

Faith Speaks

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Date: 01 June 2014

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[0 : 00] Well, it's good to be with you again, and the opportunity and privilege to share God's Word with you. I discovered from my records that this time last year or thereabouts, I was here spouting forth on the tongue, which is interesting, from the book of Proverbs.

Of course, John kindly in his email reckoned I was becoming a specialist in the topic. I probably am for all the wrong reasons, as I discovered.

So I suppose it's interesting to work out just why on earth it comes round with this frequency. Is it because your elders here reckon that this is a topic this church needs to hear frequently?

Well, they'd be right, not just from this church's perspective, but any church really needs to get their head round what we do with this muscle that flaps around between our gums, frequently letting us down.

So it might have been that reason, but I suspect not. I think that the reason simply is that the Bible has a whole lot to say to us about the tongue, the things we say, the things we articulate, the use that we put it to.

[1 : 29] So I suspect that is the reason. And it's your misfortune that you've got me twice on the topic. But hopefully we'll share some things this morning that are different.

But I rather suspect you can't remember what I said last year anyway. So we're okay. James chapter 3 is our passage. Turn with it if you have a Bible.

If not, I think the words are behind me. Almost. James chapter 3. Let's read the first 12 verses together. Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

Ain't that the truth, John? You'll all go home at lunchtime and work out how good I was. You don't need to phone me up and tell me. Verse 2 says, as Paul pointed out, We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he's a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.

[2 : 44] Or take ships, as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder, wherever the pilot wants to go.

Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

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.

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, creatures of the sea are being tamed, and have been tamed by man.

But no man can tame the tongue. It's a restless evil full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who have been made in God's likeness.

[3 : 48] Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?

My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. Amen.

God will bless his word to us. I don't know if you read the books of Chuck Swindle at all. He's an American, but we can forgive him for that. He writes really accessible and interesting books, and he always comes at them from an interesting perspective.

And one of his books is called Killing Giants Pulling Thorns. And in it he tells of an epitaph on a tombstone that he came across in a kirkyard or a churchyard in England.

And it said this, Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, lies Arabella Young, who on the 24th of May began to hold her tongue. Well, being told to hold your tongue, it's usually advice that's reserved for

children, isn't it?

[4 : 55] But perhaps it ought not to be. Maybe there's a spiritual discipline hidden in amongst all that. I'm sure we can all reflect on occasions when, oh boy, we wish, we wish, we'd held our tongue.

Now, in the normal course of our life, we say an awful lot. Now, somebody apparently, according to Google, so it must be right, has estimated the number of words that we say.

So, in an average 70 years for a bloke, 308 million words. Apparently. For a woman, 637 million.

Now, I know you'll find that really hard to believe. So, it is perhaps inevitable, and amongst all of that stuff, we're going to say something wrong.

We're going to allow our tongues to slip, as we say. Now, the psychologists estimate that for every thousand words, you'll make a couple of errors.

[6 : 01] So, at an average speed of talking, that's 10 to 20 times a day when you'll say the wrong thing. Remember old George W. Bush?

He was great at this kind of thing, wasn't he? He was great. And had enormous fun trolling the internet. And you can spend hours on this. Poor man. Families is where our nation finds hope, where wings take dream.

They misunderstood me. And my personal favourite, in addressing the sort of national association of primary school teachers in America, he opens up by saying, I'd like to spank all teachers.

Poor man. Now, they're humorous. Probably not all that important. And not the kind of thing that this wise old pastor is highlighting for us.

Rather, he is highlighting the impact that our tongues can have, and the harm they can do when we don't allow them to be under the control, and the guidance and the direction of God's Spirit.

[7 : 18] And in this one short letter, he has repeated this warning several times. So, back in chapter 1, you maybe remember in verse 19, we read this.

Dear brothers, take note of this. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. That's good advice, isn't it? Quick to listen, and slow to speak.

Then, towards the end of the chapter, verse 26, if anyone considers himself religious, and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself, his religion is worthless.

So, there's a measure by which you can assess whether your religion is worth anything. And it's the extent to which you accept or don't a controlled tongue.

Verse 12 of chapter 2, speak and act as those who are going to be judged. Speak and act as those who are going to be judged.

[8 : 20] In chapter 4, verse 11, brothers, don't slander one another. Whoever speaks against his brother or judges him, speaks against the law. And then in verse 9, chapter 5, verse 9, don't grumble against each other.

James has a lot to say about the tongue. It's a big deal for James. But as we've already said, if you check the Bible out, you'll find James not the only writer who wants to tell us something about the tongue.

We thought on Proverbs last year, there's 150 verses or so in Proverbs that Solomon's responsible for that are all about the tongue or speaking or lips or mouths.

Isaiah, central to his testimony, I am a man, he said, of unclean lips. Not I've got a terrible heart, as black as pitch.

I'm a man of unclean lips, he said. The Lord Jesus warns us that one day we'll give an account for every careless word we've uttered.

[9 : 30] The apostle Paul talks about the tongue. Peter talks about it. Even the apostle John talks about it. So this is a big deal for James. It's a big deal for God.

And therefore, it ought to be a big deal for us. Let me pick up two or three things in this passage just as we go through it. I want to say, first of all, there's something here about the tongue's influence on the direction that our lives take.

There's something about the influence on the direction. These verses three to five are all about direction, aren't they? They're all about control and about impact.

And we are familiar with these metaphors that James uses. Horses, ships, fires. I've only ever been on a horse once in my life.

That's not an experience I want to repeat. It's a long time ago and I can still remember it. You go on these YF adventure weekends. I'm far too old for all of that now.

[10 : 31] But there's the obligatory horse riding up there, up north. You know, and I was the biggest, so I got the biggest animal, which I didn't think was entirely fair. So I get on this thing rather nervously and the girl says to me, don't worry, it's very easy.

There's two controls. Kick it to go. Pull it to stop. The kick it to go bit worked. And it didn't go terribly fast, fortunately, to begin with. Then all of a sudden, it clearly smelt its stable and it set off. And that's when I realized that the pull it to stop bit wasn't quite working. I began to doubt the inerrancy of scripture here because I could remember James saying the bridle will control the horse.

No, it doesn't. No, it doesn't. Finally got to a stop all on its own. But we get the picture, don't you? There's this thing in a horse's mouth that controls it.

Or there's a small thing at the back of a ship that steers it. Likewise, James is saying to us, the tongue has a huge influence to steer the course of your life.

[11 : 35] How you use it, the things you think and verbalize, says James, will play a significant part in the way your life goes. And if you control your tongue, it can direct your whole life into what is acceptable in God's sight.

If you don't control it, the implication is that you're going to get into a whole lot of trouble. You see, our tongue is more than just a muscle that over time we are able to control so that it makes sounds that people understand.

It goes deeper. Its influence extends to the very core of our beings because before we speak, what we say has come from our hearts, our inner beings.

It's so true, isn't it, that especially if you're going to tick somebody off or you're going to say something, we often rehearse it, don't we? I'm just going to give them a piece of my mind. I'm going to tell them this.

I'm going to say this. There's a commentator called T.C. Baird. He put it nicely. He said the tongue is the hinge on which everything in our personality turns.

[12 : 44] I think he's right. Ultimately, James is saying here the tongue is a key factor in living a kind of controlled, disciplined life. And if you let it loose, it gets out of control.

It will damage just like a forest fire. So there's something about the tongue's influence on the course of our life. the kind of people we are.

But James goes a lot deeper than that because he also says to us this, the tongue here plays a part in your eternal future. That's quite interesting, isn't it?

Look at these verses sort of six onwards. They're really severe in their warning. He says the tongue's a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.

a world of evil among the parts of the body. It's as if all the sin and unrighteousness you could possibly imagine gets zeroed in on what you say.

[13 : 49] We often concentrate the things we do, don't we? James puts some emphasis here on the things we say.

I think he's right. Seems it's a tool that we've got that too often and too readily becomes at the disposal of God's enemy. And it's more than just the odd word.

It's a world of evil, he says. Then he says it corrupts the whole person. It seems as if total havoc continues and our whole personalities get marked out by the things we say.

It's almost as if our lives get a stain on them that mark us out as certain kinds of people. Whether it be critical people or flippant people or obscenities, whatever it might be, he says, James, it's marking us out, it's corrupting.

But here's the rub and here's the real warning. He goes on, he says, you know, our whole life is destroyed. The whole course of our life is set on fire.

[14 : 59] It's a blaze because of a failure to master the tongue. It's got this huge potential it seems to be influential right through our life and to impact us and impact others.

So that's serious stuff, isn't it? A world of evil, the whole person, a whole life, but he's not finished yet. And here's the real force of the warning.

He says, it's set on fire by hell itself. self. That's where the influence comes from and where destiny is if it's not sorted, set on fire by hell.

No one's really sure what James was meaning by all of that. But he's certainly grabbing our attention, isn't he? It seems, of course, very directly that if we fail while we are alive to confess the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal saviour, scripture is very clear about our destiny and maybe

that's something you've got to sort out this morning before you say anything else.

Maybe you've got to confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is your Lord and your saviour. But I think there's something else here.

[16 : 24] It's as if James is saying to us here that there's a danger that hell's influence will remain on all of us and will in some way impact on our eternal future if we don't pay attention to this.

Now that's not to say if we're a Christian we'll lose our salvation. The Bible's very clear about that. But there's something also that when we stand before the Lord Jesus Christ we will be asked to give an account not for our sins but for the rest of our lives, our service, the kind of people we have been, the way we have helped others, the way we have hindered others.

I think James is giving us a very clear warning here however mysterious it appears of the real influence of evil that we've got to be careful and watch out for.

So there's something about the impact of our tongues in terms of our lives and the direction.

There's something about the fact that our tongues can play a part in our eternal future.

I think the third thing I want to highlight here is that our tongues impact on the lives of other people. Of course they do because unless you're prone to talking to yourself and you might be generally when we talk it's because someone else is around.

[17 : 49] How much thought then do we really give to what we say? Now verse one and I bet you thought I was skipping over it. I wasn't. I want to go back here. James very rightly focuses on those he says who presume to be teachers.

Those who want to set themselves up as those who know more than others. Who want to teach.

Now I want to say to you that platforms, this one included, are not made of wood.

They're made of very thin ice. And as preachers we have to learn to be very good skaters. Because all the time we're skating on very thin ice.

And I'm acutely conscious that I will say things to you this morning and doubtless next week the devil will have a real good go at me and do his very best and he may well succeed in demonstrating that actually I've not got this mastered any better than anyone else has.

Therefore I hope you pray for your preachers and your teachers. I hope this week in your prayers you were mentioning me. I hope you'll pray for John and others who occupy this particular position.

[19 : 06] Because as James says, I'll spend more time in front of the Lord giving him an account for what I said from platforms than others will.

And we need to think about that. Jesus was very clear about it. He talked in the Sermon on the Mount about the law and how he hadn't come to abolish it.

He hadn't come to stroke any of it out. He was there to fulfill it. And he then said, look, if anyone sets aside the least of these commandments or laws and teaches others to do it, they'll be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

So there's real warning there for those of us who preach and teach. And that includes Sunday school teachers, it includes home group leaders, it includes youth leaders, any position where you open up the word of God and seek to help and instruct somebody else, do it with much prayer and great carefulness.

But James has all of us, of course, in our sights, in his sights, rather in verses 9 to 11, and he's talking here about inconsistency, and that's the real message, of course, behind James's letter, that if we're being honest, of course we would call it hypocrisy about not living in a truly consistent way for Christ, whether it's our words or our actions, not really mirroring the life that we say we have.

[20 : 36] And of course when you're inconsistent in your Christian life in some way, shape, or form, it will not bear fruit. We can't be one thing and expect another thing.

We must be what we say we are and we must say what we actually are. There has to be a consistency there, especially if we're to ever make a real impact on our friends and neighbours or our colleagues.

But there's also a message here for churches, and some would say that's what this was all about in James's mind, how we speak to each other is at the heart of his concern.

You know, we can raise our eyes to heaven, as Paul was saying, in praise and blessing God. And then we're turning around and we're looking for the words to say to someone else that will defame them or denigrate them or criticise them or slander them or simply gossip about them.

And James said that's not right. And of course in all of these things must lie the condition of our hearts before God.

[21 : 45] Because Jesus says out of the abundance of our hearts our mouth speaks. What's inside will come out. It will have its impact personally, perhaps lastingly and certainly to others.

So what can we do about it? What can we do about it? Well, James, this master pastor, recognises this is really difficult if it's not impossible for us.

Twice over, he points that out. We're not perfect, he says, able to keep our whole body in check.

We can tame the wildest of animals, he said. There was a picture in yesterday's times of a 73-year-old Finnish man who's been adopting big brown bears all his life and there was a picture of him kissing this great brown bear and I thought, poor, that wouldn't have been me.

But you can tame the wildest of animals, says James. Do you know, you can't tame your tongue.

You can't. Only God can. And that's the point.

God can bring grace and redemption to hearts and lives that manifest such things in the things we say. So maybe the first thing is simply to get before God and in the words of Paul to Romans, count yourself dead to sin but alive to Christ Jesus.

[23 : 12] Don't let sin reign in your mortal body such that you obey its evil desires. Don't offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of righteousness. Offer yourselves to God. Give God your tongue.

Give him your heart. Give him your tongue. God. The psalmist put it this way. Set a guard over my mouth. There's a good prayer.

First thing in the morning. Before you've kicked the cat, kissed the wife or kissed the cat and kicked the wife, whichever way it comes. Guard my mouth.

And then last year I shared with you Alan Redpath's little acrostic thing. So I'll share it again on the basis you've possibly forgotten. Alan Redpath said whenever he was going to say something, he used the little word think.

Is what I'm about to say true? Is it helpful? Is it inspiring? Is it necessary? And is it kind?

[24 : 23] True, helpful, inspiring, necessary, kind. Once you've gone through that little list, people have arrived at a decision whether what you want to say is really what you want to say.

And I guess we need to remember that when we speak at all, God is the one who's also listening.

May God bless his word to us and encourage us and help us in the week.

thank you. Thank you. Thank you.