

As you read through James, you may have noticed that there are a few things we don't see in James. We don't see the ministry of the Holy Spirit, no Jesus' atonement, nor the doctrine of the church. James doesn't mention about Jesus' sacrifice because he expects the readers have the faith in Jesus. He doesn't say about the church because you already belong to the church. With the same reason, he doesn't talk about the Holy Spirit. Instead, James emphasizes on how to live by faith. But, if we read it closely, we can see that James implies a lot of Jesus' words and the church life. Last week we learned about what true faith is. If we have true faith, we will care for our brothers and sisters and produce good deeds. And, those actions will happen in the church and through the church. Some may say, "No, I am already a good Christian. I don't need to learn anything from the church." But if you are a normal person like me, you and I know that the church is the place where we learn. We are learning how to cope with trials, how to act on the Word and how not to show any favoritism. We learn how to develop perseverance, how to be humble and patient. We learn how to live by faith.

Now do you have that faith? How much faith do you have? And, how do you know if you have it or not? It is hard to judge someone else's faith because faith is not something we can prove with a certificate. It is not something we can measure with a stick. But, there is one way to measure faith. That is the tongue. Let's look at what James says about our tongue – what it is and how to use it.

Before we look at the text in more details, there are two things we need to understand. Verse 1 says, "*Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly*" (v.1). Does James encourage us not to teach? Does he imply that teachers will receive a more severe penalty than other Christians? If that is so, we are in trouble because we need more teachers in our church. Who will want to be a teacher if there is a severe penalty for teaching? Here, James is not criticizing teaching itself. What he is getting at is how responsible teaching is because teachers normally speak more. We need to take responsibility when we speak. Also, when James talks about speaking, he doesn't say just to be silent. We need to be slow to speak, but it doesn't mean to close our mouths. These are the two things that we need to remember.

The title of the sermon is "Taming the tongue." But, why do we need to do that? The reason is because our tongue is so powerful. James explains how powerful our tongue is by using three examples – two positive and one negative. The first illustration is a horse. A horse is very strong. It can easily do more than 10 men could do. How can we control a horse which is much stronger than us? It is by using a small bit in its mouth. Likewise, a ship is huge. It can carry a lot of freight. When the ship is driven by strong winds, how do we control it? It is controlled by a small instrument, the rudder under the boat. A strong horse and a large ship are controlled by a small bit and rudder, respectively. "*Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts*" (v.5a). Like a bit and rudder, the tongue controls the whole body. It can determine the destiny of the individuals.

Besides the positive influences, the tongue also has the destructive force. *“Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark”* (v.5b). I think we can understand the fire thing since we have a big fire almost every year in CA. A fire can happen naturally, or by hikers’ or campers’ carelessness. Whatever the cause is, a fire is very small at the beginning but soon it becomes too big to control. We often see people have to evacuate from the fire. Just like the fire in the forest, *“the tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell”* (v.6).

This is scary, isn’t it? Have you seen any more severe curse than this? Let’s put an imaginary person here. Let’s say his name is Peter. Now read verse 6 again, “Peter, your tongue is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of your body. It corrupts your whole person, sets the whole course of your life on fire. The fire is like one from hell. You will have to suffer like being in hell.” Peter may say, “No, I am innocent. This tongue is not me. I have nothing to do with this tongue.” “Yes, you do. That is what James is talking about. Rather than controlling your tongue, you are controlled by the tongue of evil. So, your whole body will have to suffer.”

How does tongue harm its own body? If I curse myself, am I cursed? Maybe so, but we are not hurting ourselves with our tongues. The danger is that we are hurting others with our tongues. The uncontrolled tongue will harm others. It will cause a tremendous suffering and pain. There is old Jewish story¹ about the damage a tongue may cause. I think we can easily relate to this story. So, I modified this story a little to be like one in today’s church. Let’s say there were two men in the church. Both were very active in church ministry, but one of them was very careless with his words. Somehow, he began to accuse the other person and told everyone how bad the person was. Because of the conflicts and all kinds of gossip, the other person, the accused one, had to leave the church. A couple years later, the careless person experienced God’s grace and realized how bad he was to the other person. He came to the pastor and said, “Pastor, I feel so sorry for what I did. What can I do?” He was asking what he could do to make amends. The pastor told him to take a pillow out into a field, to cut it open, and to shake all the feathers out into the field. Soon, all feathers flew away. Then, the pastor told him to collect all the feathers. “That’s impossible!” the man said, “The wind has taken the feathers in all directions. It is impossible to collect them.” The pastor said “That is what you have done. You may be forgiven by the gracious God, but the hurt you have made may not go away.” Hurtful words once spoken cannot be retrieved. That is why it is better to take care of our tongue in the first place.

When we try to control our tongue, we realize that it is extremely difficult to keep the tongue under control. We could tame all kinds of creatures, *“but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison”* (v.8). James does not imply that the tongue is untamable, but that it cannot be subdued by any power of mere human beings. As he says in verse 2, *“We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check”*, but we know that there is no one perfect in this world. No one can completely control the tongue, but we still need to try by depending on the Holy Spirit because there will be pain if we do not. How can we control our tongues? James says it is possible by controlling our minds.

¹ <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/features/view/16623/hold-your-tongue>

“Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing” (v.10). What we say is a gauge of our spiritual status, whether we praise God or curse others. It reveals what is in the heart. This is what Jesus said to the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, *“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men” (Matthew 15:8-9).* Then, Jesus explained what he meant to the disciples and to us, *“The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean’; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean.’” (Matthew 15:18-20).* Since we speak what we have in our minds, we need to control our minds. We need to make our minds pure and holy because what is there comes out, and what comes out is impossible to take it back.

Here are some practical ways I could think of. This is what I have learned from my mistakes. Before we say anything, think twice if what I am going to say is true or not. Whether it is about a person or a fact, if it is not true, we will cause confusion and misunderstandings. Someone will get hurt because of what we say. Also, think twice if what I am going to say is beneficial to the person who hears. Not all truths need to be revealed. Sometimes we need to be quiet even if it is true. We also need to think twice if what I am going to say is necessary or not. When we have a great passion, we often say more than what we ought to. Yes, we need to tell the truth. I am sure we can teach people. We can admonish or advise people with all good intentions, but we don't want to overtake what God will do. Sometimes God tells us just to be quiet since He is going to take care of it. Then, we should be quiet. If we consider these three things before we say, I am sure there will be much more peace in our relationships. What we say is incredibly powerful. It can build up, encourage, and motivate. It can also tear down, hurt, and cause horrible scars. It depends on how we use our tongues; more correctly how we control our minds.

It is said that everyone's voice has different tones and waves. We may try to imitate someone else's voice but each voice is unique. It is like a finger print, with which each person is distinguished. Each one has a different sound; each one has a different mind; each one may speak different things. But, there is one common thing we can sound together; that is praising. *“There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6).* Because of the Lord Jesus who died in our place and because of the grace and mercy we have experienced, we come together and praise God. When we don't agree each other and even when there is a hard feeling between us, we have the same mind to worship the same God. Worshiping God together is the first step to have joy and peace in every relationship. In a relationship of marriage and family members, in a relationship with brothers and sisters, and in a relationship with fellow workers, let us have the same mind to worship God. The more we praise God, the less we judge others. The more we pray for God's kingdom and his will, the less we will criticize others. Let us fix our eyes to the Lord. Let us seek his kingdom and righteousness. Let us offer our minds and souls to the Lord so that God may use our lips for his glory and for our joy and peace. Let's pray!

“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6).