech. No one is perfect. But we’ve all got to work on this. We’ve got to tame the tongue.

Do you see the pattern? You see it all through scripture. We all make mistakes. We’ve got to get better.

You see it in Romans 3, “For all have fallen short of the glory of God.”

And Romans 6, “How can we who died to sin still live in it?”

You see it in Ephesians 2, “God, being rich in mercy, even when we were dead in our sins, made us alive together with Christ.”

And Ephesians 5, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us.”

You hear it in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

This is a very Christian pattern: We all make mistakes. When we do, and when we repent, God is gracious, forgiving, welcoming, accepting, restoring. And we’ve got to get better. The Christian life is a path that is always full of mistakes, but is a path upward to God. We shouldn’t just stay in the moment of first grace, but go on upward and higher. As said centuries ago by Gregory of Nyssa, the Christian life must first be defined by seeking God without end. He said, “True satisfaction of the soul’s desire consists in constantly going on with this quest and never ceasing in the ascent to God.”

You don’t get there overnight. It’s a journey of stages, like ascending a tall mountain. The first stage, the one that enables later spiritual growth, is to gain control over your passions. This is where James 3 is helping us. Get control over this one area and you will find spiritual growth flowing in other areas. One of you recently rightly observed that when we speak hurtfully, we are usually speaking out of a place of passion, just untamed passion. It’s something good that has gone sour. Understanding this, the monastics said “Watch your heart always. Constantly say the prayer ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ Be humble. Set your soul in quietness.”

This quietness and humility of soul requires discipline, but the fruit of your labor to gain control over the sprawling passions, enables you to endure insults, hardships, persecutions, and to have the right word to speak at the right time. This is called wisdom.

This is the direction we are taken by following Christ, whatever cross must be laid on our shoulders. We embrace the divine silence that we might not add to the noise of the human condition. As we move through the spiritual journey, we become people whose wisdom in spoken word nurtures and is nurtured by a peaceful stillness in our souls. Our words and our silence become a path to the life of God. As another church father writes:

Trinity! Higher than any being . . .
Where the mysteries of God’s Word
Lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
In the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.