

The Power and Danger of the Tongue

by Alistair Begg

The tongue is a small but powerful part of the body that can bring great harm and reveal our true spiritual condition.

Duration: 36:06

Scripture: Genesis 1:27, Matthew 6:33, Romans 12:1, James 1:18, James 3:10-12

Topics: "Tongue"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the power and impact of the tongue. He begins by emphasizing the importance of Christians bearing the family resemblance of truthfulness, as they have been brought to faith through the word of truth. The speaker then compares the tongue to a small rudder that has a disproportionate impact on the direction of a ship. He further illustrates the power of the tongue by comparing it to an unguarded campfire that can quickly ignite a hillside. The speaker concludes by highlighting the irony that while animals can be tamed, the tongue remains untameable by human efforts.

Transcript

The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information, visit us online at truthforlife.org. I invite you to turn with me to James chapter 3, it's page 855 in the Church Bibles. James chapter 3 and verse 3, When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.

Or take ships as an example, although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue.

It is a restless evil full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing.

My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Now, Father, as we turn to the Bible, we play our hand.

We're declaring to you that we are committed to believing what it teaches and by your Spirit to behaving in a way that it tells us. So open our minds to its truth, open our hearts to your love, and bring our wills into submission to your great and holy purpose for your people. For we ask it in Christ's name.

Amen. I can think of only one occasion when sticking out one's tongue at another person is regarded as legitimate. And I'm sure that you already recognize that this is only supposed to take place within the confines of a doctor's surgery.

You are invited routinely to stick out your tongue at a physician or perhaps at a nurse or a physician's assistant. It's always intrigued me, ever since I was a small boy, to be asked to do these various things, to say, and also to be able to stick out my tongue. And to marvel at the ability of the physician to be able to detect evidence on the tongue of a problem that is elsewhere in the body.

To be able to detect, from what is seen, a problem that heretofore is unseen. And to the extent that that is true in physical terms, the passage of Scripture to which we now turn, confronts us unmistakably with the fact that it is also true in spiritual terms. Our tongues say something about our spiritual condition.

James has already introduced the subject of the tongue. In his opening chapter, in verse 26, he made the statement, if anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight grain on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. And we saw that at the end of chapter one, James is providing three marks of genuine Christianity, a compassionate heart for those who are in need, an uncompromised testimony in the framework of a culture that is opposed to the things of Jesus, and perhaps most staggeringly and impactful of all, this whole matter of a controlled tongue.

It is in the first twelve verses of chapter three that he gives his most attention to it. And we noted last time his warning to would-be teachers. There is a great danger, he says, that attaches to engaging in a teaching ministry in a local church, and the danger is directly tied to the instrument of use, namely the tongue, because he says in verse two, it is in this area of our lives that all of us sin most readily.

We all stumble in many ways, he says, if anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man. So maybe we can just pause for a moment and have the perfect men stand. And then they'll be joined by the perfect women.

Yes, we don't really need to wait too long, do we? We understand exactly the compelling impact of what James is saying. As painful as it is to face, James is teaching us here that our words provide a barometer of our spiritual condition. Now, verse three to verse twelve is rich in illustrative material.

James is a very good illustrator. He uses material from the natural sciences and from around him. It would appear that something of the background of Jesus has rubbed off on him in this respect.

And so when you read verse three, and when you form it in your mind pictorially, then you realize that you have before you ships and horses and forest fires, animals from the circus or the zoo, bubbling springs, fig trees, olive branches, grapevines, and all of this vast panorama of illustrative material. And we each of us do well to remind ourselves that the use of illustration is in order to set forward the purpose of instruction. And every teacher of the Bible needs to remember that, so that we do not seek to hang the instruction simply on illustrations that will be recalled long after the instruction is forgotten.

There's no risk of James doing that. He weaves exposition, if you like, or explanation and illustration and application in his letter here in a way that is masterful and a lesson to all who teach. But I found myself during the week constantly having to say, I must be careful that I don't take my eye off the ball.

And I took a very, very long time before I could gather my thinking around these three thoughts, which will be the observations for this morning. Straightforward and in the text, I think you will agree. Number one, the tongue is small but powerful.

Number two, the tongue is humanly untamable. Number three, the tongue reveals more about us than we care to admit. So we begin with the verse.

The tongue is small but powerful. That's what he says in verse five. But he reaches his application only after he has used these two vast illustrations.

Consider, he says, the way that the individual puts a bit into the mouth of a horse. And as a result, a large creature, sometimes carrying another relatively large creature, is able to be steered and moved with relative ease. And there is a disproportionate impact between the size of the bit and the largeness of the creature that is being taken care of.

Anybody who has observed horses at all will be able to say, well, I get that. And then he says, take a ship. Incidentally, the Greeks often used horses and ships, agricultural and nautical metaphors, in order to make points.

And it would appear that James picks up on this. He says, think about a ship. The tiny rudder, at least it is disproportionate to the size and the vastness of a ship, is still the mechanism that is used by the pilot or by the captain, irrespective of the nature of the winds that are blowing, in order to direct the course of the vessel and to bring it to its destination.

So, we have this little bit and this comparatively tiny rudder, and we notice that they receive big results. That's the point that he's making. Very simple point.

Little mechanism, disproportionate impact. And then, having done that, he says, I want you to understand verse 5, likewise, or in the same way, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Simplicity is wonderful, isn't it? Nobody is left out.

There are still some children this morning here, because the classes don't begin until next Sunday. And so far, you are absolutely tracking right along. There is nothing that you have heard that you don't understand, and you are just right there with your mom and dad, getting the picture as we go along.

You have a tiny little tongue, and that tongue is in your mouth, hidden away, unlike your nose, and out of the mouth, where your tongue is hidden, you can accomplish all kinds of things by what you say. Now, history records that, and indeed, there is a sense in which the boasting of the tongue, in verse 5a, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts, there is a sense in which the tongue can make legitimate boasts, because the history of humanity is the history of the use of the tongue, and of the ability of men and women to use their tongues in order to change the direction of history, in order to influence lives, in order to stir passion, and so on. So, the influence of the poet is able to pick up our spirits on an afternoon where we feel ourselves to be depressed or listless.

Of course, if you never read poetry, you won't know that to be true, you'll have to start. And I can give you some pointers, but you'll probably be better off on your own. You don't really want to read Scottish laments on a Sunday afternoon, I'm sure, but every so often, it is a reminder to us, and picks up our spirits.

You may come upon a line like this, and like it, Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? I shall wear white flannel trousers and walk upon the beach. I have seen the mermaids singing, each to each. What does that mean? Who knows? But it's a mark of T.S. Eliot's genius, in the love song of J. Alfred Prufrock.

And everybody had to read it at school, so it must mean something. It's a diversion at least, but it's a powerful use of language. What of Shakespeare? What of all the words of Shakespeare? What of the influence of the playwright? Imagine being able to create such a sense of anticipation with one opening sentence of your play.

If music be the food of love, play on. And everyone's there. This is going to be terrific.

To be able to mirror humanity, what a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving, how express and admirable. It's all the power of language. In the poet, in the playwright, and in the politician.

Some of you were around on the 20th of August, 1940. I missed it by 12 years. But since then, you have grown familiar with the famous line of Winston Churchill, reflecting on the success of the British airmen in the Battle of Britain.

And you remember what he said? Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few. So much, so many, so few. He stayed up late at night thinking up sentences like that because he understood the power of language.

But it seems more than likely, in light of what follows 5A, that James is not focusing here on language used in a positive and helpful way, but rather the use of the tongue in a way that is negative and that is harmful. Because while it has the capacity to do good, to speak peace, encouragement and so on, it also has the capacity to turn harmony into chaos, to spoil the reputation of others by slander, to introduce difficulty and disappointment with bitter thoughts and words in a family, to ruin relationships, to damage the testimony of those who proclaim to be the followers of the Lord Jesus. And when you read from verse 5B on, you recognize that this tongue, for all of its potential, is a real problem.

That brings us to our second heading. The tongue is not only small but powerful, but the tongue is humanly untamable. We get that because that's exactly what it says in verse 8, No man can tame the tongue.

He says that after he has given to us a description of the tongue. He's described it in verse 6 as a fire, as a world of evil, then as untamable, and still in verse 8 as a restless evil and that which is full of deadly poison. Not a particularly nice list by any standards at all.

This tongue, he says, is a fire and is a world of evil among the parts of your body. I spent a long time wondering, what does it mean that the tongue is a world of evil? And I wasn't making very good progress until I turned to my old boss in Edinburgh and I discovered that he observed that James seems to mean by this that every sort of evil found in the world finds an ally in an uncontrolled tongue. When I read that, I said, that's good enough for me.

That every sort of evil in the world finds an ally in an uncontrolled tongue. Think of any kind of evil disposition and think about how the tongue is able to set forward that evil, either by reporting it, reinforcing it, spreading it far and wide. It is a world within the body.

Now, think with me along this line for just a moment. If you recall our opening studies, you will remember verse 18 of chapter 1, which is, in a sense, almost the launchpad verse for the whole of these five chapters. It speaks of the initiative of God in bringing men and women to faith in Jesus.

It speaks of his intention in relationship to that to make us a kind of first fruits, prototype models after Jesus, and also of the instrument that he uses, namely the word of truth. He has chosen to give his birth, says James, through the word of truth. Therefore, it is inconceivable that the child of God should not bear the family resemblance.

It is inconceivable that the child of God will not be about the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. That if there is one thing that should mark the Christian in a world of deception and deceit, it is their truthfulness. And the belt of truth which is given to us in the armor of warfare in Ephesians chapter 6 is that to which all of the other aspects of the armor attach.

It is first and foremost the question, what is true? Therefore, when there is an absence of truth, it is indicative of all kinds of other evil. Now, I won't turn here, but I'll cross-reference it for you in case you want to go back to it. When you read in Romans chapter 1 concerning idolatry and immorality and greed and envy and murder and deceit and strife and all kinds of malice, you will discover that all of that ugly list is a product of lies.

Paul says, they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator. And then, as a result of lies, all of this immorality and ugliness follows on. Now, you will notice that what James is saying in respect to this, is that this is not some isolated concern, but this world of evil which emerges from our wrong thinking, from our unwillingness to tell the truth to ourselves, is a corrupting influence.

It corrupts the whole person. Or it pollutes the whole person, you may have in your translation. That's the force of it.

It has the force to work its way through your entire system. The course of it is it runs through the whole course of a life, and the source of it is that it is set on fire by hell. This is very straightforward, isn't it? Before too long, he says, having toyed with our thoughts and played with our words, we will follow with our deeds, and our whole life will be on fire.

And the source of the fire, the igniting influence, is nothing other than hell itself. Hell, the destiny of Satan and all of his hosts. Satan, the roaring lion, seeking to devour.

Satan, the restless one, in Job chapter 1. Remember, God comes to Satan and he says, where have you been? And he says, I have been roaming to and fro throughout the earth. Notice how he describes the problem that we face in relationship to our tongue in verse 8. It is a restless evil. It is a restless evil.

That's one of the difficulties in managing to control it and curtail it. And this restless evil is full of poison. The serpent comes to insinuate and to denigrate and to spoil and to pervert.

And before a person knows where they are, suddenly, when they stick out their tongue before the mirror of God's word, they realize that their tongue is indicating a trouble that is deep-seated and comprehensive and unassailable and humanly unfixable. I have not met this person, but I wonder if he or she is not present. And that is the person who says, I came to believe in Jesus because I stuck out my tongue and I realized that it was so ugly and so representative of core issues in my life and so unfixable over the days and weeks and months and years of my life that I realized that I need somebody to fix this.

And I said, Lord Jesus Christ, would you fix my heart so that my tongue might declare your praise? Because all my tongue does, says the individual, is counter to what God designs. The tongue, he says, is like an unguarded campfire. One small spark and the hillside is ablaze.

And then in verse 7 he takes us to the zoo and the circus in order to make his point. He doesn't do literally, I understand, but you know what I mean. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, creatures of the sea are being tamed.

Some people like the circus. I never really got very excited about it. But it is quite amazing to see them make those poor elephants come up on their hind legs and beg like dogs.

I never thought that it was something you ought to do with an elephant, but that's by the way. Nevertheless, it is quite amazing that they can do that or they crack the whip and tame the tiger and so on. What James says is, that's been going on for a while.

We've been doing that for a while. We can tame the tiger, but you can't tame the tongue. We have a dominion over the creatures of the earth as a result of creation in Genesis chapter 1. A lingering dominion that is still there.

We are distinct from the rest of the created order in this. And while we are able to influence them in various ways, we have dominion over them, but we don't have dominion over our own homes. We don't have dominion over our own hearts.

We can play the flute and make the snake come out of the sack. But we can't deal with the evil serpent within our own souls that continually insinuates and denigrates and despises and sets ourselves forward to the detriment of others. It's fascinating, isn't it, that the very means that God has provided whereby we can communicate with each other and enjoy fellowship with one another.

The very means that he has provided allowing us to articulate our praise and honor of God becomes the means of despising and deceiving others and dishonoring God. Yes, I say to you again, if we were just honest enough to stick out our tongues, then before the mirror of God's word we realize how each of us needs a Savior. The tongue is small but powerful.

The tongue is humanly untameable. And thirdly, the tongue reveals more about us than we care to admit. In the Anglican Communion, in its liturgy, Psalm 51:15 is employed routinely.

So the minister will say in the opening phrase of the psalm, O Lord, open my lips. And then the congregation will reply, And my mouth will declare your praise. It is wonderful.

It's good to do and say. But sadly, says James, that's not all that our lips are declaring. And look at verse 9. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who have been made in God's likeness.

In other words, he says there is a glaring inconsistency that I'm forced to point out. Now, we will go immediately wrong if we think of cursing in terms of the casting of spells or even the use of expletives. Certainly all wrong, frivolous, immoral, filthy speech is clearly condemned in the Scriptures.

But that is not exactly what James is referencing here. And we can understand that by looking carefully at what he's saying. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, the Creator, and with it we curse men who have been made in His likeness, the creation.

The glaring inconsistency lies in the fact that when we insult and when we denigrate someone else, in one sense we are praising and denigrating the same object. We praise God and then we run down what God has made. Certainly the image of God is spoiled as a result of sin.

But you will notice that James is reminding us here that all of His creation has been made in God's likeness. And as a result of being made in God's likeness, although they are undeserving of approbation and accolades and so on, just as undeserving as each of us, nevertheless, because each is made in the likeness of God, it is absolutely wrong for us to think that we can, on the one hand, praise God, our great Creator, and then walk out into the community and denigrate those who have been made in His likeness. Because, you see, in one setting we are adoring God, and in the other we are reviling Him as He is seen in the likeness of our fellow men.

This makes it quite powerful in its impact, doesn't it? Because it takes us beyond the boundaries of Parkside Church. It takes us outwith the realm of whoever is sitting around us in the pew, whether we like them or we don't like them, or whatever it might mean. That's enough of a challenge to face.

But James takes it way beyond that. Think of all the people in community that, because of our Christian values, we just actually despise. We despise their lifestyles.

That we feel that we have a legitimate reaction to things that are wrong and so on. James says you'd better be very, very careful that you don't show up on Sundays to praise God and walk out on Mondays to curse those made in the likeness of God. It's a reminder, isn't it? That if it is the love and grace of God our Father that woos us to Himself, wouldn't it be something of the same characteristics in our lives that would see others come to consider the claims of Jesus? What a tragedy to be like talkative in Pilgrim's Progress who is described as a saint abroad and a devil at home.

To be regarded as a saint on Sunday and a devil on Tuesdays. That's the glaring inconsistency. And what does he say? Classically, you will notice what he says at the end of verse 10.

My brothers, this should not be. Masterful understatement, isn't it? This, in the King James, I think, is this ought not to be. In other words, he applies the law of oughtness.

He doesn't actually appeal to the revealed will of God. He simply says, even according to the laws of nature, this ought not to be. Every time a culture begins to putrefy, it has to enact laws.

That's why certain laws are enacted so that fathers are not allowed to shout dreadful things at the baseball diamonds in the local park. They ought to have been smart enough as men to know that's not the thing you ought to do. But since they couldn't apply the law of oughtness, the government had to come in and apply it for them.

This week, on a train to the San Francisco airport, Sue and I sat on the train. I noticed that the seats next to me were reserved for disabled people and for elderly people. And which is absolutely fine, and no one was in them.

Sue and I were thinking of sitting in them, but the fact of the matter is nobody was there. We're not quite there yet, but we're on our way. But what was so striking to me, and I pointed out to her, was that across the back of the seat, it said that by federal law, such and such, such and such, you must stand up for disabled people or for elderly people.

By federal law? Why do you have to have a federal law? Because the law of oughtness is gone. The law of oughtness is gone. You ought not to do that.

You ought to stand up. Don't you realize that this is what you ought to do? When oughtness goes, you're going to have to legislate. We're not there yet in James.

He says, this ought not to be. This ought not to be. And it ought not to be.

And he wraps it up full circle, takes us back to his illustrations once again. Back to the fig trees, the grapevines, the olive groves, the springs that are bubbling. And what is he saying? Simply what his brother Jesus said on a number of occasions.

Like produces like. Like produces like. And James is confronting each of his readers with the fact that what our tongues say is more than matched by what our heart thinks.

And the tongue's relationship to the heart is clear, it's undeniable, and it is uncomfortable. It is, as Jesus said, that out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. So our time is gone, and what are we to do? What are we to do? Shall we then pull up our socks and say to ourselves, let's go about the business of seeing if we can tame our tongues? Well, that's an act of futility, isn't it? We've just noted that no man, or woman for that matter, can tame the tongue.

Obviously, one thing we can do in practical terms is just say very, very little when we walk out of here. It's maybe one of the quieter exits from the building. No, that's a complete and utter waste of time.

There is no hardware product that we can get that will deal with this. We need a complete new software package. We need to go back to Psalm 51 and say, Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me.

Change my heart, Lord, and then my tongue will follow. Change me from the inside, because it is only as my heart is cleansed and put right with God, which is what God offers to do for us in Jesus, and what He reveals we need done when we stick out of our tongues. It is only when our hearts are cleansed and put right, and Jesus dwells in us, in our hearts, by faith, and comes and lives in us and reigns in us by His Holy Spirit, that our words may be brought under His control.

I came across a children's song this week that is akin to many we sang as youngsters in Scotland, and it goes like this, I wish to be like Jesus, so humble and so kind. His words were always tender, His voice always divine. But no, I'm not like Jesus, as everyone can see.

O Savior, come and help me, and make me just like Thee. And you know, that is exactly what God is committed to doing in the life of His child. Let me give you three verses, if you can read them at home, I'll

tell you what they are.

Romans chapter 8 verse 29 tells us that the eternal purpose of God is to make us like Jesus. He describes those who have been called, who are predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son. From all of eternity, if you are a Christian, the purpose of God has been to make you like Jesus.

That's what He's doing. That's His eternal plan. 2 Corinthians 3 and verse 18.

Paul says, we are being transformed into His likeness. That is, if you like, the contemporary, historical manifestation of God's eternal purpose. And 1 John 3, 3. We know that when we see Him, we shall be like Him.

And what of Jesus? They marveled at the gracious words that came from His mouth. No one taught ever as He taught. He didn't cry or shout out in the streets.

We sang our prayer, didn't we? Part of our prayer was, take your truth, plant it deep in us, mold and fashion us in your likeness. The only hope we have is the only hope that is offered, which is being born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And although we are not all that we need to be, in Jesus we are some distance from what we once were.

And it is to Christ we look in order to achieve His purposes in our lives. Let us pray together. Father, forgive us for the times we have praised you on Sunday and then despised and denigrated others during the week.

Cleanse our hearts and give us eyes to see your likeness in everyone we meet. And may the grace of the Lord Jesus and the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest upon and remain with all who believe now and forevermore. Amen.

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