

Body Building Sermon Series  
Pierced Tongue - James 3:1-12  
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I've never been able to roll my tongue. You know, when you curl the sides of it up and stick it out? Never could do that. Amy can. Sydney can. Molly can. I think even our dogs can do it. But I can't. Can you all do it? Let me see...I actually asked you to try that so I could see how many people would stick their tongue out at the preacher during his sermon. Let the smiting begin!

I'm very impressed with all of your tongue-rolling abilities. Wouldn't it be great if our tongue were that easy to control ALL of the time? And yet, as we know, that little buggler can get us into a lot of trouble. James is helping us build our bodies to be more like Christ. So far, we've talked about having big ears for listening, broken hearts for compassion, and dirty hands for serving. Today, we're going to focus on the benefit of a pierced tongue and the danger of an uncontrolled one.

I'm recognize the irony of preaching on the power of our words in the throes of this contentious political season. We've seen in unfortunate ways how words spoken by those running for office, or those spoken about them, can do real damage. For example, candidates who make false claims about immigrants aren't just spouting a party line, they are putting people's well-being in jeopardy. And nasty, hurtful things posted about the candidates will never be read by the candidates, but will be read by people close to you. Our words are a reflection of our character, and they matter.

I remember reading about the famous singer, Karen Carpenter. She and her brother Richard were very popular in the 1970s. When they first started singing, a critic reviewing the band referred to Karen as "Richard's chubby little sister." From that moment on, every time she looked in the mirror, she saw Richard's chubby little sister. She started taking drugs to lose weight and developed a severe eating disorder. Those simple words destroyed her. She died of heart failure at the age of 32, killed as much by someone's words as by her own health. Our words have that kind of power.

But they not only have the power to destroy. Our words also have the power to create. At the beginning of Genesis, God spoke the world into being. And God *said*, "Let there be light." And there was light. One of the first duties God gives to Adam is the power to name. Genesis 2:19 says, "Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name." We humans have power to name, to give something or someone an identity, to speak their existence into being, to affirm their value in our and God's eyes.

There is so much power in what we say. Think about it: if you ask someone to pass the mashed potatoes, they do it, even if they don't want to. If you call someone's name, you can make them turn around, change their whole perspective. Two people come before a minister and they say two little words and they are bound together for life. Think about the power of the words "I hate you" or the words "I love you." Such little words, so much power.

King Solomon, the author of the book of Proverbs, knew of the tongue's power. That book is filled with warnings to be heeded, like Prov. 10:19: "When words are many,

sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.” We preachers don’t like that one. Or Prov. 12:18 “Reckless words pierce like a sword but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” Or Prov. 21:23: “He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity.” We have such power in our words.

That’s why James is so vehement in his argument about controlling the tongue. He personifies it, gives it a life of its own: the tongue makes great boasts, it is a fire, it corrupts the whole person, it is a restless evil. The Message says, “By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it.” The comparison to fire is a particularly powerful one. Back in those days, fire was one of the most feared emergencies because they simply didn’t have the means to stop it once it started. Without fire trucks or hydrants, all they could do was let it spread and run its course, and then assess the damage it left behind. That’s not unlike our response to a rumor or piece of gossip. All we can do is let it run its course and then assess the damage.

James knows about this damage, and he knows that negative words are evidence of a much greater concern. “With the tongue we praise our Lord, 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.” I remember once on the bus in elementary school I was showing off to my friends by using some off-color words I heard, and I saw the bus driving in the mirror watching me. As I was leaving the bus, he gently grabbed my arm and said, “Son, I heard those words you were using. Do you kiss your momma with that mouth?” Yowza. I never said those words again until I started golfing.

James says there should be consistency between what we say to others and what we say to God. He knows that we shouldn’t be opening our mouths just to take out the right foot and put in the left one. Our speech is revelatory of our soul. Things that come out of the mouth originate from the heart. A gossipy mouth is a sign of a gossipy heart. An insincere mouth is a sign of an insincere heart. A boastful mouth is a sign of a boastful heart. What we say is a reflection of who we are.

The number one reason God gave us a tongue was so that we could express our praise, our gratitude, and our worship to God. And the second reason we have tongues is so we can use them to encourage, to build up one another. And yet, how often do we use our words to build ourselves up, usually at the expense of someone else? It’s like the Pharisee in scripture who in prayer thanked God that he wasn’t like the lowly tax collector. Just because you invoke God’s name doesn’t mean your words are a blessing. It’s like the uniquely Southern tradition of saying something horrible about someone, but ending with, “God bless his heart.” It’s bad enough to speak poorly of someone, don’t bring God into it!

James calls this duality our “double-mindedness,” our tendency to be divided between God and our own selfish desires. William Barclay says, “In humans there is something of the ape and something of the angel, something of the hero and something of the villain, something of the saint and much of the sinner.” None of us are either one of the other; all of us are a little bit of both. We all have the potential for double-mindedness. When we use our tongue to praise God on Sunday, but then use it to lash out at someone or talk behind someone’s back or pass judgment on someone, we are being double-minded. God bless our hearts.

What makes this so dangerous is that it can happen so quickly. Even when we think we have our tongue under control, it's so easy to slip back into old habits. There was a little boy selling a push lawnmower in his front yard. A preacher wanted to buy it and asked if it worked.

"Yes sir." said the boy. The preacher pulled and pulled on the rope and said, "Son, this thing won't start."

The boy said, "That's 'cause you 'gotta' cuss at it first."

The preacher said, "Son, I'm a preacher, and I haven't cussed in 18 years."

The boy said, "Keep pulling; it'll come back to you."

We can be having the best day of our lives, and then someone gives us a dirty look, or someone cuts us off in traffic, or a loved one gives us a verbal jab, and all of the sudden we're spewing fire. No matter how hard we work at it, it's so easy to unroll our tongues and say the wrong thing without even thinking about it.

If you could hear a recording of everything you said last week, what would you want to edit out? How would your words change if you realized that every word you spoke to someone was being spoken to a child of God? Ask yourself, "How would I feel if what I'm about to say was said to me? Would I be angry? Would I be hurt?" If what you're about to say about someone is negative, stop and ask yourself the motivation behind it. Why do you feel it necessary to say these words? What do you gain from it? What are you about to reveal about yourself by saying them?

Better yet, how can you use your words this week to build up? What good thing needs to be named in a friend or a family member or a coworker? What words can you speak to someone this week that will be an overflow of the love of Christ that's in your heart? Every person has something about them that can be complimented. Find it and name it. Remember we have been given the power to name, and we can choose names that tear down, like "the chubby little sister," or we can choose names for people that build them up, that remind them of God's love for them and honor God in the process.

We have such power, the power to name, the power to create, the power to build up. And we have the power to tear down and the power to destroy, to turn harmony in chaos. Which power will we use today?