



The Truth about the Tongue

James 3:1-12

A quick recap

The letter of James to his church family—dispersed from Jerusalem because of persecution—has a table of contents in James 1:26-28. The entire letter covers three themes: (1) how God wants believers to treat the poor; a topic which dominates chapter 2; (2) how God wants believers to bridle their tongues (chapters 3 & 4); (3) and the importance of God’s people keeping themselves from the spiritual pollution of the world (chapters 4 & 5). After urging God’s people to demonstrate their faith rather than merely declare it, James says in 3:1-12 that your words are a form of Christian work. What comes out of our mouths, reveals the content and substance of our faith. James point is crystal clear: Master your mouth, master your life.

Not many of you should be teachers

James introduces this topic by warning would be pastors, elders, or otherwise church leaders not to rush into this business of local church leadership. “We who teach will be judged more strictly.” That’s fair, isn’t it? James says “We” meaning that he counts himself as a pastor/teacher. There’s something heady about getting up in front of a group of people and being the “authority”; and it’s a perilous venture, too, this matter of church leadership. Since the spiritual leader’s primary tools are words, James insists that both what is spoken and what is lived must be in line with the truth of the Gospel. James infers that there is no private-public dichotomy of spiritual leadership. Your life is a fish-bowl. People are watching. Satan is watching. There’s constant surveillance going on. Spiritual leaders are being observed even when they don’t know it. That’s the deal. Therefore, if some of these persecuted Christians naively assume that spiritual leadership is a means of self-gratification; or even a way to run for cover from being persecuted, James says, “Think again.” That said, no spiritual leader is perfect (v. 2). Thank God for a plurality of elders who help me ensure that what comes from the pulpit and my person is Christ-centered, Gospel-driven, and biblically sound!

The tongue has a disproportionate power for good . . . or not.

That’s the point in James 3:3-4. Words matter! Americans are liberty lovers but you can’t just mouth off at the airport, can you? You can’t yell, “Fire!” in a theatre of packed people when there isn’t one. Markets rise and fall on the inflections of the Fed Chief. And how many retractions have politicians made because they forgot to bridle their tongues? Positively, the power of affirmation

can motivate, challenge, encourage and inspire. A losing team becomes a winning team after a coach's half-time locker room speech. A student's career is launched on the words of a teacher: "You can do this! You should be an engineer . . . an accountant . . . a contractor . . . a carpenter . . . an iron worker . . . a physician . . . a homemaker . . . a computer programmer . . . a pastor." "Words are a form of power, and like all forms of power, they can be used to bless or curse, to heal or injure, to save or damn. 'Aids.' 'Daddy.' 'I love you.' 'I want a divorce.' Can you feel that?" (R. Wayne Stacy)

The tongue has been corrupted by sin.

While the bridled tongue is evidence of spiritual/emotional maturity, who can tame it? Even while all kinds of creatures in the animal world have been tamed; humanity still has been unable to master the tongue! How ironic! James wants God's people to use their tongue in a manner consistent with how it has been designed!

James does not mean that the tongue can never be used for critical tasks -- just read James 4 and 5. No, the issue is clear: the tongue can be used for good and bad and the teachers were using the tongue for bad when they should have been using it for good.

Humans are to be spoken to and about and with as befits who they are: Eikons (image) of God. Let us say it again: every person you meet, every person with whom you will engage in conversation -- today and forever -- is an Eikon of God. If we treat God with respect, we are to treat every human being with respect. Why? They are the very likeness of God.

And humans, who are Eikons of God, are capable of doing both good and bad with their tongue: the tongue, James is saying, is designed by God to do good and to fit in the world of God and Eikons. Therefore, use it for what God has designed it.

James is pushing harder: if the tongue indicates source, bad use of tongue indicates bad source. It's that serious for James. (Scot McKnight)

How does a redeemed tongue talk?

Parallel to James 3:1-12 is what Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:28, *"Do not let any unwholesome words 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."*

I once saw a sign called a "Four Way Test for Ethics":

"Is it the TRUTH?"

"Is it FAIR to all concerned?"

"Will it bring GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS?"

"Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?"

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer. Psalm 19:14