

June 19th 2011 Practical Christianity #3 Tongue Control: James 3:1-12

I'm told that on a windswept hill in an English country churchyard stands a drab, gray slate tombstone. The quaint stone bears an epitaph not easily seen unless you stoop over and look closely. The faint etchings read:

Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, / lies Arabella Young, / Who on the twenty-fourth of May, / began to hold her tongue.

Now we may have a bit of a chuckle about that, but we all know that everyone of us suffers occasionally with 'Tongue Control' and it's a problem that persists even when we become Christians. The sharp and unkind word; the angry and cruel remark; the pervasive gossip; the name calling or unjust statement; the endless complaining or bitter negativity....the list goes on and on and on.

When James wrote his epistle he knew how destructive the tongue could be in the early Church and he was also aware that too many Christians saw tongue control as a minor problem—something that they really didn't have to do too much about.

And that's just as true today as it was then. If two Christians got into a punch up we would all see it as wrong. If a member of the church committed adultery we would recognize its destructive potential. If a Christian stole or was convicted of some crime we would question his or her commitment to Christ; yet gossip mongering, cross words and insulting comments are accepted at worst as simply minor infringements of good behavior.

But says James, an uncontrolled tongue is one of the biggest dangers that the church faces. Indeed he goes as far as saying in 1:26

James 1:26 *If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.* Or as the Common Bible translation puts it:-

If those who claim devotion to God don't control what they say, they mislead themselves. Their devotion is worthless.

There is huge potential for damage to the ongoing work of the church of Christ through thoughtless words and, conversely, huge benefits through the use of the God given and well thought out words that build and don't destroy.

In the country church of a small village an altar boy serving the priest at Sunday mass accidentally dropped the cruet of wine. The priest struck the altar boy sharply on the cheek and in a gruff voice shouted: "Leave the altar and don't come back!" That boy became Tito, the Communist leader in Yugoslavia. In the cathedral of a large city an altar boy serving the bishop at Sunday Mass accidentally dropped the cruet of wine. With a warm twinkle in his eyes the bishop gently whispered: "Someday you will be a priest." That boy grew up to become Archbishop Fulton Sheen. The power of words. The power of the tongue.

Because of this power James gives believers in verse 1-12 of chapter three, 5 things we need to know in order to control the tongue.

The first relates to its power for good, particularly as it relates to Christian teaching. That's why James begins chapter 3 by saying:.....

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers,

And this is because the vehicle that a teacher uses to proclaim eternal truth is his own human and earthly tongue. So James goes on to say in v2:-

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.

I rather like the way that The Message puts these two verses:-

¹⁻²Don't be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends. Teaching is highly responsible work. Teachers are held to the strictest standards. And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths. If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true, you'd have a perfect person, in perfect control of life.

As a preacher and teacher I am so aware of this. I know I am far from perfect and even if I get the theology right I can easily wreck a whole presentation by a careless remark said in or outside of the pulpit.

The power of the tongue of a preacher teacher is huge says James. It's like a bit in the mouth of a strong animal like a horse, or a rudder on a huge ocean liner. With the ability to speak comes the power to redirect the thinking and lives of many, and every teacher must be aware of the huge responsibility that God has placed in their hands. Once a preacher starts to see preaching as just a job, or a way to express his own talents of presentation, or simply an entertaining of others with thoughts they like to hear, then they are in

trouble. But if they constantly remind themselves of the huge responsibility given them by God then they never cease to throw themselves on His mercy and pray for His guidance and enabling.

We see an example of this in Psalm 19. It begins by speaking about the way the heavens daily declare so perfectly the Glory of God without word or speech. It then moves to the written revelation of God which is the law of God which is again perfect in its proclamation. Then at the end you have the preacher—in this case the psalmist David—talking about his hidden faults. Imperfections that he cannot see as well as the ones that are so apparent. Yet to him—an imperfect man—has been given the task of taking God's law and from there declaring the glory of God. Is it any wonder that he ends with the prayer found in Ps 19:14

***May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.***

Dr Noel Vose was Principal of the Theological College when I attended it and always showed himself as an extremely Godly man and very apt teacher and speaker. And I will always remember that every time before he lectured or preached he would pray those words from Psalm 19. And I realize now that he prayed them because he felt the same as James did about the need to control his tongue.

Second relates to its power for evil : Look what James says about the tongue in 3:6

***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.***

A world of evil that can turn a human being into a destructive flame that burns all who come near. These are strong words indeed but even worse is what James mentions here as the force behind such evil. It is the force of hell—the power of the devil himself. I heard of someone the other day who has been accused on a public forum of a most horrible crime, and yet the accuser knows full well that such a charge has already been investigated with the accused being exonerated by the highest authority, yet they persist in their verbal attacks because they want to cause damage. It's evil and destructive and spurred on by the devil.

And the scary part is that a person does not have to be evil themselves for their words to be used by evil powers—they simply have to be foolish, impulsive, unthinking.

The other thing James mentions relates to the immense damage that the tongue can do because of the evil force that desires to empower it. He says in v5:-

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark

We feel for that retired policeman living in Roleystone whose unthinking use of an angle grinder set off a bush fire that destroyed 71 homes in that region. He just didn't realize the possible consequences of what he saw as a perfectly ok act, but that would have meant little to those who suffered so greatly because of his ignorance, foolishness, whatever you may call it.

Now the tongue can be just as destructive as the sparks from that angle grinder were, says James. What we may think of as a harmless observation may quickly ruin a person's reputation and the effectiveness of the work they do. I recall a country church where one of the members had a problem with the Pastor, and because he was also a correspondent for the local newspaper he would often include criticism of the sermons in his article. You can imagine how that affected the Pastor's and the church's standing in that small community. We need to remember that an out of control tongue is greatly used by the evil one.

Third relates to the tongue as a witness of our commitment to Christ. We use it when we gather on a Sunday to worship the Lord together and others who hear our praises see them as a witness of our Faith. But we use our tongue on every other day of the week too and we need to be careful how we use it then, for a bad use results in a bad witness to the name of Christ we bear. James says in 3:9-10

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.

There's this story about a tramp who knocked on the door of an English pub called "George And The Dragon". A woman opened the door. He asked, "Could I have a bite to eat?" The woman screamed at him, and began to curse and malign him and finally slammed the door in his face. He knocked again and the woman opened the door. "Now could I have a few words with George?"

It's too easy for us to be George on Sunday and the Dragon during the week. We need to watch our tongue constantly for the sake of Christ and our witness to Him.

Finally only God's power will ever keep our tongues in check. We will never tame our tongue by ourselves. It doesn't matter how hard we try or how good we think we are, there will always be times when our words will let us down and be used by Satan for evil. James says in 3:7-8 (CEV)

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures can be tamed and have been tamed. But our tongues get out of control. They are restless and evil, and always spreading deadly poison.

I believe James was thinking of specific instances within the Christian community of which he was head when he wrote this letter, and that is why he uses such strong words. But there is no doubt that words in a church fellowship, in a family, in any close community, can at times still be used to spread 'deadly poison'.

That's why we need to always watch what we say and how we speak, but beyond that we also need to recognize the evil forces that wait to use every slip of the tongue to create division and pain. And because we become aware of that so we will become more aware of our need to rely on God to help us tame the un-tameable.

So as we come to the end of this study about the tongue let me leave us all with one practical suggestion. That we compose a short prayer, asking God to watch over our lips, and write that prayer on a card or bookmark. Then we place the bookmark in the Bible, or other devotional book we turn to each morning, or maybe, place it next to our bed. So that we get into the habit of commencing each day with a prayer for God to enabling us to tame the un-tameable. To enable us to control our tongues.

