

Think before you speak (The tongue) – James 3:1-12

Words are a funny thing aren't they? A small change in the way something is worded can make a big difference. Getting the words wrong can be very costly.

On a church notice sheet (not our church) were these words:

Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our community.
Smile at someone who is hard to love. Say "Hell" to someone who doesn't care much about you.

Another said:

At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be "What Is Hell?"
Come early and listen to our choir practice.

You see we need to be very careful with words. Of course, in life little words are used to huge advantage. For example, when you see a great offer advertised. A great product at a great price and you think 'I'll have one of those' – the price is displayed in great big numbers but if you look carefully in little letters before the price is the word 'from'. We all know what that means, chances are that you will end up paying much more than the price shown. Then in even smaller print are the words 'subject to availability' – which often means that you are unlikely to get this product at this price.

Words can be used very cleverly or very carelessly. James knew this only too well and it has been argued that this passage in James 3:1-12 about the tongue is the main point to James's entire letter. In other words, some commentators say that the reason James was driven to write a letter in the first place was to address this issue over the way people used their tongue. He has a lot to say about the tongue as even a quick look through the first chapter of James will show:

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak...

(James 1:19)

²⁶ Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.

(James 1:26)

So control of the tongue is very important to James but why? Well he gives us the answer in verse 2 of our passage today:

² We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

That seems very strange thinking doesn't it? Does James really mean that if we can control our tongue then we will not sin so much?

Let's have a look a little further down at what else James says. (verse 7)

⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

James says the tongue is an uncontrollable animal, several wild animals have been tamed but the tongue is a wild animal that is difficult to control. So the person who can tame the tongue should be capable of controlling anything – control over the rest of your life is easy compared with controlling the tongue.

We have a phrase in English “biting our tongue” – when we want to say something to someone but we know we shouldn’t, we know our words will be unhelpful and so we hold back from speaking – we use the phrase ‘biting our tongue’ as though the tongue is so uncontrollable that the only way to silence it is to clamp it between our teeth.

We know how hard it can be to control our tongue

The tongue can do so much damage. We say “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me” This is rubbish! A small word can cause a much greater wound than can be achieved by our hands.

James talks about the damage the tongue can do.

He likens it to a small spark sets off a forest fire. We’ve all seen images in the news of devastating forest fires. They start with just a small spark and James warns us that the tongue can cause similar problems.

- Gossiping about someone starts rumours spreading
- A small lie turns into a lot of lies
- We can get one another going – someone gets angry and they convince someone else that they should be angry, this spreads and suddenly a lot of people are angry but no one really knows where it all started.

This can be very damaging. Not only is this damaging to other people but James warns that also with the use of our tongue we can damage ourselves. James says:

⁶ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

Strong words. James is saying that the tongue if not kept in check is capable of corrupting our whole life. It can lead us down a path of wrongdoing that eventually leads to hell. So learning how to control this monster within us is extremely important, but as James has already said, extremely difficult.

James uses two illustrations to highlight why control of the tongue is so important and why this is the key to controlling our lives:

A bit in the mouth of a horse

A horse has great strength and is capable of amazing things – lightning speed, high and long jumps or if you get in the way, a hard kick. Yet James points out that this mighty animal can be brought under complete control using a relatively small ‘bit’. This brings control from internal forces.

Application

Introduce yourself to the person next to you in the poshest voice you can.

All I asked you to do was to use a posh voice but did you find that you also used posh actions?

A handshake, a bow of the head, sit up a little straighter

The way that we speak can affect the way that we behave and if we bring our speech under control, it will affect our whole behaviour.

I know of one household where the word “stupid” is banned for talking about people or inanimate objects. (e.g. when you can’t get the car to start, you can’t call the car stupid – how can an inanimate object be stupid? – likewise a person is not stupid even though their actions may be questionable)

Controlling this little thing has much greater implications. It changes the whole way that you think. So when a person does something that is questionable, instead of addressing the person as stupid, you instead address what they did.

How many times when you are cross with someone, do you find yourself saying “do you know what that stupid man/woman has gone and done now”.

It changes how we ourselves react to things that bother us.

A rudder on a ship

A ship is subject to great external forces – the waves, the wind

If these forces are against the boat, it could easily drift off course

But a small rudder determines the direction of the vessel and skilful use of the rudder ensures the ship stays on course.

This brings control from external forces

Application

One of the most powerful words that we can use is the word “no”. But it’s often such a difficult word to say. When people want us to do something, perhaps we feel peer pressure to conform (especially true for those in their late teens – 20s) – to get drunk at your friends birthday party, to experiment with drugs, to sleep with someone.

These things are like the wind and waves around us, threatening to take us off course into dangerous rocks and probably we’ll end up shipwrecked.

But saying “no” is like the captain using the rudder of a ship against a strong wind that is trying to drag the ship off course. The rudder though small can be very affective at steering the ship away from danger. So with a small word we can steer ourselves away from danger.

So the tongue used correctly can steer us through troubles that may arise from the inside (within ourselves) or from the outside (from others).

James reminds us that it is important to control our tongue. With it we give praise to God and yet somehow we can manage to hurl insults at one another with the same tongue.

⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

James talks about fresh water and salt water. You wouldn’t expect to turn the tap on and find that one day it produced good clean water but the next day mud came out – you would be onto the water board pretty quickly complaining.

So think about the words that you say.

- Remember James’s challenge – we come here on a Sunday and sing praises to God, let us not use mouths that are filthy all week and expect God to accept them as pure and clean on a Sunday. Be careful to keep your mouth clean.
- When there is gossip going round about someone, will your words add fuel to the fire or will your words help to bring perspective and peace?
- If James is right, then the key to bringing our lives under control is to start with controlling our tongue – be careful how you use yours.