

The Power of Speech

We celebrate the first words spoken by a baby and reverently strain to hear a dying person's last words... Words and speech represent the power of God, a facet of the image our Creator has implanted in humans. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God gave humans the power and responsibility to name the other creatures (Gen. 2:19-20). God gave us "birth by the word of truth" (James 1:18) and offers us "the implanted word that has the power to save [our] souls" (James 1:21).

Again, this week we take up life lessons from the Bible, found in the letter of James. Here in chapter three he elaborates on themes announced at the very beginning of his letter: that everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak (1:19), and that a pretense of religion without control of the tongue is worthless (1:26).

Accountable Speech

Perhaps a number of the Christians to whom James was writing felt themselves called to be teachers or preachers. That is not so surprising when you think on how excited new converts usually are about their newfound faith. When your life has been transformed by something or someone, you want to tell others about it. Many of the Christians James knew had recently been redeemed from a life going nowhere, to a new life in Christ, going on to perfection. Some wanted to preach about their profound experience. That's the reason that often our best evangelists are our newest members - they're still excited about what they've found in the family of God.

I don't want to discourage anyone here from sharing their faith with others. In fact that's what we're all supposed to do. All Christians are held accountable by God for what they say (or don't say). Yet, "We who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (this is the only time that James uses the first-person plural). Teachers use speech more than others (teaching of course), and have control over others, and are subject to more temptations with regard to speech: arrogance, domination of students, anger at contradiction or opposition, slander and abuse directed at rivals, flattery of students for the sake of popularity. All these temptations and failures were considered grievous in the culture of the first century A.D. that expected teaching to model virtue. (There is some remnant of that expectation in our culture in the moral expectations we hold for teachers).

In the Christian community James reminds us that the preacher has greater privilege to speak in the congregation, but his/her condemnation will be the greater as well. The office of preacher does not assure one's salvation, but places them in greater jeopardy. If the preacher does not proclaim the word in conformance with the gospel of Jesus (tested and taught through apostolic tradition), then they are at risk of condemnation. James goes on to say that since no preacher is faultless (including himself; including myself), it is an office not to be entered into lightly. [I would add that it is also an office that demands humility and the ability to ask God's forgiveness as well as guidance.] That is one reason why the office of preacher is carefully screened in Methodist churches. That is why John Wesley was so careful about who he allowed to preach in the Methodist movement. He did not want, nor should we want, the pulpit to become simply a mouthpiece for current fads of the culture, or religious language that has not the power of the Holy Spirit. The language must contain the living faith of dead people, not the dead faith of living people.

In the UMC, like many other churches, we have doctrines; specific statements (taken from the Bible) of what it is we (and other Christians) believe about Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit, the church, the Bible, the sacraments, the last judgment, sin and free will, etc. Doctrines form our foundational beliefs. They are like grammar for telling the story of God's work through Jesus. Without good grammar the story becomes garbled. What we say about God's story, or how we tell it, is extremely vital to preserving "the faith once delivered to the saints" in a world that continually seeks to shape reality apart from God. By the same token we must guard against a rigidity in language that renders our doctrines simply dead letters. Language can both encourage and suppress human creativity, so preachers and teachers must be guided closely enough by God's word to be able to discern what human creativity is of God, and what is not.

The wisdom of the ancient Mediterranean world - Greeks, Romans, Jews - all agreed on the power and perils of speech. The sages of ancient Egypt, the Bible in Proverbs and Sirach, the essays of Plutarch (Grk.) and Seneca (Rom.), formed a consensus that silence is the better part of talking, that listening is the pathway to wisdom, that when speech is necessary it should be brief, and above all speech should be under control and never utter rage or envy. The mark of a wise person was above all control of speech. This is why James spends time here warning us of the perils of the human tongue.

### The Danger of Speech

What a man or woman does with the tongue has great consequences. A thoughtless exercise of the gift of speech can bring one to destruction more quickly than anything else. Don't we all know that? Think of the times you've said something on impulse, or "off the top of your head," and instantly regretted it. (Let me see; I was at three church meetings this week. That's three times where I said something I'd like to take back.) What's that old saying, better to remain silent and risk appearing the fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt? Gossip can undermine leadership in a church and destroy the family of God more quickly and thoroughly than financial challenges.

How many of us have said something that seemed good at the time we uttered it, then later realized it wasn't so good? My mom used to admonish me, "If you can't say something nice about that person, then don't say anything at all." That's really good advice, though I can't say I've followed it at every turn. It is an exercise in patience to deliberately look for positive qualities in those people whom we dislike.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me," my mother used to tell me. She wanted me to learn that bad words said against me could only penetrate if I let them. The truth is, unless we protect ourselves, words can hurt us and our words can hurt others. We must be very careful what we say to our children - especially what we call them.

The tongue, like a fire, can do much harm. (Don't we know that all too well in California the disastrous effects of wildfire. One arsonist starts a small fire that consumes untold amounts of property). [James acknowledges that the tongue can set afire the whole world and its devilish power can contaminate the whole body. "Sets on fire the cycle of nature" - probably referring to different ages of history and the destruction the world through fire as inferred in 2 Pet. 3:7, 10. The tongue is the instrument by which the great world conflagration is kindled and spread. Christians already suffer from this fire being persecuted by ruling powers (1 Pet. 4:12; Jude 23). Those destructive flames - that have their source in the pits of hell - have already singed the believers. This is very strong and graphic language that we're not accustomed to

hearing - maybe we gloss over it, and relegate it to a distant past. But think of those Christians today who experience first hand what James refers to (see *Voice of the Martyrs*).]

Oh, to have control of the tongue!

### Double -Mindedness

Nothing so reveals the destructive power of speech than the double-mindedness that results from intemperate talk. Unfortunately many a Christian ignores this and so from the same mouth comes forth praises of God and curses of people. (Salesi on boat from Hunga). In their eagerness to be prophetic some of the Christians of James' day were quick to condemn the unredeemed world and unredeemed people. Yet even unredeemed people are created in God's image. James tells us that just as fresh water cannot come from a brackish well, or from the sea, (spring at Neiafu), so curses cannot arise from the tongue controlled by Christ.

In the Greek world it was recognized that speech could do harm to others, but more emphasis was placed on the ridicule and shame brought upon someone who talked too much. In contrast James places speech in the framework of the law of God (the Torah), and specifically God's intention in creation. [Human speech and action must be modeled after the speech and action of God, who has chosen to be involved with humans. In that regard human behavior is judged not only on its capacity to build up or tear down good character, but also on the way it shows right or wrong in relationships.] Being "double-tongued" is not just a matter of saying one thing and doing another (though that is bad enough). When one blesses God and then curses a person who is created in the likeness of God (3:9), the faith by which one claims to live is betrayed. It is a moral failure, and a sin against God. The Bible tells us that humans were created in God's likeness (Genesis 1:26-28). [The theological understanding that humans are created in God's image is not derived from observation of human behavior - such a survey would no doubt lead to very different conclusions. Rather, this understanding is rooted in the Bible itself, re-affirmed by Jesus.] So what is at stake in the "double-tongue" is not just the perfection of the human speaker, but the proper way of responding to God's creation - that is our fellow humans.

Likewise, when James says the tongue is the "flame of hell" he's not simply saying that speech is a problem to be solved, a mere human vice, but a system that is at enmity with God. To curse a fellow human being is to place oneself in the framework of how the world operates, which betrays the intention of God's creation. This is more than a struggle for self-control; it is a battle involving spiritual allegiances.

[Human speech must be placed in the context of God's word. Recall that James said that Christians have been given birth as a kind of "first fruits of his creatures (1:18) by "the word of truth." Human speech is qualified in reference to the creative and saving Word of God, which is different from the wisdom of the world. This creation imagery is also found here in reference to taming of beasts and humans created in God's likeness.]

Bitter dissatisfaction with the sinfulness of the world does not constitute the essence of the gospel. God's intentions are that all may be saved (doesn't mean all will, for some will refuse God's offer). The Christian's calling is to proclaim that God offers salvation to all in Jesus Christ, not to condemn all that isn't right with the world. (Honey catches more flies than vinegar).

### Control of the Tongue

James tells us that control of speech is the only way to perfection. It doesn't mean speaking sweetly about everyone and everything. Jesus, who was perfect and who is our model, spoke the appropriate word each

situation and people, and for who he was. That included words not so sweet when called for.

When James says that control of the tongue means control of the whole body he is thinking of the Christian congregation whose "tongue" is the teacher or preacher. It is vital to the life of this "body" that the leader preach the word of God as known in Jesus, and not use the office as a soap box for demagogic speech. James uses examples of the tongue controlling a body much larger, as the leader who regulates the preaching may control the whole body of believers. It is like the bit in the mouth of the horse, which can control that large animal's movements. For early Christians a ship was a favorite symbol of the church (1 Pet. 3:20), and all knew that a large vessel is guided by a small rudder. The rudder (which actually resembles a tongue) corresponds to the proclamation of the message. The strong winds that can drive a ship here or there could be likened to rival beliefs or philosophies, cares of the world, and human opinions that can push a body of believers one way or another (Eph. 4:14). The situation of Christians can be perilous as powerful tongues twist and turn believers. But by means of the true rudder - through the proclamation of the word that adheres to the witness of the Bible - the pilot is able to bring the ship to its proper goal. The leader/preacher of the congregation must, of course, be under the guidance and control of our true Pilot, who is with Jesus.

### The Word Made Flesh

Humans have been able to tame just every animal on earth (Gen. 1:28; 11:19, 9:2), but cannot master the tongue. How can this possibly encourage us to control *our* tongues? Greek moralists were aware of how difficult it is to control the human tongue, yet they believed it was possible to bring speech into line with reason and virtue. But James knows human nature all too well. He flatly asserts that no one can control speech. It is almost as if the tongue were an independent agent outside anyone's control; almost a cosmic force set on doing evil (v.8). [Vs. 6 characterizes the tongue as though it were within the body (i.e. the congregation) as an agent of the world - the unredeemed aspect of human culture that is inimical to God.]

Humans alone cannot control the tongue, but the One who is the Word of God made flesh, the One we know as Jesus, makes it possible. Through Him all things are possible. We don't have to make excuses for slips of the tongue. Rather, we can ask the Lord to teach us and reshape us. The tongues of believers have One who can tame it. Even as Jesus died on the cross for and for our salvation, that included our tongues. Our speech can be redeemed in Christ's saving power.

### Speech: God's Creative Work

Human language is a potent instrument for continuation of God's creative work. Human language can also be used to misshape God's purposes for humanity. That is why it is so important that we pay attention to the language we use for communicating the faith we hold. That is why we must be careful about how we speak to one another and those outside these walls. That is why we must submit all of ourselves, including our tongues, to Christ's guidance. God has given us this great gift of speech to be used for His great purposes.