

“Faith and Works: Watch Your Tongue!”—James 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 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. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! 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. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

According to Wikipedia, the average length of the human tongue from the oropharynx to the tip is 10 centimeters, and the average weight of the tongue in adult males is 70 grams and 60 grams in adult females. (There is the possibility of several jokes here, but I will resist, and you probably should, too!) So the tongue is not very big at all, yet it causes us a world of trouble. How many of us were taught by our mommas that if, we couldn't say something nice about someone, we shouldn't say anything at all? (If our mommas didn't teach us that, someone along the line has to have said it to us!) But how many of us have been able to keep that lesson perfectly? I know maybe one or two people whom I've never heard say a negative word against anyone—but then, I haven't known them their whole lives. And I certainly don't count myself among them, because my mouth gets me in more trouble than anything I do or don't do. A lot of the time it's very unintentional—being a smart-aleck, I'll crack a joke at which someone takes offense, or sometimes, when I'm being serious, I don't communicate what I'm trying to say very well and someone's feelings are hurt. But sometimes the words just come out, and they're meant to hurt. I try not to do it, but it happens. It's part of the human condition—which is not an excuse; it's just, as they say, a natural fact.

Now, James knows as well as we do that it's not really our tongues that are behind the hurtful words we speak—nor, in our social media era, are our fingers behind the emails and Facebook posts and tweets on Twitter and messages on other outlets that are hurtful to others. James knows as well as we do that this is a problem of the heart—not the blood-pumping muscle in our chests, but the decision-making faculty of mind and emotion and experience that often leads us in directions we don't really need to go. It's our hearts, and not our tongues and fingers, that lead us to say things that hurt others. We all know the children's rhyme, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me"—but we also know it's not true, because we're hurt by other people's words, and we hurt other people with our own words.

James, of course, pulls no punches with us, and he points out in what we've heard this morning another of our hypocrisies—an issue that seems to have been a real problem in the community of faith to which James wrote, since he comes back to it a number of times in this letter. James writes:

With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

James' point is that it's inconsistent for us as Christians to praise God and bless his holy name in one moment and then say something demeaning about or to someone, particularly a sister or brother in Jesus. If James were living in our social media age, he would point to the inconsistency of posting words and pictures that praise God and urge others to do so and then later posting words and images that tear people down. To make his point, James uses images that even we can understand:

Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

It's inconsistent, James says, for us as Christians, whose lives have been transformed by the Holy Spirit, to profess love for God and then use words that hurt others.

Okay—we know the problem. How do we deal with it? Let me offer some suggestions, as much to myself as to anyone, because I'm just as guilty as anyone else.

So, first, let me suggest that we repent and confess our sinfulness in the inconsistency of our words. "To repent" means "to turn away" or "to turn around."

It doesn't mean making a 360-degree turn, because that just brings us back to where we started. Repentance means making a 180-degree turn. It means turning *away* from our sinfulness, our selfishness, our self-centeredness, away from our self-justifications for what we say, and turning *back* toward God. Repentance means more than being sorry for our sins—as one little girl said in Sunday School class, “It means being sorry enough to do something about them.” That something is to turn to God.

But repentance needs to lead to confession, where we humble ourselves before God and say to him that we have sinned—that we've broken his law and hurt our sisters and brothers. Now, God already knows that we've sinned, and he already knows that we've repented. Yet God gives us the privilege of bowing before him and, in all humility and honesty, telling him what we've done. But our confession leads to forgiveness—through confession we can claim the promise of God that, as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed from us our iniquity; we can claim the promise that God has cast our sin into the sea of forgetfulness, and there he remembers it against us no more; we can claim the promise that, if we confess our sin, God is faithful and just, that he will forgive our sin and cleanse us from all our unrighteousness; we can claim the promise that God will wash us thoroughly from our iniquity and put a new and a right spirit within us. We can begin to deal with the problem of our tongues—our words—through repentance and confession.

But as we get our hearts right with God, we need to learn to look to God's Spirit to guide us in the way we use our words—we need to ask the Holy Spirit to guide what we say and what we write. My father often says that people operate their mouths before engaging their brains; I would say that we as Christians often speak or write before we're engaged the heart of Jesus. We need to slow down and ask, “Is what I'm about to say honoring God? Is what I'm about to say going to build up someone rather than tear him or her down? Can I truly say that the words about to come out of my mouth or off my fingers are truly doing no harm?” It's so easy to pop off with our spoken and written reactions—not so easy to put a brake on our words and check them out with God, so to speak, before we speak or write them. God has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us in the practical matters of daily living—and that includes our words.

Let me offer one final suggestion, for myself as well as for anyone else—and that is to remember that we are governed by the law of love—we are governed by loving God with all we are and all that we have, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and loving one another in the community of faith as Jesus loves us, that is, with self-sacrificing, self-giving love. That law of love is the filter through which everything we might want to say, either orally or in writing, should be screened. Even when we feel we need to offer a word of correction or even rebuke,

we need to check our motivations against the law of love. (I suspect that, more often than not, we'll find that we're operating from our own egos rather than out of true love and concern for another.) The challenge of going on to Christian perfection in love is to conform our wills, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to the will of God, so that we habitually love God—that is, loving God simply becomes our way of life; we habitually love our neighbors—that is, acting toward our neighbors in love becomes natural for us; and having the mind of Christ—that is, the spirit of serving rather than being served. When we allow the Spirit to guide our words by the law of love, we find our speech and our writing become tools, not of hurt, but of help and of hope.

Now, none of us is perfect in speech—I suspect we've really got to struggle with it. We've got all sorts of justification for what we say or write, but they all fall to pieces when we hold them up against the way and will of God, the law of love which governs our lives as God's people. So let's watch our tongues—let's take care of what we say and write—so that our words become a blessing before God and to others. Dear God, may it be so for all of us!