



Session 5 – James 3:1-12

CONTROLLING OUR TONGUES

We can use our tongues for good or for harm; our words can be a source of great encouragement or of great hurt. It is on the dangers of the tongue that James focuses in this passage.

This is a key theme of James's. He has already told his readers of the need to be slow to speak (1:19), and he has told them that, in living out their faith, they should keep a tight rein on their tongues (1:26). Now he writes about this theme at some length.

James introduces this passage about the tongue by referring to teachers; they, along with apostles and prophets, had a high-ranking role in the life of the early church (see eg 1Cor 12:28, Eph 4:11). They used their tongues for their very important task: teaching believers the truths of the Christian faith. It was a huge responsibility, for which they were answerable to God; think twice before seeking to be a teacher! The same can be said of preachers today: their words have the potential to do great good, but careless or deliberately misleading words can do great harm to the church.

It is true for teachers, and for everyone, that we all make mistakes, especially in our speaking (v.2). The person who can control their tongue, will have no difficulty controlling the rest of the body.

The tongue is powerful (v.3-5)

James uses some of his mini-parables to make his point.

- A small bit can control a large horse.
- A small rudder can steer a large ship.
- A tiny spark can start a huge fire.

In the same way, the tongue, although it is very small, has huge power. The things we say can affect the whole direction of our lives, and they can have a great effect on others too.

The tongue is dangerous (v.6)

James continues with the metaphor of fire: the tongue can be as destructive as a forest fire which burns everything in its path. Our words can be incendiary. No other part of the body has the same capacity to be used for evil. A person's whole life – their career, their family relationships, their friendships, for example – may suffer from the devastating impact of careless words.

James re-emphasises this danger at the end of v.8: the tongue is 'full of deadly poison.' He is thinking perhaps of lying, or insults, or arrogant boasting, or gossip.

The tongue is uncontrollable (v.7-10)

James reminds us of Gen 1:26, in which God says that the human beings whom he will create will 'rule over' the other living beings. We have indeed succeeded in taming other animals, but the tongue is the one thing we have failed to tame. Our tongues often say things we regret.

As an example of this failure to tame our tongues, James gives the example of someone who goes to church on Sunday and blesses God – praising him, worshipping him – which is the highest form of speech there is. But then, over coffee after the service, they show a complete lack of control over their tongue as they curse someone – wishing the very worst for them – even though they are made in the likeness of God (another reminder of Gen 1:26). Such cursing is the lowest form of speech, the opposite of blessing. (Someone who both blesses and curses is an example of a 'double-minded man' (1:8).)

The tongue reveals what is in our heart (v.11-12)

A saltwater spring produces only salt water, not fresh water; a fig tree produces only figs, not olives. The principle is clear: the product matches the source.

The application of this principle to the tongue is clear: pure words come from a pure heart; sinful words come from a sinful heart.

James is echoing the teaching of Jesus: “A tree is recognised by its fruit” (Mat 12:33); and “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mat 12:34 – see also Mat 15:18).

Is there any hope for us?

If the tongue really is uncontrollable, will it not keep on saying bad, harmful words? James hints at the answer in v.8 – ‘No man can tame the tongue.’ Although no man can do it, we know that what is impossible for men is possible for God (Luke 18:27, Mat 19:26).

Our prayer is that God, by his Holy Spirit, will work in us and purify our hearts (see eg Ps 51:10, Acts 15:8f) and then, from our purified hearts, produce the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) so that our words are words of love, joy, peace . . . and, not least, self-control.

We pray that our words will never do harm, but will be a blessing and encouragement to others.

For homegroups

- Why do you think it is so difficult to control the tongue?
- If teaching in church is such a risky business (v.1), how can those who don't do it best support those who do?
- Can you think of an occasion (whether in a local or international context) when inflammatory words have set things ablaze? In such situations, what might a Christian be able to do to dampen the flames?
- In what situations are we most likely to be tempted to gossip?
- How can we best react when we are hurt by someone's words?
- If James were writing today, in the era of the internet and social media, what might he add to what he says in this passage?
- Can you tell the group of a time when someone's words were a real help to you?
- Read the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Gal 5:22f. Which of these fruit would you especially pray to be evident in your speaking?
- What are the ways in which we can use our tongues positively – bringing good to others?