

THE TONGUE

JAMES 3:1-12

Introduction

In the winter 1990 edition of *Leadership* magazine was a cartoon that showed a line of pews with the same sentence being passed verbally from one pew to the next (Swindoll 574). The message passed in this way; Pew 1: “My ear kind of hurts,” Pew 2: “The pastor has an earache,” Pew 3: “The pastor got a hearing aid,” Pew 4 “The pastor is having trouble hearing,” Pew 5: “The pastor got a double earring,” From the final pew an elderly woman with a cane is seen walking out while saying, ‘That does it, I’m outta here! The pastors got a double earring’ (Swindoll 574). I think we all recognize this as a game that we played as children, but while it is a child’s game the truths that it illustrates are not, by any means, childish. In this game we see the tremendous power that the tongue has to both create confusion and cause destruction.

Grand Idea

The tongue is a small part of our bodies, and the unmanaged use of it has destructive power but God has given us the ability and responsibility to manage the tongue so that it is not our master.

Text

Our text for this evening conveys to us the great power that the tongue can have, the responsibility that exists to properly manage our tongues, and the destructive force that an uncontrolled tongue can have. Turn with me to James chapter three and let us begin at verse one;

3 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. ² For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a

perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. ³ Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. ⁴ Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. ⁵ Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! ⁶ And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. ⁸ But no man can tame the tongue. *It is* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

There are four things from this text to which I believe we need to pay careful attention. The first is the unique responsibility of those who teach to manage their tongues. Then we will move on to how significant effective management of our tongue can be. Next, we will consider what must be done about the tongue. Finally, we will ponder the destructiveness of an uncontrolled tongue.

Point 1

This text begins with an admonition to those in the Church who would seek the office of teacher. The issue here is not that aspiring to teach is somehow ignoble or sinful; the issue is the great level of responsibility that is laid upon those who do teach. This greater level of responsibility, and the accompanying level of accountability, is derived from the power of the tongue, and its influence. Simply put, those who teach must exhibit a far greater mastery of the tongue for the simple fact that their words reach a larger number of people, and because their words often carry a greater degree of authority due to the office that they hold. Teachers in the Church (be they Sunday School teachers, pastors, small group leaders, educators, etc) are considered at the very least to be more informed on the topic that they are teaching about than their students, and at the most to be experts in the particular field on which they are instructing. Therefore, a teacher who is careless or sinful in how they choose and apply their words can cause far more damage than the average individual who is equally careless with their words. I do not think it a stretch to say that we all can recall a time when the careless words of a teacher wounded us in some way. The admonition of our text is meant to remind those of us who teach to be especially diligent in how we manage our words, and to warn us that our influence over others carries with it a greater level of accountability before God than one who does not teach. I would go so far as to say that it is better to not teach than to do so with careless words and be a stumbling block to others, and to bring judgment on oneself.

Point 2

However, it must not be assumed that the only ones who struggle with the waywardness of the tongue are those holding the office of teacher. Indeed our text reminds us that we are all

prone to stumble in what we do in life. Yet the most difficult of all the things in our lives to manage is the tongue. Early on in my career as a carpenter I was told by a certain master carpenter that if I wanted to be successful in that profession all that I needed to do was to master my hammer, my tape measure, and my saw. Considering the fact that there had to have been a thousand different tools in his collection I thought that he was being overly simplistic. However, as the years went by I began to realize that there were few tasks in my daily life as a carpenter that could not be completed with one of or a combination of those three tools, and no task could be completed without at least one of those tools. Our text makes a similar assertion concerning the tongue. Our text reveals that the individual, who can master what they say, or how they use their tongue, is in possession of such discipline that mastery of all the remainder of their conduct is not out of reach. I believe that the issue to be considered here is not that a person who keeps their words under control is perfect, for they could certainly sin in some other manner, no the issue is that the tongue is so difficult to manage that the remainder of their conduct pales in comparison to the discipline needed to keep our words in check. In fact we are warned that the tongue is so unruly and so out of control that no one can successfully master it.

Point 3

Now if it is true that no one can tame the tongue, what are we to do with it? An untamed and unbridled horse is known as a Mustang, and one such beast can ruin a whole herd of tamed horses by its presence among the herd alone. A rudderless ship can set no steady course, and bears a great risk of running aground to its ruin. A single spark can set off a firestorm that will devastate thousands of acres of land if left unchecked. Likewise, a tongue left untamed can ruin many lives and reputations. Thus, we are not left the option of doing nothing with our tongue. I

submit to you that at a minimum there are three things that we must do with our tongue. First, we must surrender it to the will of God, for if we will have sanctified lives we must have sanctified tongues. A cleansed heart will lead to a controlled tongue. Next, we must be intentional about a daily discipline with our words. A bad day or a stressful situation is no reason to wound another with our words, and if we do not plan on speaking words of life and honor then we will not do so. Finally, we must be humble enough to amend for our poor choice of words. Let us not permit pride or excuses to prevent us from healing the damage done by our words with words of grace and redemption. Do not permit your tongue to destroy because you fail to take steps to bring it under control.

Point 4

We began this evening by recalling a childhood game involving words, and now let us be reminded of another piece of the childhood years. I think we all recall this little rhyme; “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” What a horrible lie that little verse is. Our text tells a different tale as it recounts the destruction that words can reap in our lives and in the lives of others. The text indicates that an untamed tongue can corrupt our whole body, that it is a poison to us and others, and that it can, if left unchecked, reverse any good that we might have done. The author of our text clearly states that an uncontrolled tongue is contrary to the life and witness of a Christian. In fact an uncontrolled tongue is completely unnatural for one who calls themselves a follower and disciple of Jesus Christ. It is unnatural in exactly the same way as a date bearing fig tree, a fig bearing grapevine, or drawing salt water from a freshwater spring. No one would think to find such things in nature, and neither should they expect to come to a Christian and receive words of destruction, not conviction, destruction.

There is power in words to bring death to others and there is power in words to give life. The natural condition for the Christian is to wield words as a means toward the life and redemption of others.

Conclusion

Knowing all this I, personally, cannot go forward in life without the intention of, and the actions to, manage the waywardness of my own tongue. I cannot proceed onward without repenting for the times that my tongue has been unsanctified, or when I have acted as though it was not sanctified, neither can I leave here without asking the forgiveness of any of you to whom my words have been a curse, please forgive me, and I cannot envision that any of us present can ignore the mandate of our savior to manage the wayward tongue. Determine today, right now, that your tongue will be a balm of healing to all, and never a bitter poison to them.