

# *Taming the Tongue*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3<sup>rd</sup> in a five-part series

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*Proverbs 15:2, 4 (CEB)*

<sup>2</sup>The tongue of the wise enhances knowledge, but the mouth of a fool gushes with stupidity. . . . <sup>4</sup>Wholesome speech is a tree of life, but dishonest talk breaks the spirit.

*Jeremiah 9:5, 8 (CEB)*

<sup>5</sup>One cheats the other; no one tells the truth; they train themselves to lie; they wear themselves out by doing wrong. . . . <sup>8</sup>Their tongue is a lethal arrow; their words are deceitful. They wish their neighbors well, but in their hearts plot their ruin.

*Matthew 15:11, 17–20 (CEB)*

<sup>11</sup>It's not what goes into the mouth that contaminates a person in God's sight. It's what comes out of the mouth that contaminates the person. . . . <sup>17</sup>Don't you know that everything that goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? <sup>18</sup>But what goes out of the mouth comes from the heart. And that's what contaminates a person in God's sight. <sup>19</sup>Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adultery, sexual sins, thefts, false testimonies, and insults. <sup>20</sup>These contaminate a person in God's sight. But eating without washing hands doesn't contaminate in God's sight."

*James 3:1–12 (CEB)*

My brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers, because we know that we teachers will be judged more strictly. <sup>2</sup>We all make mistakes often, but those who don't make mistakes with their words have reached full maturity. Like a bridled horse, they can control themselves entirely. <sup>3</sup>When we bridle horses and put bits in their mouths to lead them wherever we want, we can control their whole bodies.

<sup>4</sup>Consider ships: They are so large that strong winds are needed to drive them. But pilots direct their ships wherever they want with a little rudder. <sup>5</sup>In the same way, even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts wildly.

Think about this: A small flame can set a whole forest on fire. <sup>6</sup>The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives. Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire. The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell.

<sup>7</sup>People can tame and already have tamed every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish.

<sup>8</sup>No one can tame the tongue, though. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup>With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God's likeness. <sup>10</sup>Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn't be this way!

<sup>11</sup>Both fresh water and salt water don't come from the same spring, do they? <sup>12</sup>My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree produce olives? Can a grapevine produce figs? Of course not, and fresh water doesn't flow from a saltwater spring either.

*Bridle our tongues? Live our lives in God's truth? In this world?!*

Jesus had seemed especially busy after the execution of John the baptizer (Matthew 14:1-12). He had fed thousands with a just a few loaves and fish, he had walked across the water to join his disciples, he had healed multitudes of the sick. And, still, the scribes and Pharisees, the so-called teachers of righteousness, came to challenge him. They again wanted to test him, to question him, to destroy his ministry. They had discovered that some of his disciples didn't always wash their hands before eating, as required by the ritual rules practiced by the Jews.

Jesus knew what was going on. He always did. They weren't really interested in God's teaching but were protecting their own status as the unchallenged interpreters of the Law. So Jesus gathered the crowds around him and taught them with authority: "It's not what goes into the mouth that contaminates a person in God's sight. It's what comes out of the mouth that contaminates the person."

In this simple statement, Jesus combined three points. First, though the dietary food laws had long been a visible marker of what it meant to be Jewish, the time for those laws was passing. They had served their purpose. Second, God's people have to always be on guard against creating and elevating human rules that supplant God's law. Third, our tongues, our words, betray our hearts. As Jesus said that day, "What goes out of the mouth comes from the heart." The Pharisees' words revealed that their hearts were turned inward rather than outward in love of God and others.

In this, Jesus was placing himself within the wisdom traditions of the Jewish scriptures. They knew what you and I also know. Our tongues can be very dangerous weapons, inflicting harm on ourselves as much as on others. Proverbs 15 v. 2: "The tongue of the wise enhances knowledge, but the mouth of a fool gushes with stupidity." That about says it. Jeremiah 9 v. 8: "Their tongue is a lethal arrow; their words are deceitful. They wish their neighbors well, but in their hearts plot their ruin."

Thus, it is no surprise that when James writes his "sermon" about being doers of the word, not merely hearers, he turns to the tongue – to what we say and write.

#### *A warning for teachers (and preachers)*

James begins by talking to the teachers, for few people talk as much as teachers. That's why I'd throw preachers in there as well. We say and write so much that it is foolish to try to be anything but yourself. The heart is connected to the tongue and though you might fool people for a while, in the end, your words betray your heart. In Proverbs, our words are a key marker of our godliness, for good or ill (see, e.g., 10:8, 11, 21; 11:9; 12:18, 25; 13:3; 16:27; 17:14; 18:7, 21; 26:22). And so James warns that not many should strive to be teachers, for it is probably teachers of the faith and word that he has primarily in mind. James acknowledges that all teachers make mistakes, but that we have to learn to make fewer of them. We have to learn to control ourselves. James, like all teachers, enjoys a good metaphor. We should strive, he writes, to be like a bridled horse, having ourselves under full control. That's the problem with tempers. When we lose our tempers it is like throwing off the bridle and when we lose control we can say some of the most hurtful words that ever come out of our mouths.

I'm the sort of teacher who uses a lot of spontaneity and humor to keep a lighter tone from time to time. Though I've never wanted to do so, I've made some mistakes with my words and hurt some feelings, e.g., teasing the wrong person at the wrong time. I've tried hard to never make such a mistake – but every once in awhile I'm reminded how powerful even the most innocently-delivered words can be.

#### *The power of our words*

In verse 3, James turns to the power of our words: "even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts wildly" (3:5). The tongue, he writes, is like the rudder of a ship. A small part of the vessel, but the one that determines where the ship goes. The tongue, James writes, is like a small flame that threatens to set the world on fire, consuming our lives and the lives of those around us.

If we think James is overstating things a bit, the turmoil caused by our use of social media illustrates James' very point. How often do we learn of instances where someone's unthinking, unbridled, and irresponsible use of Facebook or Twitter has inflicted real harm? Yes, sticks and stones can break bones. But it is also true that words can hurt. In our own lives, how many times have we wished we could recall an email or post or tweet? How often have we wished we had kept the bridle on our tongue?

In writing this, I searched for stories of cyber-bullying and other cases where social media was misused toward a tragic end. Such stories were depressingly easy to find. The page five textbox below is one such story.

#### *Our words and the creation of our world*

In the final section of this passage, James links the tongue with God's creative work in the beginning. God gave the humans responsibility for this world, telling us to tame it.

And we have gotten some of this world under our control, but how about our tongues? How is it we can bend rivers and yet are unable to guard our words? Perhaps because we underestimate the power of language to shape how we see reality and how we live. Luke Timothy Johnson writes:

When we realize that language is a world-creating capacity, then we begin to appreciate James's cosmic imagery in describing its power and its peril. Even the world as it emerges moment by moment from God's creative energy—the "given" world of natural forces and juices—is reshaped and given its meaning by human language, whose symbols enable us both to apprehend the world as meaningful and to interpret it. The power of language, then, is awesome, for it gives humans the freedom to structure human life according to "the word of truth" so that humans are "a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (1:18 NRSV), or to create a universe of meaning in which God is omitted or ignored. The real peril of the tongue is not found in the passing angry word or the incidental oath or the petty bit of slander. It is found in the creation of distorted worlds of meaning within which the word of truth is suppressed. . . .

We are aware as well how the slippery half-truths of advertising have become the common language of politics, where messages to the public are crafted precisely according to their ability to "sell" a candidate, where lying about and slandering opponents have become recognized as the most effective of all campaigning devices, and where political agendas are advanced by appeals to the electorate's most primitive fears and most unworthy cravings.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, we need to note James' warning about being double-tongued. We are familiar with the idea of being double-minded (see James 1:8) or even double-hearted, but James wants us to see that too often we are double-tongued. As James, writes, we praise God one minute and then, the next minute, curse those made by God in his own image. Blessings and curses both from a single tongue, a single heart. Thus, James urges all believers to be one mind, one heart, one tongue – all devoted to God, his way, and his work.

### *A Closing Story About Hastily Spoken Words*

It was more than a thousand years before Jesus. Though God had promised the land to the tribes of Israel, getting it and keeping it had not been easy. For the twelve tribes, it had not been so much a military problem as a moral one. Time after time the tribes had wandered away from God, doing "what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (Judges 10:6), worshipping the Baals and Astartes (local Canaanite gods). Though God was angry with his people over their choices, he respected their freedom to choose wrongly and suffer the consequences of those choices. And so the Philistines pushed in upon the Israelites from the west and the Ammonites from the east (see the map on page one). This fell particularly hard on the Israelites who lived in Gilead on the east side of the Jordan river. With the river at their back, the Gileadites faced the Ammonites alone. Desperate, they appealed to God who, at first, told them to lie in the bed they had made for themselves – let them appeal to their new gods. However, as we'd expect, the LORD relented, for "he could no longer bear to see Israel suffer" (10:16). God would rescue the Gileadites – but how?

#### *Jephthah*

At the time, a man named Gilead had several sons. All but one of his sons was born to Gilead's wife. Jephthah, however, was Gilead's son by a prostitute. All the boys seem to have gotten along fine when they were kids. But as they grew up, the wife's sons turned on Jephthah, eventually driving him from the house. One can only imagine what all this was like for Jephthah. An outsider from the beginning, the one about whom all the folks would gossip – the product of an illicit union. Jephthah surely knew the power of words to hurt.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson. (1994–2004). The Letter of James. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 12, pp. 205–206). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Jephthah fled northward to the area of Tob where he gathered around himself a band of raiders and marauders, soon earning for himself a reputation as an effective military leader.

Thus, when the Gileadites need rescuing from the Ammonites, they turn to Jephthah, hoping to take advantage of his experience and expertise in warfare. At first, Jephthah can't believe that the Gileadite leaders have the nerve to come to him after chasing him away. But the tribal elders persist and Jephthah drives a bargain with them. He will lead them into battle with the Ammonites so long as they make him the tribal leader as well. The Gileadite leaders agree.

#### *The fatal words*

At first, Jephthah tries diplomacy with the Ammonites. However, “the king of the Ammonites did not heed the message that Jephthah sent him” (11:28). With war imminent, Jephthah tries to strike yet another bargain – but this time it is with God! It seems so foolish, but who hasn't tried it?

Jephthah vows that if God gives him a victory, then he will offer up as a sacrifice whomever or whatever first comes out of his house to welcome him home. The Hebrew in Jephthah's vow is a little ambiguous. It is possible that he expects a “what” to be the first out of the door, as we know that animals often lived in the main house with the people. But, Jephthah might also be expecting a servant or other “who” to be the first out the door. Though the Israelites never practiced human sacrifice, perhaps Jephthah picked up the idea during his time away. Whichever it is, Jephthah makes the vow.

#### *An unspeakable and self-inflicted tragedy*

Jephthah gets his victory. The Gileadites are saved. It is a big win all the way around. As Jephthah arrives home ready to celebrate, his only child, his beloved daughter, races out to meet him. She is the first out the door!! Believing that he cannot take back his vow, Jephthah plunges into despair. He even manages to get angry with the poor girl, when it was his own misguided attempt to bargain with God that brought them to this place.

The first question to ask yourself is this: what God would have Jephthah do? He thinks that he cannot break his vow. But surely, God would prefer that Jephthah break his vow than kill his daughter. Read Micah 6 and ask yourself what it is that God really values – sacrifice or mercy. Or imagine what Jesus would have to say about Jephthah's vow.

But Jephthah's daughter knows that her father will keep the vow. She doesn't ask him to break his vow but only that she be given some time to prepare. Jephthah allows her two months to go off with her friends to the mountains and prepare for her death. She will die so young. She will die a virgin. After two months, the girl returns home so that her father could do “with her according to the vow he had made” (11:39). The writer of Judges tells us that a custom arose from this. The young girls of Israel would go out for four days each year “to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite” (11:40).

In his reflections on this story, Ellsworth Kalas<sup>2</sup> notes that tragedy begets tragedy. The people of God are themselves locked into a cycle of tragedy. Every time they are rescued by God, they soon turn away again, descending deeper into darkness each time. For his part, Jephthah is born into tragic circumstances, the child of his father's visit to a prostitute. Chased out of his home by his half-brothers, Jephthah reinforces the cycle of tragedy as he embraces a lawless life, eventually making and fulfilling a tragic bargain with God. Jephthah wins his victory but loses what is most precious to himself. In our own lives, how many of us lose what we value most in our attempt to get the big win? How many of us set ourselves up for tragedy?

If only Jephthah had bridled himself and kept his tongue under control! If only . . .

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<sup>2</sup>from Kalas' *Old Testament Stories from the Backside*

## The Power of Words to Hurt

(taken from nobullying.com)

In December 2007, Tina Meier founded the nonprofit Megan Meier Foundation. The non-profit was named in honour of Tina's 13-year-old daughter who hanged herself in a bedroom closet in October 2006. Megan struggled with attention deficit disorder and depression in addition to issues with her weight. About five weeks before her death, a 16-year-old boy named Josh Evans asked Megan to be friends on the social networking website MySpace. The two began communicating online regularly, although they never met in person or spoke on the phone. "Megan had a lifelong struggle with weight and self-esteem," Tina said on the Foundation website. "And now she finally had a boy who she thought really thought she was pretty."

In mid-October, Josh began saying he didn't want to be friends anymore, and the messages became more cruel on October 16, 2006, when Josh concluded by telling Megan, "The world would be a better place without you." The cyberbullying escalated when additional classmates and friends on MySpace began writing disturbing messages and bulletins. Tina said on the Foundation website that it was about 20 minutes after Megan went to her room after leaving the computer that the mother found her daughter had hanged herself in her bedroom closet. Megan died the following day, three weeks before what would have been her 14th birthday.

Aftermath: According to the Associated Press, it was later that fall when a neighbor informed Megan's parents that Josh was not a real person. Instead, the account was created by another neighbor, Lori Drew, her 18-year-old temporary employee Ashley Grills, and Drew's teenage daughter, who used to be friends with Megan. One year later, the case began receiving national attention. While the county prosecutor declined to file any criminal charges in the case, federal prosecutors charged her with one count of conspiracy and three violations of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act for accessing protected computers without authorization. A federal grand jury indicted Drew on all four counts in 2008, but U.S. District Judge George Wu acquitted Drew in August 2009 and vacated the conviction.

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday Genesis 1:1-2:4</b> God creates the cosmos, the humans, tells them to master (1:28) the world.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday Proverbs 10:8-11</b> A skilled mind v. a foolish talker. What do you think the writer means by "skilled"? The NRSV translates this as "wise of heart."</p>
<p><b>Wednesday 2 Samuel 14</b> Joab gets an old woman to tell a false story to King David, setting in motion even more tragedy</p>	<p><b>Thursday Judges 10:6-12:7</b> The story of Jephthah</p>
<p><b>Friday 1 John 2:18-27</b> John urges believers to stay, to live, in the truth, God's truth, and turn away from the lies that sustain this broken world.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

