

## James and the Tongue August 23, 2020

The lesson writer regards the epistle of James as the New Testament's contribution to "wisdom" literature. We are back to that after last week's important "works versus faith" discussion, which is perhaps the most controversial point in James. In contrast, the dangers of loose talk is relatively uncontroversial, even though it is an issue that can be a problem for any of us! Furthermore, in this age of instant personal communication and social media, the issue isn't just the "tongue" (what we say), but what we write, text, snap, or video as well. Humanity has millennia of experience in learning how to control speech to good effect (when we take care to follow that wisdom). We have not yet acquired much experience in moderating or understanding the impact of some of these newer methods of communication.

Really, the issue is even broader than even just communication. God has given us, as humans, many amazing abilities. But how we use those abilities matter – we can use them for good or for evil. Think of our arms and our hands. We can use tools that make life better and more productive. We can also use them to throw rocks at each other, or worse. We have invented automobiles – a way to go long distances affordably and conveniently. But think about the behavior you sometimes see on the road. It doesn't take explicit communication to demonstrate blatant disregard for others and a sense of entitled privilege. We have seen many examples of how technology can be used for good, but also for evil. It is part of the human condition, and seems to have been in one way or another since the very beginning when Cain killed Abel and then tried to talk his way out of it.

The passage begins with a comment about teachers that bothers me:

**James 3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For 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. (NRSV)**

I will flat-out say that I think James is wrong. Perhaps if by "teachers" he means specifically "rabbis," then I'll defer to our Jewish neighbors. But, for teachers in general, and those who would teach others about a variety of subjects both religious and secular, I think we can do with more teachers, not fewer!

Yes, teachers are, and should be, judged with greater strictness. But that's not a reason to avoid teaching! It's a reason for diligence, and care, and dedication. A person who does not make mistakes is more likely someone who does not do enough! In doing, we humans are likely to err, no matter how careful and diligent we are, in teaching as well as other things. Is that a reason not to teach? No! Here's what's important: approach teaching with humility and with respect for the Creation. As you may know, I have spent the last 29 plus years teaching electrical engineering. One of the things I tell my students is, "You can't fool the electrons." If you design a circuit incorrectly, and build it, the electrons that make electrical current flow will know what to do and will do it, regardless of what you said the circuit would do. You can fool people sometimes with mistakes or even deliberate false statements, but those electrons can't be fooled. So when you put a design in front of students, and it is wrong, you will be exposed! So, part of teaching this stuff is to show how work can be checked for mistakes, and how in developing complex products there are ways to look for problems and demonstrate correctness in a disciplined manner. But, even then, mistakes can be made! The universe, and life, is complicated. We don't have all of the answers. So, if you teach, you, too, will make mistakes. Join with your students in investigating and understanding them. One learns more from errors demonstrated and corrected than from never having made a mistake.

Now, James wasn't teaching electrical engineering. But he was teaching things about the world of his day and time. How many things from that day have been found to be either wrong or at least far from correctly understood? Recall that everything was supposed to be made up of fire, air, earth and water. When things burned, they gave up stuff (later called "phlogiston"), rather than taking something (oxygen) out of the air. The cosmological models were wrong. Many believed in a flat earth. Then there are all the biology issues. There was no more advanced political system on large scale than "monarchy" in one form or another. Lest we think we are so much smarter now, what of our contemporary common knowledge will be looked back on as foolishness hundreds of years from now? It's hard to tell. Look at how much has changed in just the last 100 years. For example, one of my grandfather's letters of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century mention a novel idea that microscopic little animals, "germs," cause illness.

So when it comes to many of the things we feel so sure of in our day, perhaps a bit more humility is needed. But, still, don't hesitate to teach! Do the best you can. Yes, you will be held to a higher standard. Aspire to meet that standard. But

know that there is Grace when you fall short. God will have mercy. Your students, if you show humility and respect for your subject, and if they are at all serious about learning, they will understand too. We are truly all students.

Yet, amazingly, the words of Jesus ring true just as much now as in the first century. In Matthew 15 Jesus teaches concerning cleanliness and the mouth, words that really address many of these issues that James frets about:

**Matthew 15:15 But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” 16 Then he [Jesus] said, “Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19 For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.” (NRSV)**

What comes out of the mouth in our speech proceeds from our heart. Likewise, what we do with our hands, what we write, or text, or whatever we do to help or to hurt others comes from the heart. If we can keep our hearts in the right place as we navigate through the ups and downs of life, we do well! So, while James puts the blame on our tongues, the problem is deeper.

**James 3:3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4 Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5a So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.**

James uses a couple of analogies. One has to do with horses. I rode ponies occasionally when very young, but don't have enough experience to address this point. But my Father had experience with horses, and that included uncooperative ones, despite bit and bridle. If a horse wanted to go home and decided to do so, good luck! He wouldn't mind going under a low branch on the way either! Now, about ships I can say a thing or two. If your ship or boat isn't moving through the water, that rudder does no good at all! If the tide of water is carrying you toward a bridge piling and there's no wind, hence no speed, you can't maneuver! If you at least have wind, you can steer, using the sails alone if need be. But you can't just go wherever you want. I have first-hand experience with that! There's no way to

go directly upwind without a power source. (A manual auxiliary power system will do it – oars! Cindy adds that even these don't work well enough in a heavy wind.) Yes, I do see James's point. But it's the intentions of the heart behind that tongue, or those fingers, that direct things.

**James 3:5b How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8 but no one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12 can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.**

The outward impact of words calculated to offend or enflame can indeed lead to disaster. That's the power of language and the power of human society. Words can inspire. They can give us peace. They can be accompanied with music to even greater effect. It's not for nothing that we sing hymns on Sunday morning! But words can hurt; they can sting; they can sow hatred and destruction. Of course we should use our words carefully! But we also should not be so calculating in our use of words that we seem uncivil, unresponsive or uncaring. We don't want to be so preoccupied with ourselves and our utterances that we miss the casual conversation that is expected for civility. We need to be ourselves.

So, if you are going to avoid words spewing out poison, the place to focus is your heart. Guard your heart, and at that point check your feelings lest words come out before you can consider them. If someone is making you angry, recognize it, and think about what words to use. But you shouldn't have to live that way all of the time.

I think James gets into some trouble with his further analogies. The tongue can sing songs of joy and praise. It sounds like James would rather us all not have tongues. (Then we'd just have to use hand gestures instead.) There are numerous species of animals that cannot be tamed; controlled maybe, but not tamed. As to taming the tongue, it's really us, the human species, that can't be practically tamed.

That's a good thing! Suppressed, maybe. Cowed or downtrodden, yes, on occasion, but still yearning to be free. We are not by our nature meant to be slaves!

James makes a point of saying that our tongues (actually our hearts) can't be both sources of good and sources of evil. He cites no fresh water from salty (desalinization hadn't yet been invented), and he doesn't seem to know about grafting plants. Still, I'm not so sure he is otherwise correct anyway. As Christians, we are supposed to put our hearts on Jesus and follow him. Does that mean that we can assure that nothing ever gets the better of us? Of course not. Dealing with using a computer even made my mother utter words she wouldn't ordinarily use. Trying to get through on the telephone to a human being when trying to get help likewise seems an exercise designed deliberately to try our patience and dedication to good manners. And, of course, uncourteous or downright mean or rude human beings can annoy us into saying things we shouldn't. It can happen. Be assured that God understands; there is grace. Each Sunday we say, after the prayer of confession, "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." The slate is wiped clean. Indeed, we live and sin and do good things as we live out our lives, continually under God's grace. If we have given our hearts to Jesus, we are assured of that. Jesus speaks to us with more grace than James does.

Yes, it's best if our lives, words and deeds always reflect the highest ideals of Jesus's Way. But we don't have to be calculating each moment what we should do to stay on the right side of a ledger of works somewhere. We live by faith. That gives us the freedom to speak, to go, and to do without having to focus overly much on the details. If our hearts are in the right place, God goes with us, and we can trust His Holy Spirit to give us help and calm to deal with what comes up. We can live boldly doing the work God has given us.

Prayer: *Wise and gracious God, continue to shine your light on the path before us, enabling us to see what matters most and act on that knowledge in your name. Amen.*