

Speaking the Words of Faith

James 3:1-12

Introduction

Last week we learned that faith alone saves, but faith is never alone. Saving faith, given to us by the Holy Spirit, works the fruit of righteousness in our lives. This is why James says that a faith without works is dead. We also learned that the fruit of righteousness, good works, are done to point people to Christ. Today, we look at the tongue's role in this.

The Wild Tongue

We might be tempted to think that we'll be talking about witnessing as the tongue's role in pointing people to Christ. The fact is, our entire life is a witness, for Christ or against Him. What we say in everyday talk will either point people to Jesus or turn them off. You've heard the old saying, "actions speak louder than words?" That's not always true. Sometimes, the things we say can take away from our actions, or other words. James talks about salt water and fresh water, or bitter water and sweet. What happens if you combine bitter and sweet water? You get bitter water. The bitterness overpowers the sweet. The same thing happens when we "curse men" or say bad things about people. Those things overshadow any good things we may have said. We can't cover up ill said words with good actions or good words. Once we say something bad or hurtful, that's a bell that can't be unring.

The Eighth Commandment

That's why the Eighth Commandment, "you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" is so important. This commandment forbids all sins of the tongue, by which we may injure or confront our neighbor. Of course, our fallen nature is inclined to break that Commandment, as it does all the others. We know we're not supposed to speak ill of anyone, but it's just so natural. Somehow, we must bring the tongue under control.

Control the Tongue—Control the Body

In **verse 2**, James points out that if a man can bridle his tongue, he can bridle his whole body. James says that such a man is perfect. Lucas Osiander, Lutheran pastor and theologian of the Reformation, said: *James calls such a person perfect, not because the person has been perfected in the severe judgment of God, but because the person has perfection of such a kind that is able to occur in a mortal person in whom sin still dwells.* That man is not perfectly righteous before God but is leading such an exemplary life that no one else can find fault in him. One such man was Billy Graham. Like him or not, no one was ever able to discredit him with any kind of scandal. Yet, he would be the first one to tell you he wasn't perfect.

Bits and Rudders

Think of the power of the tongue. A tiny bit can control a 1600-pound horse. A small rudder can turn a huge steamship. In the same way, the tongue can turn the whole body. Our actions are largely determined by our words. That's because of the source of our words (Read **Matthew 15:18-19**). Evil

words spring from an evil heart. If the heart is evil, the actions will be also. That gives us insight as to how to tame the tongue.

Taming the Tongue

Let's take a closer look at the horse and bit. The horse doesn't put the bit into its own mouth and turn itself. A man or woman puts the bit in and uses it to turn the horse. The same is true for us. We can't tame our own tongue since it's part of our fallen nature. As Augustine said: *God is needed in order to tame a man.* He went on to say this about the evil of a man's tongue: *[It] is so great that it cannot be tamed by anyone, even though that is not true of wild beasts. He said this not in order that we should tolerate this evil but in order that we should ask for divine grace to tame our tongue.* The good news is that the Holy Spirit, living inside us, can tame the tongue.

A Useful Tongue

Taming the tongue is an act of grace. God gives us His grace through Word and Sacrament. When we spend time in the Word and receive the Sacrament, God works on our vocabulary and begins to bring our tongue under control. When a horse is brought under control, it becomes a useful animal. It can be ridden, pull a buggy, cart, or wagon, or be used for other work. When the Holy Spirit tames our tongue, it's not for our own benefit, but to make us useful for God, by **SPEAKING THE WORDS OF FAITH** to point others to Jesus.

*And the peace of God,
Which surpasses all understanding,
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
