

Taming the Tongue

Part 3 of Sermon Series: *A Faith That Works*

a sermon based on

James 3:1-12

(with reference to Mark 8:27-38)

and delivered on

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at

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On the surface, both of the passages that we have just heard from Scripture seem a bit harsh. Don't they?

In the Gospel reading, Peter makes this profession that Jesus is the Messiah. (Mk. 8: 29) Mark keeps it short but in Matthew's account he says, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." (Mt 16:16) Then just a few sentences later (while Peter is trying to stick up for Jesus), Jesus calls him Satan. That's pretty brutal!

In that first passage we heard (in James), it begins with a warning that few of you should aspire to be teachers, and then goes on to tell us how impossible it is to tame the human tongue. "No one (he says) can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison." (Jas 3:8) If we were lazy we might say, "Why even try?" It's futile to attempt the impossible. And it is. Except...

James gives us a huge clue when he talks about little things. And this is really good and hopeful news! Before he says that no one can tame the tongue, he talks about the power of such a small organ comparing it to a horse's bridle or a ship's rudder. This is the clue.

I don't know how many of you have ever sailed. I'm talking about sailing not power boats. (They're an entirely different beast.) Sail boats are propelled by the wind, the sail works in conjunction with the keel to move forward. That's where most of the energy goes. The rudder though, it only gives a nudge. And you have to be careful with it. It doesn't always work quickly, and just a nudge can make an enormous difference. But the rudder doesn't take over. It just guides and gives direction, the sails operate on their own. In fact, a sailboat can still be guided without a rudder, by merely – maybe merely is the wrong word – because although a rudderless sailboat can be guided sail adjustments – it's no easy task. But when there's a rudder and a pilot to direct it...

James uses the example of a bridle and how it keeps the whole body of a horse in check. I'm not an equestrian expert. I haven't even ridden a horse in thirty-five (35) years. But I do know that the bridle – in particular – the bit is important. Getting ready for the sermon today, I did some research on-line. Did you know that there is evidence of a bit being used in a donkey's mouth more than 4700 years ago?¹ What does a bit do? It guides the horse or the donkey. The animal is still free to choose where to place its foot. The animal is still free to use its brain to notice and avoid danger. We might think of rattlesnakes – but then there was Balaam and his donkey. Do you all know that story? (If you want to look it up in your Bible later – take a note the story is in Numbers 22, in particular verses 16-26)

Balaam is on a mission that does not please the LORD. So the LORD sends an angel to block his way. Balaam's donkey sees the angel and stops; but Balaam ends up beating him trying to move him forward unaware of the danger. There's a lot more to that story, but the point is that can still stop – the donkey doesn't give up its identity just because there is a bit in its mouth. In fact the bit merely gives direction.

That's the good news that James is telling the church. As soon as he tells them that teaching is serious business and uses the examples of the rudder and bridle to emphasize the power of a small thing to affect our lives – (and I think we miss this) – he's not just talking about the tongue. He mentions the pilot and the rider that gives those nudges.

Bear with me, here. We really do benefit by giving up our whole lives to Jesus Christ; but that doesn't mean we have to give up control of our whole being. Just this – the tongue. Wouldn't it be great to have faith to move mountains? But Jesus says, you only need a mustard's seed of faith to say to the mountain, "Move," and it will be done. (Mt 17:20) Obviously he was using a bit of hyperbole – an exaggeration to make a point – faith does not lead to

telekinesis. But the point is simple – God can do wonders with us when we give up just a little control. That’s what faith is. Faith isn’t belief. Faith isn’t thinking the right thing. Faith is trusting God, and because you trust him going where he leads.

But oh how this thing {point to tongue} gets in the way. When I did that research about bits and donkeys, do you know what else I found out? Bit placement is important. The bit rests on top of the tongue. Do you know what one of the most common discussion threads I found was? How do I keep my donkey from putting his tongue on top of the bit?

When the tongue isn’t in the right place, the bit doesn’t work as well; and it can hurt. Huh? Could that maybe be why it seems like God is so demanding sometimes? Not because he is, but because we’re so insistent on being obstinate... “donkeys” that we don’t realize how much control he gives us.

As Christians we have the power to forgive sins. As Christians we have the power to tell others that God loves you so much that he sent his Son to die on the cross to prove to you that there’s nothing in creation that will keep him from yearning for you.

But if we ask people what the Christian message is, is that what they’ll say? “Christians are judgmental.” “Christians are hypocrite.” You’ve heard it. The really bad part is that it’s not entirely false?

Here’s the irony. For all the good things Christians have done – building hospitals and universities, standing up to the injustice of slavery, leading the civil rights movement (Dr. King was the Rev. Dr.), taking care of the poor well before any government programs, and sending money and people into the heart of natural disasters – it’s the hurtful things we sometimes say that people remember.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Really? Words can hurt. We know they’re powerful. Look at the United States Constitution. The amendment for sticks and stones (the right to bear arms) – is the second. The first is the freedom of speech, of the press, of religion (saying what you think about God).

So often we worry about avoiding the big sins. We don’t murder. (I hope we don’t. Right?) But Jesus said that if you call another a fool, you have committed murder. (Mt 5:22) When you say, “Ooh la la,” after another man’s wife, you’ve committed adultery. (Mt 5:28)

We are called to be a holy people. Each of us. We are called to spiritual perfection. God wants us to be sanctified – not as a demand but as a blessing that he wants for us. But it seems so hard – that it seems futile. But for God, all things are possible. (Mt 19:26, Mk 10:27)

What would happen if we cede just a little control? It doesn’t even mean knowing the right thing to say. Sometimes it’s better to be silent. Proverbs 17:28 says, “Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent.”

When we gossip (that is when we share things that are not ours to share), when we lie, when we demean another person, when grumble and complain, when we withhold an encouraging word, we deprive ourselves and others of God’s grace despite whatever else we say or do.

Think about it. It wasn’t just what Peter said that stole his pleasure after acknowledging Jesus as Messiah and being called his Rock, but his insistence on his way over God’s way that led Jesus to shout, “Get behind me Satan.” That had to hurt. Didn’t it? Words have power.

So let’s go back to the bridle and the rudder. Here’s the really good news in all of this. God is not that demanding. Think about it. In the beginning only one rule. Don’t eat from that one tree. Everything else is yours. Giving our lives to God doesn’t mean giving up all our free will.

Giving up our lives to God doesn't even mean giving up most of our free will. God merely invites us to let him guide us. The simplest way that happens is by keeping our tongue in the right place. To think before we speak. To think, "what would the Lord have me say." Or maybe, as James says, to hold our tongues and listen. We don't have to tame our tongues, but when we hold them, God will lead us in a faith that works. AMEN.

¹ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/05/180516144626.htm>