

**“Where did that Come From?!” (James 3:1-12)**

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This passage in James is very helpful to us, partly because it is so vivid. There are physical, cultural examples that are as relevant today as they were when this was first written. Let’s go through this passage again, verse by verse.

*Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. <sup>2</sup> 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. (James 3:1-2)*

James talks about the high calling of leadership: leaders will be judged more strictly. But he also reassures that the expectation of leadership is not perfection. Not by any stretch. But he is leaning toward an expectation of leaders and mature believers of self-control. And one of the main ways we see the need for self-control is in the words that we say. Our tongues either reveal our ability to be a person who is in control of their lives, or a person that has very little control of their lives. The person that masters the words that they say is able to control their entire body, their entire being.

A modern amendment we can make to this is not just words spoken, by words typed. Many of us are on email, texting, social media – we live much of our lives online. But a foolish post, a hastily sent email, falls under the same category of foolishly spoken words. “Anyone who is never at fault in what they Tweet is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.”

Words spoken, words typed, can do incredible damage. With the words we say in the heat of the moment we are often warned, “Don’t say something you will regret.” With the words we type online, the warning is, “Don’t type something you will regret, because the digital record of those words endures forever!”

The words we speak have an incredible weight to them. So James, when talking about the power of the tongue, uses examples of controlling something very large with something very small. His first example:

*<sup>3</sup> When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. (James 3:3)*

I worked for 6 summers at a camp that specialized in horses and hockey. I do neither of those things. But I did go on trail rides several times a year in those six years. The horses we rode were experienced. They were smart. They could tell when an inexperienced rider was on them. (And they were probably miserable with that knowledge) So this massive, intelligent animal has an inexperienced rider like me on its back, and it is in my control because of a tiny bit that is in its mouth. The bit is connected to the reins I am holding onto, and I am steering the horse to the right or the left. Because of a small bit, with very little effort, I am able to control the direction of this animal.

Second example:

*Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. (James 3: 4)*

I was on a whale watching tour on an older styled sail boat. There was not any wind so the sails were put away and the engine was running. The captain let me be the one to steer the ship home. (Again, no prior experience.) I looked at points on the horizon and steered back to the dock. (I didn't park it of course). The entire time I was at the steering wheel, I barely had to move that wheel any more than an inch to the right or the left. Because of the rudder, very little effort was needed to control this big ship.

The bit in a horse's mouth, the rudder of a large ship – very small things that control the direction of massive things. In the same way our tongues, small as they are, have incredible power to steer the directions of our lives.

Controlling the tongue is important, because the tongue can do incredible damage. James talks about the extent of damage the tongue can do, and he really is not exaggerating in way he describes that destruction.

*<sup>5</sup>Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. (James 3:5)*

We were in Waterton yesterday, and there are parts of the park that are not recognizable from the Kenow fire that ripped through the mountains last year. Last year we saw terrifying videos and images of people escaping Fort McMurray with fire surrounding them. Fires like these are often caused by a very small spark. When it comes to fire, it does not take much to start a fire that threatens lives, destroys ecosystems, and is completely beyond human control.

Words have a comparable ferocity in their destructive power. They can damage family relationships, end friendships, destroy careers, ruin political campaigns, and undermine the entire good work of someone else. And once those words are out there, they cannot be pulled back. The destruction has begun, and there is often no reversing the path of that destruction.

*<sup>6</sup>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. (James 3:6)*

James continues:

*<sup>7</sup>All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, <sup>8</sup>but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (James 3:7-8)*

James is very vivid when he describes tendency of the tongue toward evil. James describes the tongue as

- Beyond control

- a restless evil,
- full of deadly poison.

He is very clear that he is not speaking in hyperbole. He uses these examples, knowing full well the damage that words can do.

But is the issue really with the tongue? So far James seems focused on the externals: watch your mouth! But the tongue is really the final launching point for things that have already been brewing and building within us. Watching our words is very much a self-control issue. But the source of the problem is not just on the tip of our tongues. It's actually deep within:

*<sup>9</sup> With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. <sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. <sup>11</sup> Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? (James 3:9-11)*

The words we say show what is really on our hearts, on our minds, what is truly going on within us. Our words expose the resentment and bitterness we have towards others. Our words expose hate and judgement that we carry around within us. Our words expose the ways that we feel about ourselves, and expose the war that goes on between what we know God wants us to do and what we really want to do instead. The things that we have tried so hard to keep a lid on within us are exposed in an instant by our tongues.

The things within us are what emerge when we speak. We cannot hide what's inside of us.

*<sup>12</sup> My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. (James 3:12)*

Our tongues expose our inner lives – and that is a terrifying idea. When our tongues expose what is inside of us it can be embarrassing for ourselves and horrific for those who experience those words.

There have been two high profile examples in the past of couple of weeks of people who have not guarded their tongues.

The first involved hockey player Brad Marchand. Marchand is an incredible player for the Boston Bruins. He's among the league's best at scoring. He's also an agitator, doing anything to get opposing players off of their game.

He was bothering Ryan Callahan of the Tampa Bay Lightning, and Callahan was not pleased with Marchand's antics. The two players stood face to face, and in that moment, Marchand licked Callahan from chin to forehead.

Fans and sports journalists alike were disgusted by this, broadcasting their outrage. They could not believe the line that was crossed. How could Marchand do such a thing?! Where did that come from?!

While some were in shock of this anti-social behaviour, others weren't surprised at all. If someone was going to lick someone else's face, of course it was going to be Brad Marchand. He makes incredible plays, but he plays with an edge and often engages in dirty play. His tongue exposed the style of player that he is. The incident has given him attention that he certainly has not wanted – he's been the butt of a lot of jokes. It only took an instant, and there is now a wildfire of commentary on the character of Brad Marchand. (I realize this does not have to do with the actual words that Marchand has said, but I couldn't help myself! It is an example of how instantly the tongue can ruin us.)

The second example is one that has been national news from our very city – at the most famous Denny's in all of Canada. A woman was recorded going on a racist tirade against Middle Eastern men at the table behind hers. The words spoken are terrible. People watched the video and their response: Where did that come from?! Who says horrible things like this?

The woman filmed saying these words later apologized (kind of?), but within the apology was a predictable justification:

"It is what it is...but I do apologize for what I said, cause a lot of it is not me. I don't normally say things like that."

I knew it! This is the most predictable response to being caught saying terrible things. "I don't know where that came from." "That wasn't me." "I was having an off day." Of course this is completely untrue. The words we say certainly do expose things about us, things we would rather not have people see. We can deny all we want and cry and plead that "that's so unlike me," but those words came from somewhere. They came from the battle deep within us.

We have this persona that we want to project. We're good people! We'd never harm another person! And yet out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing of other people. There is something dark within us that our tongues expose.

The words we speak expose the condition of our hearts. The good news is that Jesus wants to meet us at our hearts. He has no interest in meeting the public persona we hope to share with the world. He wants to meet us at our very core, where the darkest things dwell.

<sup>16</sup> "Don't you understand yet?" Jesus asked. <sup>17</sup> "Anything you eat passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer. <sup>18</sup> But the words you speak come from the heart—that's what defiles you. <sup>19</sup> For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. <sup>20</sup> These are what defile you. Eating with unwashed hands will never defile you." (Matthew 15:18-20)

We get obsessed with outward behavior. We have been crucifying the woman recorded at Denny's all week. The response is not to see someone who is broken and in need of love. The response is to hope the very worst for this woman and hope for her life to be reduced to ashes. We are obsessed with outward behavior: we are obsessed with judging it, punishing it, and exposing it. Jesus is obsessed with our hearts. Jesus is more obsessed with what that behavior truly reveals about us. Jesus wants to transform us from the inside out. Jesus is not concerned with behavior modification. Jesus is concerned with our hearts.

Jesus is concerned for the whole person, not just the image we project in public. Here is the extent that Jesus wants to walk with us to see true change happen from the inside out.

*So if your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It's better to enter eternal life with only one hand or one foot than to be thrown into eternal fire with both of your hands and feet.<sup>9</sup> And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It's better to enter eternal life with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. (Matthew 18:8-9)*

If it needs to be stated, I'll say it: Jesus is speaking in hyperbole. People should not be walking around maimed in pursuit of following God. (Besides, Jesus was already beaten and maimed as he paid for our sin on the cross) Jesus is saying, do whatever it takes to deal with matters of the heart. Cut poisonous things out of your life. Go to great lengths to remove the things from your life that keep you from following Jesus honestly and whole-heartedly.

At the beginning of this passage, James acknowledged "We all stumble in many ways." The same is true of our tongues. How is it that you struggle with the words that you say? Is it the way you can say demeaning things to those around you? Is it in criticism and complaint? Is it in the words you say when you've lost your temper?

Once we identify the words that we say, where are these things coming from? What is at the heart of us that makes us say these things? What heart issue is being exposed by the words that I say?

For me I get myself in trouble trying to say funny things. Sometimes the timing is completely inappropriate. Sometimes I show I am not taking a situation seriously enough, preferring to get a laugh over being a good listener. My words expose my desire to liked, which at times is greater than my desire to engage with another person. These words expose a self-interest that can consume the person that God is actually calling me to be.

What does it take for you to make significant change as it relates to your tongue?

- Take on one habit to try for the next week. Try praying The Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This simple prayer acknowledges: You alone are God. I need your help. Forgive me. I belong to you.
- Keep coming back to Jesus. James speaks of tongue taming as an impossible task because it is. It requires continual repentance to one another, and a continual reliance on God. That dependent relationship with God is the relationship we are meant to be in with God.

Our tongues can ruin us. They can do things to our lives and reputations that we can never get back.

Our tongues have incredible power. They are small, but they have the power to set the direction of our entire lives.

If you want to change the things you say, get to the source. Deal with the condition of your heart. Meet Jesus at the place where the darkest thoughts, most spiteful thoughts, worst desires for another person are under the surface. Jesus wants to meet us at our truest selves. Jesus wants to help us change from the inside out. Jesus wants to use us as agents on this world who offer words of life, truth, encouragement and hope.