

## TAMING THE TONGUE

James 3: 1-12

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Calvin Coolidge was the 30th President of the United States. He became president following Warren Harding's death in 1923 and was elected to his own term in 1924. He was a man of few words. Even at official dinners which he was compelled to attend, President Coolidge usually had nothing to say. When asked during one of these occasions as to why he was so silent, he replied, "Got to eat somewhere." His reluctance to speak in public was so well-known that on one occasion a vivacious socialite sought his assistance. She had made a bet that she could get him to speak more than two words. He replied, "You lose." I suspect that Calvin Coolidge would have felt right at home with the Scripture that was read a few moments ago.

I am also confident that James would have wholeheartedly agreed with Calvin Coolidge's reluctance to speak. In fact, he begins the third chapter of his letter by warning that those who are authority in the church, like teachers, should realize that they will be judged more strictly regarding what they say. In fact, as he continues to write, James doesn't have many positive things to say about speech, especially as it relates to the tongue. Let's take a look at what he said and see if there are some things that could prove to be beneficial for you and me this morning. According to Biblical scholars, this passage of Scripture can be broken down into two parts, verses one through four and verses five through twelve. The first part is called "**the power of the tongue.**" The second part is best described as the "**perversity of the tongue.**" Let's take a look at each of them.

No one should ever doubt that the tongue is powerful. James uses two vivid illustrations to drive home his point. He says that the tongue is like a bridle on a horse and a rudder on a ship. As we discovered earlier, a bridle is a fairly small part of a rider's gear. Nevertheless, it is quite important. If you want to control a horse, you need a bridle. Take it from me I learned that a long time ago when I got on a great big gray horse. He turned his head around and looked at me and I looked at him. We both read each other's minds. He said, "I'm going to buck you off," and I said, "Horse, oh no you're not." As soon as we were led into the middle of a great big field, the horse headed off towards a great big tree. I knew what he had in mind and made full use of that bridle. When the ride was over, I was glad to get off and the horse was probably glad to not have me yanking on his bridle. Likewise, a rudder, even though it is a relatively small part of a ship, does indeed determine the direction in which it goes. In the days before engines, a

sailboat without a rudder was a vessel in deep distress, especially if it was being blown towards a shoreline.

In the same way our tongues exercise a power and authority much greater than their size within the human anatomy. An example from the past illustrates this point dramatically. Adolf Hitler used his tongue to deceive an entire nation and led them down the pathway to war. Even more startling, schools in Germany following World War II tried to educate children as to what had taken place in the past by showing films of some of Hitler's speeches. The children were so mesmerized, listening with such rapt attention and admiration, that they quickly abandoned this approach to teaching the history of the nation. Like the reins of a horse or the rudder of a ship, the tongue of this long dead dictator still possessed immense power to direct the lives of young people, just as he had directed the life of an entire nation years before. We should never forget that the tongue, human speech, possesses tremendous power, especially when it is used for evil purposes. Proverbs 25:18 states, "Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbor."

This, of course, leads us to the second major theme in this passage of Scripture, the perversity of the tongue. Now "perversity" is a word that we don't hear very often, but the meaning of this word perfectly fits what James says about the tongue. This is what the word means—"deviating from what is considered right or acceptable, persisting in error or fault, stubbornly contrary." In verses five through twelve James presents three ways in which it is perverse. First, he says that the tongue is like a little flame that grows into a destructive and dangerous wildfire. As such it can become as evil as a raging holocaust that destroys everything in its path. Wicked tongues can do that very thing, spreading vile rumors which ruin a person's character and reputation. I suspect most of us have encountered a situation where someone's life was ruined by what others said about them. Psalm 34:13 declares, "Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies."

James says that the tongue is perverse in another way. It does not like to be controlled. He reminds us that all kinds of animals can be tamed, including birds and reptiles and even creatures in the sea. A trip to Ocean World in Florida where dolphins perform for the tourists demonstrates this obvious truth. But the tongue, James says, is obstinate and disobedient. It is evil and filled with deadly poison. That seems a bit over the top until we remember an occasion when an ugly, hateful word slipped out of our mouths and we wonder, "Where did that come from? Did I utter those vile words?" It's almost as if our tongues are directed by some unseen force over which we have no control.

Finally, James says that our tongues are perverse because they are so fickle. One moment they are praising God and the next moment we are cursing

someone who is made in His likeness. James asks, "How can fresh and salt water come from the same spring and do fig trees bear olives?" Of course not. Yet that seems to be the way of our tongues. Let me share a personal example. You may not know this, but I have a temper and on more than one occasion it has gotten the best of me. My words were not like fresh, clean spring water, but pretty salty. I should have known better. In fact, I knew this passage of Scripture. Nevertheless, my tongue took me to places where I should not have gone and the same thing can happen to any of us.

Yes, our tongues can become a world of evil. Our entire nation had an opportunity to see what can happen when people start arguing with one another. A victory celebration in Kansas City two Wednesdays ago was turned into a horrific tragedy. Two young men let angry comments and words take charge of their lives. Guns were drawn and over twenty people were shot, one of them fatally. We've all heard the childhood saying, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me." In this case and in so many others just like it, words did, indeed, break bones and destroy lives. So, in light of what James has told us about our tongues, "What should we do?" Here are some things to consider.

Consider the source from which the words on our tongues emerge. On one occasion Jesus said something that sounds very familiar to what James says in his letter, "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45). In other words, our speech is a reflection of what's going on inside of us. Before we speak, we'd best take a look on the inside of our own hearts to see what's lurking there.

Here's something else we should consider. Paul reminded the Christians in Ephesus, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs that it may benefit those who listen" (Ephesians 4:29). Our words, therefore, should be helpful, not hurtful. The world is full of verbal negativity. Let's be positive when we speak to one another.

Finally, one last thought. Proverbs 17:28 declares, "Even a fool is thought to be wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue." Or as Abraham Lincoln once famously stated, "Better to remain silent and thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt."