

***Faith That Works: Tonguefire***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Psalm 15; Matthew 5:21-24; James 3:1-12***

Our final Scripture reading today is James 3:1-12. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy, perfect, and sacred word. “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. 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.”

One of the first things we learn growing up are bad words. No kid at the age of three intentionally goes around learning bad words – you probably have to be eight or nine to actively look for them. And yet we learn them early, don't we? And it's primarily through triggering our parents. Some of us got the question, “Where did you learn that from?” Some got our mouths washed out with soap. And others found their parents laughing because it was so ridiculous, and they knew that we'd picked it up from them!

Words matter. Luther's words on the Wittenberg Door led to a massive split in the Christian church. Patrick Henry stirred up the colonies to action with “Give me liberty or give me death!” The Treaty of Versailles laid the groundwork not only for the end of World War I but the start of World War II. Scripture's words have changed hearts, minds, and souls for generations. The average person says about 16,000 words a day. Those words can foster relationship or antagonism, encourage or discourage, build bridges or burn them down.

James is concerned that we as Christians understand the weight of our words, and so in today's passage, he returns to this subject in detail. Previously, James taught us to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Why should we be so slow to speak? James has some answers for us today. Here, he's not so interested in telling us *what* exactly we should say so much as how important it is for us to *submit what we say to the Holy Spirit*.

James hasn't mentioned teaching before, so it seems out of left field when he says, “not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” He's specifically speaking about Christian teaching.

Teaching the faith was considered an elevated calling in early Christianity. Not many were well educated and able to speak at length from Scripture, and those who not only understood the faith but could teach it were well-respected. In 1 Timothy, Paul says that being an elder, a teacher of the faith, is a “noble task.” Today, trust in Christian teachers is at an all-time low, residing around the same place as journalists. (We still are more trusted than members of Congress – take that as you will!) But in the early church, to be able to teach the faith well – it was highly praise-worthy and did have some prestige.

But James warns that teachers will be judged more strictly than just ordinary folk. It’s our responsibility not only to get our theology right, but to preach and teach it well. And there’s a problem that faces all of us that gets us into trouble, that can ruin a preacher and ruin someone in the pews. And that’s what we say. James says, “We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.”

That’s a stunning statement. If our speech is perfect, if our communication is perfect, we are perfect. Anybody think they’ve got it down? What we say reflects our inner character. Remember what Jesus said. Nothing from outside a man can make him unclean; it’s what comes out of his mouth that makes him unclean – Matthew 15:11. It’s within where all the uncleanness is – all the lust, theft, evil thoughts, murder. Those things, our selfishness, our sinful desires, are reflected in what we say. It’s when we become believers that those things start to get cleaned up, and what we say starts to get cleaned up too. But God has cleansed us from the inside out, our words will still reflect our sinful selves.

James uses some well-known metaphors in his own day to illustrate just how significant the tongue, what we say, truly is. He uses the tiny bit used to make a horse turn, or a rudder that steers a sailing ship. The tongue is tiny, but it often determines the course of the rest of the body. We boast, for example, and what we boast often determines what we’re going to do to prove it. Just like a single spark starts a raging forest fire, so the work of the tongue can spark incredible things far beyond what we expect. You cannot underestimate its power.

We try to diminish the value of words and the piercing nature of the tongue. I can’t tell you how many times I was told in childhood, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” It’s an attempt to make the tongue seem less powerful than what it is. But you know what? It’s an immense and awful lie. I may have forgiven the most cruel and hurtful things ever said to me 35 years ago, but I still remember them today and remember who said them. I can’t remember a single bruise I got from getting tripped in the hallways at middle school, but the evil things that were said to me linger. What we say is no small thing.

And James doesn’t hold back about how dangerous the tongue really is. He calls it a world of evil among the parts of the body that corrupts the whole person, sets the course of life on fire, is set on fire by hell, cannot be tamed, a restless evil, full of deadly poison. Tell us how you really feel, James! He’s using rhetorical devices and exaggeration, but he gets his point across. Our words, our communication, what we say, those things are not neutral. Our natural inclination is going to be to use hurtful words, hateful words, disparaging words. We do not naturally choose to be kind, thoughtful, and loving with our words.

When we think about it, this is not a surprise. We expect people are going to use their words in harsh ways. We hang around with friends and we still expect some of us are going to be complaining about something. We are critical of everything from the shows we watch to the other people we know. Guys get around each other and become known for what's been called "locker room talk." We have stereotypes about women and gossip. And these are in situations where supposedly everyone is friends!

We often use our harshest words towards people that we are supposed to care about. When you think about incidents of domestic violence, divorce, abuse, how do they often start? With words. An argument about finances blows up into something more severe. Words chill a relationship and make a couple think about breaking unbreakable bonds. Wars seldom start without a lot of words being spoken first. Because it's seldom enough to give orders for one sovereign country to invade another. We have to be convinced about "those" people, people who are different from us now, who we don't see as being the same as us, who have become our enemy. Words are the spark for so many of the world's problems.

James goes so far as to say that all sorts of creatures of all kinds have been tamed, but that no one can tame the tongue. It's impossible. Why is James even telling us these things if it can't be done? It's because it is the Holy Spirit that changes the patterns of our hearts and minds that are reflected in what we say. Either your sinful self speaks or the new person created in you by the Holy Spirit, replacing the old dead self, speaks. Your old sinful self cannot put a reign on your tongue. Because the old sinful self wants to say what it wants to say, the hurt and pain and anger and lust and everything else. Only the Holy Spirit can help change what you say.

Taming the tongue is a matter of the heart. It's not about just being silent. Being slow to speak is different from being unwilling to speak or afraid to speak or of a temperament that doesn't say much. Being shy doesn't make you godly. I think about a lot of westerns where the good guy and the bad guy were both pretty much silent. Instead, it's about choosing wisely what you are going to say, making sure that what you say reflects the heart of Christ in you.

James points out the hypocrisy of doubleminded speech. You can't get fresh water out of a saltwater spring. Grapevines bear grapes, not figs; fig trees bear figs and not olives. In the same way, it is fundamentally incompatible for us to speak well of God and evil of other people. James points out that when we curse others, we are not cursing rats or fleas or parasites. You're cursing someone made by God in His own image. You are trashing not just a creation of God, but a person that even in his or her worst state still reflects the image of our Maker.

When we are doubleminded, when we sing God's praises and then bite and backstab and scheme with our words, we do not reflect who God made us to be. As James says, "My brothers and sisters, this should not be." Either belong to the world or belong to Jesus, but do not think you can have both. I've spoken to many unbelievers throughout the years, both those who have never been a part of the faith and those who've left the faith. And with very few exceptions, their leave-taking has been because of hypocrisy in the church they couldn't reconcile. Now it's easy for us to say, "They shouldn't throw out Christ because of Christians." And I agree. But the Christ they see is what we show them in our actions and our words. Our words speak loudly. And Jesus warned us that we will be judged on every careless word we speak.

E. Stanley Jones was a missionary during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and he has been called “the Billy Graham of India.” An Indian philosopher named Bara Dada said to Jones, “Jesus is ideal and wonderful, but you Christians – you are not like him.” Jones became a good friend of Mahatma Ghandi, asking what we could do so Christianity would be perceived as a contribution to India, a true Indian religion. Ghandi said, “I would suggest, first, that all of you Christians, missionaries and all, must begin to live more like Jesus Christ.” We live like Jesus and bring others to Jesus through our actions and words. James says, your tongue can thwart that.

Now what is James not saying? First, James is not simply saying, “Watch your tongue.” That’s a good piece of wisdom, echoed in the Proverbs. But it’s not specifically Christian. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, all teach right speech or restrained speech. Of course, pay close attention to what you say. But that’s not the final point.

Nor should we focus specifically on what we commonly think of as “bad words.” This has long been a focus of American religiosity, and it extends to how we put ratings on our entertainment – by how many “bad words” show up. We used to tell on each other when some other kid used a “bad word.” But the reality is, it’s how you use words and what they mean. There is something far different between a word somebody says in frustration hitting their thumb with a hammer or dropping a gallon of milk on the floor and words that degrade. The worst things I’ve ever heard said didn’t use profanity. Paul warns us in Ephesians 5:4 to avoid obscenity, foolish talk, and crude jokes. Some profanity falls in that category, and we are mindful how offensive those words can be. But that’s not the heart of this either.

The heart of the matter is this: *our words – written, spoken, and thought – need to be submitted to the lordship of Christ and the leading of the Holy Spirit.* What does that mean, exactly? It means that when we are forming an idea, when we are writing it down, when we are speaking to others, we make sure that what we are doing reflects that we are disciples of Christ.

We might think, “Do I really need to do that with everything I write and say and think?” Sounds like a lot. Sounds like it might slow things down. But you know what? That’s the point. At Compassion, it wasn’t always like this, but now I check every letter we send out to make sure everything is right on each one. And it was because we had dumb mistakes get through when we assumed that the computer was going to import all the information for those letters correctly.

At Trinity, it’s common that a teacher will have someone else review an email or a text before it goes to parents. Not because they aren’t capable, but because that review might spot a typo, an error, or something that might cause confusion. Does it take more time? Absolutely it does. But it also means less frustration. These aren’t even moral issues at stake here.

Submitting to the lordship of Jesus means we recognize that we who are disciples are not free to do whatever we want. We were under the bondage of sin and death and the devil. Now we are under new management, a King who loves us and gave His life to rescue us. But that also comes with certain responsibilities – one of which is letting Jesus call the shots, letting the Holy Spirit inform us of who we are to be and what kinds of things we should be saying. We have no right to shoot from the hip and say, “I’ll be forgiven.” We have marching orders we are to obey, and one of them is submitting to Christ in all things. Speech is one of them.

Because we are not isolated individuals on our own little islands with Jesus. Each of us is a representative on this earth of God's Kingdom. We are ambassadors, priests of the most high God. You may not realize it, but people are watching us to see how we act and speak to see if Christianity is true and Christ worthy to follow. They're looking to see if we are really changed people. Since that's the case, we must submit what we say to Jesus for review.

How do we submit our words to Christ? I'd suggest a simple pattern found in Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 4 verse 8: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -- think about such things." If our words start with thoughts, then our thoughts should be on those things that are good, pure, true, and right. Imagine what Facebook would be like, our TVs would be like, our homes would be like, our thought lives would be like, if this were the standard we were to keep!

We also keep in mind that the things we think on and discuss should fit more than one of these categories. Something can be true and yet not be said in an excellent or praiseworthy manner. Some things sounds lovely but are actually untrue. Our speech should be attempting to fit these things together. It doesn't mean that everything will immediately fit. The Bible is full of ugly stories that reveal human nature but only become noble and praiseworthy when read as part of the whole. We can discuss the good things in a bad film, for example. But disciples look to keep their minds on the admirable.

If that's submitting to the lordship of Christ, how does the leading of the Holy Spirit play a role? Simply put, the Holy Spirit communicates to us now the heart and thoughts of the Father and the Son. Our submission says we will not say whatever we want but instead look to have the mind of Christ. The leading of the Spirit is about when and where and what.

So much of what we say doesn't need to be said. Is the Spirit prompting us? Then proceed, and with caution. What needs to be said? Is the Spirit guiding us? If we aren't sure, we stay silent until we know. This is where knowing the Scripture is helpful, because the leading of the Spirit will not contradict what we know of God in Scripture. The Spirit counsels us to edify others, to build them up, to point them towards Christ.

If our words are not edifying, not building others up, not pointing them to Christ, not warning them, beware! Because even Christ's most severe words about the Pharisees were not words of derision or name calling; they were words of warning about their hypocrisy and ungodliness, that their hearts might be changed. And honestly, I don't think any of us can say we have the pure mind of Christ – so we keep well away from the derisive or cruel. It does not mean that there aren't hard truths to be said, but they are always said with the intention and desire for repentance and change, the desire for holiness and goodness.

I'm going to close this time today with the words from Ecclesiastes 5:2 – "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few." May our words not be cause for our judgment. Instead, may our words be few, and chosen well, so that we might honor our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in everything we say.