

Taming the Tongue

James 3:1-12 verse order changed to suit flow of sermon

Introduction

I have heard it said in many sermons that the tongue is the strongest muscle in the human body- well I did my research and that's simply not true, It is not even the strongest muscle in your mouth so let that be a lesson to check your sermon cliché facts.

James is written to a Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 [perhaps 30+ years prior to the Gospel of John being written]

The biggest struggle for the Jewish Christians at the time was; thinking that they were better than gentile Christians and forcing circumcision upon them. At this point in time Christianity was still emerging as a Jewish sect. It was not until after the destruction of Jerusalem that it was seen as a separate religion from Judaism.

Paul challenged Peter about this in the book of Galatians and the Gospel writers constantly portray the confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees as a reminder not to think Jesus advocated following Judaism religiously.

You still see this in the church today; many Christians consider Jewish Christians to be in an extra special category.

James is warning his readers that their faith and knowledge of the Old Testament does not excuse them from doing good works and it certainly does not allow them to speak in a haughty way that puts other Christians down.

However the advantage his Jewish audience has is that they know the Old Testament, he is able to draw upon Old Testament images and references often.

Stop and think:

[I suppose this is a good place to ponder is biblical literacy equivalent to faith?] We church Goers have a huge advantage in getting to know God because we focus our attention on his holy book, but this should never make us feel superior to any other sinners. WE are all sinners too; we just know that mercy is available. When churches don't offer forgiveness they fail to show the love of God. More on this later.

James 3:7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,

3:8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

This verse is a reminds us of Genesis chapters 1, 2 and 3

Man is given dominion over all the animals, but he has lost dominion over his own words.

There is also a link to the great temptation fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil- as mankind's first sin was a sin involving the mouth. Sin first contaminated mankind through our mouths.

It also makes us think of Jesus teachings which many scholars believe James would have been familiar with.

Matthew 15:17 *Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled?*

15:18 *But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.*

15:19 *For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.*

James 3:9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

3:10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

3:11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?

3:12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

Here is a reminder that we are made in the image of God [another reference to Genesis].

The Greek word **similar** is used [translated as likeness in the passage above].

Cursing God's image [man] is **similar to** cursing God.

We are Not talking about swear words that slip out when we break something here- we are talking about insults and hurtful comments that lift us up and or cast others down [see extra notes on swear words for interest only at end of this document]

Remember James is not writing to unbelievers but to Jewish believers – they would not be in the habit of using vulgar language like the pagans around them [or like me] he was addressing the way that they spoke to each other.

The words also have a source as we established before –here is another passage from Matthew to ponder.

Matthew 12:33 *“Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.*

12:34 You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

12:35 The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.

12:36 I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak,

12:37 for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Little things matter

James 3:3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

3:4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

3:5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!

James reminds us that massive changes in direction are always directed by smaller movements which are directed by the desire of the driver When we look at the changes in our society the increase in wickedness we could be forgiven for thinking it was just happening, but upon further investigation we realise that it is driven by significant smaller events which in turn were driven by the desire of people or groups of people at the time.

James is saying the Pen is mightier than the sword – that words and ideas are power that drive action and left unchecked cause massive destruction.

The reference to wild horses is a reference to the Psalms.

Psalm 32:8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

32:9 Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you.

Horses untamed are some of the most destructive animals and the most dangerous animal of all is the Hippo = Greek word for horse.

James 3:6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

The fire of the Hell = Gehenna; valley of the sons of Hinom, south of Jerusalem [Jebusite human sacrifice- the people of Israel took up these practices at times] eventually the land was cursed and was used as a dump that was set on fire and seemed to burn forever . The 1st century Jewish people used this Word for the eternal suffering in the afterlife for the unrighteous.

James is saying all of this hell fire and the filth that fuels it can be found in our very mouths. No wonder the angel flew down and burnt the lips of Isaiah with a hot coal?

Teachers

James 3:1 *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*

James is not saying: that people who teach are in a different category or class than people who do not.

There is no divide between clergy and lay people in our church.

And he is not saying; If you sin it's bad but if I sin it's worse-- all sin is judged by God

James is talking about what I say [or any teacher says] about God and The Bible

The greatest evil you can do with your tongue as a teacher is to misrepresent Truth

If you don't put your trust in the promises of God- that's sad for you

But if the teacher doesn't put his trust in the word of God that is bad for everybody listening

People are literally led into unbelief [to hell as it were]

The destructive influence of preachers who abandon or distort the Word of God is horrific.

I could easily talk about heretics and liberals [but I feel I need to focus on matters closer to home]

The word for teacher here is not facilitator [we are not talking about people who create environments in which we can learn from each other; like a home group leader]

But rather a didactic teacher some translations use the word master [someone who has studied truth and imparts it to people who have not studied as much]

Speak the truth in Love

Ephesians 4:14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

4:15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,

4:16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

4:17 Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.

4:18 They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.

4:19 They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

4:20 But that is not the way you learned Christ!—

4:21 assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus,

4:22 to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,

4:23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,

4:24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

4:25 *Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.*

– God wants me to be aware that I will be judged harshly if I expect people to come around to the truth immediately that has taken me years to discover.

2 Common mistakes

1. We speak the truth but not in Love [Pharisee -this is the right way]
2. We avoid the truth in the name of love [Sadducee –don't rock the boat]

We are all guilty of both extremes

1. Remember The biggest challenge Jesus faced was from the Pharisees

The biggest challenge in the early church was Jewish Christians demanding that gentiles become Jews before becoming Christians.

They demanded that people live a certain way – they were not completely wrong in their morality but they were motivated by appearances not genuine desire

Our desire to do the right thing ought to come from a place of love, Love is our motivator and Love is what motivated God to send his Son to die for the sins of his people

So is it about Love? - Well yes but it is not about love alone either

2. Often the modern excuse for sin not being repented of is that people love one another.

Two people living together before they get married – the bible is pretty clear that that is sin.

God says if you love me and that means you will do what I say or at least try, but if you openly flaunt what I say then you have to ask do you really love me? [You might think that is harsh – but that is exactly what Jesus did with Peter after Peter openly denied Jesus.]

Love is about putting God's way first and Love is about putting my neighbour first, serving others – if you are sinning you are putting your own desires first [Not God's and Not Love's]; you are not loving as God intended.

Love can only Defeat sin when it is a motivator to confront that sin.

A love that ignores sin is not the type of love we need.

This is where our language matters;

Are there things we are lying to ourselves about and say that we are not sinners?

Is there sin in our lives or in society that we don't confront?

Watch the news: The Church has sins [crimes even] that were covered up for years, by people who were trying not to upset anyone.

Maybe you feel shame and you are hiding? Maybe you are lying to yourself and others now?

Many people have broken relationships because of addictions, it wasn't the alcohol or the drugs pornography or even the adultery that caused the lack of trust but the lying about the sin and the hiding that caused the relationship to be ruined.

The Truth will set you free

John 18:37 Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."

The word Gospel is good news

Now this does not mean you just confess immediately to the person you have been lying to; often you need help to speak the truth,

The same applies to the teacher – often it seems like a good idea to be blunt, being blunt gets headlines but not necessarily heart lines.

Case study: NZ Church makes the news this week



Now I hope you feel as strongly as I do that abortion is wrong.

It is a terrible issue that the church has always stood against: The number one social justice issue of our day, where defenceless people's lives are ended to relieve financial burdens on society. Like all government sanctioned massacre, the actions are justified by pretending the babies are somehow less than human.

And this church in NZ wants to take a stand...

However sometimes we say the truthful things in unloving wrong ways.

Remember the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector

"Thank you God that I am not a sinner like that tax collector"

You cannot reach people who feel the guilt of sin in their life by heaping that guilt upon them [this billboard seems to welcome mothers while excluding sinners]

No man will come to our Pornography addiction course if we don't make it very clear that we are all sinners saved by grace.

No woman who feels the guilt of having had an abortion will attend a church that puts up a billboard like that.

It is an emotionally manipulative statement and it does not appeal to reason or offer forgiveness and understanding.

It correctly assumes that a woman, who has had an abortion, may feel guilty on mother's day- but instead of offering mercy and forgiveness it rubs the guilt in.

Do the people who put this up not know that all have sinned, and our sin [as bad as it is] is a gift from God in that it allows us to show to other sinners that we can relate to them?

Spiritual [I know best] Superiority gets us nowhere and that is why I have chosen to save the best verse in this passage till last.

James 3:2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

Often times when you see the word all in the bible it is natural to think it means everybody in the world, but that is actually not always true – in this case for two reasons

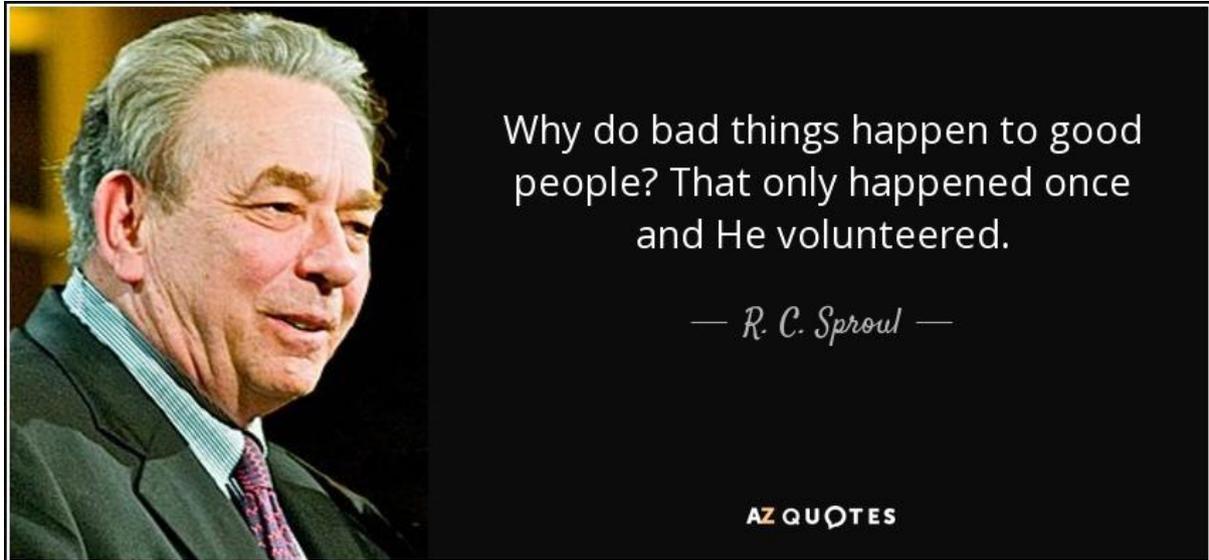
1: James is talking to people in his church who he is specifically reminding that they are not perfect

We can apply this to our lives as believers [all believers still stumble; this is part of what keeps us humble]

2; there is obviously one human who is not included among the [all] here

There is only one perfect man

In case you were wondering there is only one perfect person: Jesus



The great difficulty for Christians is that we have a high moral standard and yet we realise that we cannot live up to it – we need to rely on God

As his grace outworks itself in our life we can get better – but it is not easy – the struggles we go through are part of God’s process in making us into better people.

You will never always do the right thing or say the right thing but you can get better with Jesus help.

And

You can help others too as long as you try not to forget that you are not better than them.

End of sermon

Notes on swearing

Luke 6:45 The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

In the last sermon I preached I mentioned that I was not perfect and I even admitted that I was a person who occasionally [by that I mean regularly] vents my frustration by swearing.

This is an issue that I am working on daily

Let me just say I think someone who uses a shocking word when they make a mistake or something goes wrong is not the type of misuse of the tongue that James is talking about in today’s sermon.

This is not a sermon about swearing being good or bad.

It is about being honest about the really nasty stuff we all say.

Yelling out a rude term for a body part or a bodily function when you are frustrated is not what God is talking about- that is our modern human interpretation and reasoning and we have to be careful that we don’t force our 20th century socially acceptable culture onto this passage.

I don't know if you have ever thought about common swear words- but they really aren't as offensive as society would have us believe. Often swearing is a coping mechanism or a sign of ignorance.

The common word for Faeces makes sense as a swear word as often it is used to refer to something that is not pleasant.

The common word for what ought to take place in the marriage bed is meant to shock [it has a more guttural sound and can be said in a harsher tone with a New Zealand accent] but strangely it too is often used to refer to something unpleasant or even broken [which makes no sense when you really think about it].

The other interesting thing is that in our swearing we use gendered language and for some reason female words are far more offensive than their male equivalents [again it makes absolutely no sense] For example: Why is the most offensive word in New Zealand a slang word for part of the female anatomy and yet the slang word for the male anatomy is hardly even considered a swear word at all? One cannot be said on TV before 9:30 at night and even then it is often censored the other can be said almost anytime and is laughed at.

Likewise if you call someone a dog that is offensive, but if you call someone a female dog you have really crossed the imaginary line?

There are two answers to these puzzling questions:

1. Society has allocated power to some words [power to offend] and of course society expects you to be offended by these words. You don't have to tolerate them – but don't let them shock you.
2. We associate some of these words with aggression and hate [malice]. The actual meaning behind the word is forgotten and replaced by the sentiment "I hate you" "you are an idiot" "A pox on your house"

The heart of the matter is the heart behind the words. If your use of swear words stops violence then swearing is preferable to violence. But if your use of swear words leads to violence then you ought to stop swearing.