

September 13, 2015 – James 3:1-12 (OT: Isaiah 50:4-10 NT: Mark 9:14-29)

Only Jesus Can Tame Your Untamable Tongue

We have all said things that we regret. We each have “put our foot in our mouth” by saying something that we shouldn’t have. We’d like to think that these “slips of the tongue” are minor things, of no real consequence. The nursery rhyme, after all, tells us that while sticks and stones can hurt us, words cannot harm us. But if someone has ever said something hurtful to you or about you, you know how damaging words can be. Words are not easily taken back or ignored.

Our reading today talks about the tongue and the problems it causes. James says the tongue “*is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison*” (v. 8). That may seem a bit extreme, but if we consider the hurts we’ve experienced at the tongues of others and that we have caused with our tongues, we see that these words are no exaggeration. We also are told here that “*no man can tame the tongue*” (v. 8). That may seem to leave us in a hopeless situation, but we know that what is impossible for us is possible with God (Mark 10:27). So we will see that only Jesus can tame our untamable tongue.

James chapter 3 starts out with a warning: “*My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment*” (v. 1). This refers in particular to those who teach in the church. It shows how important God views correct teaching as He will subject those who teach His word to a stricter standard. We see the damage done by false teaching throughout the world today, as many churches focus only how to have a good life here and now and fail to teach the good news that God sent His Son Jesus to suffer and die for the sins of the world and raised Him from the dead so that we can live eternally with God.

But if you are not a pastor or teacher, that doesn’t mean you are off the hook! Your words are still important – they still matter. There are many different ways we can stumble and sin, but to not stumble in our words most difficult. “*If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body*” (v. 2). If you can control even your tongue, you can control all your actions.

To help us understand this we have the illustration of the horse and bridle, especially the bit that is put into the horse’s mouth. By directing the bit one can control the horse and turn its whole body. Unless you are into riding horses, this illustration may not be as familiar to us today. Perhaps a modern-day illustration would be the steering wheel of our car. It is relatively small, but controls where the car is headed. This is like the second illustration God gives us here: that of a large ship. It is “*driven by fierce winds*” just as we are buffeted by the desires of our sinful nature, but by controlling a very small rudder a pilot can direct the ship in the way it should go. These examples illustrate that while the tongue may be just a small muscle in our mouths, it has a great effect: either for good or for bad.

James goes on to talk about the bad effect the tongue can have with the illustration of fire. A whole forest is set ablaze with a little fire, even just a tiny spark (v. 5b). We see the damage caused by a little fire in the news of the fires in California and Idaho and other places out west. The physical damage of homes being destroyed and lives lost illustrates the damage that can be done with the tongue. For “*the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity*” (v. 6). An uncontrolled tongue can produce great damage; “*it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature*” (v. 6). It doesn’t only affect us, ourselves, but others as well.

In case the power and importance of the tongue seems exaggerated here, listen to some of the things God’s word tells us about our tongue and our speech: “*Therefore, putting away lying, ‘Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another*” (Ephesians

4:25). *“Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers”* (Ephesians 4:29). *“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice”* (Ephesians 4:31). *“But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth”* (Colossians 3:8). *“Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one”* (Colossians 4:6). I don’t know about you, but if I compare myself these words that I just read, I have failed.

And then there is the eighth commandment: *“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”* (Exodus 20:16). This commandment is not limited to appearing in court and perjuring oneself, but as Luther explain in his Small Catechism it means: *“We should fear and love God that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, or say anything that might ruin his good name and reputation; but we should defend him, speak well of him, and explain all his words and actions in the best possible way.”* How easy it is to gossip about someone, and how often we find it easier not to speak up and defend someone when someone else say something about them.

And don’t forget the second commandment: *“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain”* (Exodus 20:7). Again Luther helps us understand what this means in his Small Catechism. It means that *“We should fear and love God that we do not use His name to curse, swear, practice witchcraft, lie, or deceive; but we should call upon His name in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.”* We would like to think that we do not often violate this commandment, but how well have you followed it when you have been stuck in traffic, or someone cuts you off? As our text says, *“With [the tongue] we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so”* (vv. 9-10).

Jesus said, *“For every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned”* (Matthew 12:36-37). So the tongue truly is *“an unruly evil, full of deadly poison”* (v. 8) that *“defiles the whole body”* (v. 6).

As James points out all manner of beast and bird has been tamed by mankind, but no person can tame the tongue. No matter how many times we have to *“bite our tongue”* we cannot control it by our own will power. It is a uncontrollable evil set on fire by hell.

But as I said, what is impossible with man is possible with God. God the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Being both God and man, He was perfect. He was the only perfect man who never stumbled in word. He was full of grace and truth (John 1:14). When He taught, He spoke the very words of God. He taught with ultimate authority (Mark 1:22) and His words bring us eternal life (John 6:63, 68).

Although He lived a perfect life in both word and deed, He was put to death as a criminal. But He died an innocent death to take away the sins of the world. Jesus’ blood blots out every thoughtless, unkind, hell-fired word you and I have ever uttered. His death has removed the guilt of all our stumblings – both in deed and in word.

As Jesus said, on the day of judgment we will give an account for every idle word we may have spoken (Matthew 12:36). But you need not fear! Every idle word will covered with the blood of Jesus. In today’s age of computers we do not often use Wite-Out correction fluid to erase things, but if remember such a thing, you can think of Jesus’ blood as *“Red-Out”* for your sins – His

death blots them out so they are no longer part of your record. Your file of idle words will be erased and empty on that day because Jesus' blood has cleansed you from all sin.

But Jesus does not only remove our guilt, but He destroys the power of the evil one and the power that hell has over us. He tames our tongues.

Two weeks ago we heard Jesus explain that it isn't what goes into a person that defiles them, but what comes from their heart (Mark 7:14-23). The heart is the source of a laundry list of sins. The heart is also the source of what the tongue says – out of the abundance of the heart one's mouth speaks (Luke 6:45). The things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart (Matthew 15:19) and, as we see here, defile a person. We cannot fix our hearts, but we need a new one. And that is what God promises to do – to create in us a new and clean heart. To create in us a new person, which a new heart and a new tongue.

When God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, Moses didn't want to do it. He told God, *“O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue”* (Exodus 4:10). The Lord replied, *“Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the Lord? Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say.”* (Exodus 4:11-12).

As God was with Moses, so He is with us. He is the only one who can enable us to use our tongues as He desires and keep us from stumbling (Jude 1:24). Last week we saw Jesus heal the tongue of the deaf person who could not speak properly. In today's Gospel reading Jesus cast out the demon that made the boy deaf and mute. With His power, Jesus does the same for us – He delivers us from the power of the evil one and enables us to speak and use our tongues to His glory.

Whenever you are troubled by your untamable tongue, remember that only Jesus can tame it. He has removed the guilt of every idle word you have spoken by blotting them all out with His blood. And He has created in you a new tongue fed by a new heart. So look to Him to tame your tongue and pray: *“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) Amen.

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