

Pastor Joe Polzin
 James 3:1-12
 “Living Faith: Faith Speaks”
 Year B – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
 September 16, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Today we continue our series on the book of James, called “Living Faith.” Last week we considered what Scripture says about faith and works. They are two things which cannot be separated; they go hand-in-hand. We are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and we have been given sanctified lives of good works prepared for us by God in order to walk in them (Eph. 2:8-10). We have been given living faith by what Christ has done for us, and we are to live out our faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians have *living faith*, which includes both faith and works.

This week now we turn our attention to James chapter 3, and hear what the Holy Spirit through James says about our words, about what we say. We hear James use more direct and powerful language, this time in talking about our tongue. And he compares our tongue to a bit in the mouth of a horse, which though small, is able to guide their whole body.

I remember when I first rode a horse when I was young, and the most memorable piece of advice that was given to me was this: there is nothing I can do to make this 1500-pound beast do anything it doesn’t want to do. I can’t *make* him do anything. Rather, it’s only by training, discipline, and cooperation between horse and rider that allows this to work.

And an important piece to that relationships was a piece of tack, the bridle that went over the horse’s head, and the bit that went into the horse’s mouth. The bit is that small, smooth piece of metal that’s only a couple of inches long, connected to the reins, that could guide that horse to steer or stop entirely. It was the bit and bridle that enabled cooperation between me and the horse, that enabled me to guide that whole animal.

But if I dropped the reins, or the bridle broke, or the bit fell out, then everything changes. I’m no longer in control; the horse is now completely in control. And if he decides to take off charging, we’ve got an extremely powerful animal doing whatever he wants, and I’m just along for the ride. There’s no telling what kind of danger or damage might take place.

This is what it’s like, James tells us, with our tongues, with what we say, with our words. “If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things” (3:3-5).

Controlling our tongues is like bridling a horse, or steering a ship. And that comes with a fair amount of danger—if a horse is *not* bridled, if a ship is *not* steered, just think about what’s at stake. Lives could be on the line. And James sees our tongue—the words that we say—with the same kind of catastrophic potential.

He uses some more picture language to describe the risk: “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (3:5-8).

We get the sense from James that our tongue, our speech, is this runaway animal that we can't tame, or fire that we can't contain. He makes it seem like our tongue is separate from our body, restlessly prowling around, looking for an opportunity to pounce. That our speech is outside of us constantly setting things ablaze. It seems so unnatural and severe.

And yet, isn't that exactly what it's like sometimes? Our words are constantly slipping out of our mouths, and we even cringe at things we hear ourselves say, and think, "I wish I hadn't said that." We find ourselves cutting people down with words that truly do kill them emotionally or spiritually. We scream and shout, combating people around us in verbal knife fights. We spew hate at people with whom we disagree, and utter all kinds of foul words like they're nothing.

But those are only the obvious examples. What James is getting at is that our tongues are small, sneaky, and crafty members. Their greatest damage can be done in the smallest ways, when people are least expecting it. We sneak a barb in at the end of a confrontation with someone, so that they know what we truly feel about them, and so that it continues to draw blood every time they think about it. We talk about people behind their back, tearing down the wall of their reputation, not all at once, just one brick at a time. We allow unwholesome talk or crude jokes slip past our lips. We tell a white lie, which we later have to cover up with a gray lie, which then soon has been smeared with a full-out black lie, so that no one finds out our guilt.¹

James says, "For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body" (3:2). The problem is, none of us is perfect. And too often our tongue is given free reign, leaving in its wake disagreement, dissonance, destruction, and death. We've likely all experienced a situation recently where words took their vicious toll, either on us, or by us on someone else.

The problem with our tongue is worse with Christians, James says, because "with it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, these things ought not to be so" (3:9-10). This is as unnatural as a spring pouring forth both fresh and salt water, or a fig tree bearing olives, or a grapevine producing figs (3:11-12). It just can't happen.

But what option do we have? Doesn't James himself say no human being can tame the tongue? Aren't we all convicted in some way when we consider our own tongue? When we catch ourselves speaking in ways that are unnatural and unacceptable as Christians, and yet we still do it? What can we possibly do?

We would do well in those times to remember the one who, long ago, suffered many things at the cutting edge of sharp human tongues. After all, it was Jesus Christ who endured the worst our sinful speech could deliver. He was denied by the masses, condemned by the Pharisees. A traitorous disciple agreed to betray him, whose lips kissed him to seal his fate. He had lies uttered in false testimony against him, and accusations that it was he who blasphemed God.

Those closest to him used their words to passionately deny they ever knew him. Pilate used words to wash himself clean of him. The crowds used words to shout, "Crucify him!" Upon the cross, words were used to mock and scorn him, telling him to save himself, if he truly was who he said he was.

And what did Jesus do in return? He didn't retaliate. He didn't deride them. He didn't tell them to shut their mouths. He didn't tell them they were all going to hell for killing him. Instead, he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). He suffered all the destruction and death that human words could deploy, and in return, as he hung upon the cross in

¹ A few of these examples from Chad Bird, "Jesus and the Parable of the Horse's Mouth," <http://www.chadbird.com/blog/2014/09/19/jesus-and-the-parable-of-the-horses-mouth?rq=tongue>

the throes of death, he offered words of love and forgiveness. In return he spoke the only words that could possibly redeem our stained and sinful mouths: “Father forgive them.”

And the Father does. By the forgiving words of Christ, his holy words cover your unholy words. His wounds heal the wounds caused by your sharp tongue. His mouth speaks a treasure of grace that covers the stain of your sin, and constantly pours forth those gracious words into your ears and into your heart. By the Word of God giving his all on the cross, you are forgiven.

And by knowing that we are forgiven by the very precious words of Christ, we also know that he gives us a living faith to trust in those words. And by the powerful words of Christ continually pouring into us, we are being renewed and restored by him and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our living faith can be put into action, so that we do learn how to bridle and harness our tongues, and use our words for good, not for evil.

But it takes discipline and intentional choices. Everything starts with the Word of Christ that forgives us and lives within us, which means we need to spend time in the Word so that our words would reflect his Word. And then we need to put into practice how to bridle our tongue. It’s made possible by the living faith given to us by God, but it’s always possible for us to carelessly backslide into our former ways. We need to be vigilant and on guard every moment with what we say.

Living faith enables us to speak as we ought. And just as a horse or ship or fire has great power for damage and destruction, so also can they be harnessed for great good and benefit. In the same way, out of our forgiven and redeemed mouths can come all sorts of good. Christians can use their words to bless one another. To encourage one another. We go out of our way to build people up. We take care to only speak well of others and purposefully find every opportunity to build up their reputation in the eyes of those around us. We use our words to put the best construction on everything, as the Eighth Commandment guides us to do.

We make sure to cut off unwholesome talk when we hear ourselves say it, and in its place offer something wholesome and substantial. When we are in a disagreement, or have uttered words we shouldn’t have, we are the first to speak words of reconciliation and forgiveness. When we sin, we don’t cover up our guilt with lies, but humbly admit our guilt and ask to be forgiven.

And we are always at the ready to share our faith, which is an amazing thing. Because God has trusted His Word to each and every one of you by the living faith that He’s given you. At any moment, you may have the opportunity to share Jesus with those around you, on the street, in the supermarket, at work, or in your home. To share the hope you have in your Savior, by whose wounds you are healed, and by whose words you are forgiven.

The Word of Christ, which is living within you, brings forward its fruit by what you say. Colossians 3 says, “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (3:16). In other words, by the Word of Christ dwelling in you, your words are able to be given in service to God and to your neighbor. And by God’s working through you, there’s no telling what good He may do with your words. *Living Faith* means *Faith Speaks*. In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. **Amen.**