

Put a Bit In It. James 3:1-12

Portions adapted from "Faith with Feet - What we Say is What we Sow," Charles Billingsley @ TRBC 7/12/2020

Three preachers, from the same town but different churches, went out on a fishing trip together. Getting out into the middle of the lake they decided, as the Bible recommended, that they should confess their sins to one another.

The first preacher started talking. "You know what my big sin is? My big sin is drinking. I go once a month into a neighboring town where nobody knows me and I get drunk. I know that it is wrong but I still do it."

The second preacher added. "My big sin is gambling. I went to Las Vegas last year and lost a large sum of money."

Then the third preacher replied. " Well ...Guys I guess that I should have gone first." The other two preachers looked puzzled and asked why. "**Because my big sin is gossiping.**"

This certainly gets to the heart of a serious problem in our culture today – which is the sin of gossip, but at a larger level it applies to everything else that we say about or to one another with whom we are in disagreement. Our world today is filled with a divisive spirit, with anger, violence and a lot of hurt, most of it fueled by what people have said or done to each other in the name of what? Politics? Racism? Civil rights? Ethnic equality? Privilege?

At least for the Christian there is good Biblical guidance in how to speak and do in the midst of such a contentious culture. The letter of James was written to Christians living in just such an angry world and its message to us is quite simple, ***faith without works is dead*** (2:17). Now we know from the rest of our Bible that *faith alone in Christ alone* is what saves us, **but the life we live, our "works," is what puts our faith on display; what proves its worth.**

James, neatly divides these faithful "works" into **what we say** and **what we do**. I encourage you this Sunday afternoon to read the entire five chapters of this short letter to get the whole story for yourself, but for this morning, we will concentrate on what we need to be saying in the midst of an angry culture.

Now let me be honest with you, this is a very hard message for me to share with you, because watching what I say is one of my own greatest weaknesses. I fancy myself as having a quick wit, but sometimes (many times) my mouth moves before my brain has had the chance to think about it and in horror I watch my sharp words cut deeply into another's heart.

Novelist Edward Lytton first wrote that *the pen is mightier than the sword*, But our Bible says that the tongue is mightier still. You would be amazed at how often the Bible addresses this matter of how powerfully what we say affects both ourselves and others.

Proverbs 18:21 gives us this cautionary warning...

Death and life are in the power of the tongue,
and those who love it will eat its fruits.
Proverbs 18:21

Think about what this is saying: Every time we open our mouths in a time of conflict, we are making choices by what we say for either death or life and the choices we make will also come back home to us someday.

The greatest example of this in the last century, was an Austrian man named Adolf Hitler. He was a powerful orator backed by a twisted mind who unified all of Germany to defend herself against the perceived abuses of her enemies and caused the second world war in the process. At his instigation, one of Germany's acts of self-empowerment was the intentional elimination of the entire Jewish community, who had long lived as peaceful citizens in their midst. Thankfully he did not completely succeed, but he was responsible for the death of over 6.5 million Jews across Europe. With Germany's inevitable defeat at the end of World War 2, rather than surrendering, Hitler had himself shot, rolled up in a rug and then burned. A fitting end for a man who spoke death for millions.

Consider another Austrian man in the time of Hitler, a young Jew named Heinz. One day he found himself surrounded by a gang of Hitler youth. Fearing he might be beaten up or worse killed, he began talking quietly words of peace to his attackers which miraculously ended up with him being let go without harm. Heinz's family eventually emigrated to America where he changed his name to Henry. As an adult, Henry decided to dedicate his life to speaking words of peace rather than war. Today we still benefit by the contributions that Henry Kissinger made in making national friends and keeping our country out of wars.

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits ... either one or the other. So let us today all take a lesson from James' on controlling our tongues and as he advised learn how to put a bit in our own mouths.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.

James, chapter 3 opens with this advice, which I have to admit is first pointed directly at me and anyone else who would presume to teach God's word to other people. Because you must believe that we practice what we preach; that we live by our own advice. If we don't practice what we preach, the Bible has other names for us: hypocrites, false apostles, empty clouds, dead uprooted trees. So James reminds us that if we presume to speak for a higher power, we will also be judged more sternly by that higher power.

But thankfully he then brings both himself and everyone else into the equation by admitting that *we ALL make many mistakes*. Yep, it is hard to go through life without tripping over something. But we have a very simple way of learning how to trip less and stand more, which is in learning how to control what we say by *bridling our tongue*, which literally means learning to put a bit in it.

When we can't hold back, or set boundaries, on what comes out of our mouth, our words are in charge -- not us. But we are still responsible for those words.

Our words do not come from somewhere outside of us, as if we were a ventriloquist's dummy. They are the product of our hearts. As Jesus said, ***it is not what goes into but what comes out of our mouths that defile us... for what comes out comes from our heart*** (Matthew 15:11-18). ***I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter*** (Matthew 12:36).

In the next few verses, James then gives us three word pictures of our tongues under control or out of control: Horses, ships, and fires.



Verse 3 notes, *If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies*. I was looking at these most amazing pictures on Facebook the other day of little **Maggie DeWitt** - well she's not so little anymore – but riding and directing this big powerful pony in a cow herding, calf roping contest.

Anywhere she wanted this horse to go, she merely tugged on a rein which was attached to a bit (a little steel rod) in the horse's mouth. Wherever she turned the horse's mouth the head of the horse followed and the rest of the horse followed the head. The horse then drove the cattle where they were supposed to go.... It was a real group effort directed by simply controlling the horse's mouth. If you can control the mouth you can control the rest of the body – this works for humans as well as horses.

The same principle works for ships and rudders; the mightiest of ships are controlled by their in comparison, tiny rudders. If the rudder doesn't steer the ship it is bound to

crash. We have all heard the story of the Titanic, the unsinkable ship. One of the reasons it was thought unsinkable was because it had a large rudder compared to its size, making it very agile and maneuverable. The night of their accident they had been warned of icebergs in the area, but the ship's captain trying to set a record crossing time on their maiden voyage kept the engines going full speed. They still had thirty seconds from spotting the iceberg to make a turn which they easily did – missing the top but it was the rest of the iceberg under the water that they did not account for. They thought the berg had merely brushed past as it was actually slicing through the hull of the ship.

How often have we casually spoken a word or had a word spoken to us that has sliced right through to the heart, literally wounding us or another for life. As children we were taught to say *Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will never hurt us. Liar, liar pants on fire!!* That is the most untrue statement we were ever taught. Most bones heal in months, but those wounded by words can still be hurting 30, 40, 50 years later.

As another Proverb says:

Rash words are like sword thrusts,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing
Proverbs 12:18

Think back to a time when someone said something bad about you or to you? Do you still remember those words and how they made you feel? Or conversely, when someone said something kind to you, or complimented you and how that changed your day.

In grade school, one particular bully would taunt me saying, *Hey Salley where is Dick and Jane?* To which I would quickly reply, *they done growed up and got married* (young people you will need to ask your parents to explain that reference). Though I didn't want to show it, those words hurt deeply. To this day if you call me by only my last name, my first impulse is to say something not-so-nice back to you.

So if bits can control horses and rudders can control huge ships, then learning to control what we say can also control everything else we do. James then turns the picture around to show how much damage a few uncontrolled words can do.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!
And the tongue is a fire itself set on fire by hell
James 3:5-7

Do you remember the 2018 fire that burned down the town of Paradise California? It all started by a single spark falling from a malfunctioning Pacific Gas and Electric company power line. It was a time of drought and the winds were strong. In fourteen hours it had burned over 20,000 acres. By the time it was finally put out two weeks later, it had consumed 153,000 acres, 18,804 buildings, 85 lives, and \$16.5 billion dollars in damage; it also bankrupted Pacific Gas and Electric. As a consequence, during last year's drought, the company blacked out whole communities for weeks rather than cause another fire.

As young Christians we used to sing of God's love, *it only takes a spark to get a fire going*. But more often the fiery sparks we send out have nothing to do with God's love. Here's another Proverb

For lack of wood the fire goes out,
and where there is no whisperer, quarrelling ceases.
Proverbs 26:20

What we say, in ignorance or malice can ruin entire lives, others or our own. The news these days is filled with stories of strong careers ruined, powerful public people brought down, by some slip of the tongue, some careless remark, or a bit of black face dredged up from their younger more thoughtless past.

Four things you can't recover from your words:

1. the word after it's been said
2. the blow after it's been delivered
3. the pain from the blow
4. the scar that it leaves

On this communion Sunday, what then is our take home from this passage?

We demonstrate our faith to others by what we say and what we do.

So we must be careful about what we say, how we say it and when we say it.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths,
but only what is useful for building up, as there is need,
so that your words may give grace to those who hear.
Ephesians 4:29

We must learn how to communicate - and remember, Communication is not just what we say.....it is what they are hearing! You can say things in a certain way, but depending on how you say it...it can be misconstrued and taken wrongly...and suddenly you've offended someone and didn't even know it. To quote the poet James Lowell,

Blessed are those who have nothing to say and cannot be persuaded to say it.

That's why especially in a conflict situation, before you text, tweet, post, instagram, tik tok, blog, snap chat, email, write, or call, think of what you are going to say:

- Is it true
- Is it necessary
- Is it kind
- Does it bring peace and resolution or cause escalation

Remember, you can neither control nor reverse the damage that idle words can do. Everything posted on the internet is permanent, so before you viciously reply to a response or an attack, consider your words carefully, or even better give them a phone call, better still if possible meet in person face-to-face to talk things out, this usually resolves most disagreements.

To quote another proverb

Congenial conversation — what a pleasure! The right word spoken at the right time — beautiful! <small>Proverbs 15:23 (the Message)</small>
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Also remember, if God is not controlling your tongue then guess who is. James says that the uncontrolled tongue is *set on fire by Hell* (3:6).

When our speech is motivated by Satan, it is full of

- Bitter envy
- Self-seeking
- Earthly concerns, desires,
- Unspiritual thoughts, ideas, humor
- Confusion and evil.

When our speech is motivated by God it is full of

- Mercy
- Love and consideration for others
- Peace
- Submission
- Sincerity, impartiality
- And righteousness.

It is a simple but profound truth: **The maturity of our speech is the mark of maturity in our life.** In this time of national divisiveness, angry words, and violence we who follow Jesus Christ have been left here **to be the peace makers, to be the salt** that preserves our world, **to be the light** that guides others home to God. So be

very careful with what you say, how you say it, and when you say it! Let us join our prayers with those of the psalmist, saying...

Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord;
keep watch over the door of my lips.
Psalm 141:3

Let's take these thoughts to the communion table. Let us pray.