



THE TONGUE – James 3:1-12; Matthew 12:33-37

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Review

Have you ever heard the proverb: “An apple a day keeps the doctor away?” Do you believe it? What would it mean to believe this saying? For instance, if you said that you believed it – would that be enough? What if you spent some time doing some research about apples – looking up the different types of apples and how to grow them and the various health benefits of apples. Would that constitute belief? What if you bought a whole lot of apples and displayed them decoratively in a nice bowl on your dining? What if you travelled from city to city around Australia, teaching people about the benefits of apples, the different types of apples and how to cook with them? OK – let’s say you took a bite of an apple. Would that mean you really believed that “an apple a day keeps the doctor away”? I think you only really believe that “an apple a day keeps the doctor away” if you actually eat an apple a day! Eating an apple each day would begin to change you from the inside out – giving you better health so that you didn’t need to see the doctor. As your health improved, your belief in the saying would strengthen. And, as you talked to others, you could add a new dimension to what you say. Now you could say, “I believe that ‘an apple a day keeps the doctor away’ and I now have better health because I eat an apple a day!” That would be the very best demonstration both of your belief and of the truth of the saying.

This is a silly example, and I’m not sure if I believe that “an apple a day keeps the doctor away”, but maybe it is a helpful way to illustrate what James is seeking to teach the people to whom he is writing. He wants them to understand that it is one thing to say they believe in God and His salvation, but it is another thing to open their hearts to God and His life-changing power and begin to display its effect in their lives. Just like you have to eat an apple – every day – in order to experience its health-inducing effects, so you have to accept God into your heart and allow Him to change your heart in order to experience His life-changing power.

Back in the first chapter of James, he said,

So, as you are ridding yourselves of all the filth and evil in your lives, humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts (the Gospel), for it has the power to save your souls. (1:21)

James is describing a process of change. We start out with a heart full of sin, but as we accept the Gospel – the good news of salvation through Christ and new life in Him - and allow it to work in our lives, it will purify our souls (or hearts) and gradually purify our lives from the filth and evil which is so destructive. This leads to a new life which demonstrates God’s ways instead of sin’s ways. This is what it means to believe in the Gospel truly and whole-heartedly.

But it is not always easy to know how God wants us to live in this world. It has been so corrupted by sin, that we cannot always see the right way to go. As well as accepting the Gospel, we also need to seek God's wisdom. James has already talked about asking and receiving wisdom and he will come back to talking about wisdom in the passage we will look at next week. If we ask, we can be sure that God will show us what to do and how to do it. We just need to be committed to doing what He shows us to do – as James goes on to say:

But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourself. (1:22)

There is no point in saying that you believe that "an apple a day keeps the doctor away" unless you actually eat an apple day! In the same way, there is no point in saying that you believe in God's word if you don't do what it says. You have to allow God to change you from the inside out so that your life begins to reflect Him. You might fool yourself that you believe, but you certainly won't fool God. You might even fool others that you are a believer, but anyone who knows you well will see that your actions don't line up with what you say.

According to James, how do we live out our faith? We must accept the Gospel, seek God's wisdom and allow God to change us. In this way we will show our faith by our works. But James doesn't just give his readers the theory, he also gives them some very practical examples of how their faith should be changing their behaviour. Maybe he had received some reports of some specific issues they were facing. We don't know, but there are a couple of topics that he re-visits several times. He is concerned about the things they say and how this can impact relationships, how they deal with trials and uncertainties of life, and also how they are to walk with trust in God whether they are rich or poor. Looking at this list, I think these issues are still relevant for us today!

An aside ...

Before we get into the main body of what we want to look at today, we come across a verse which seems to be totally unrelated to what has come before or what follows. At the end of James 2, he was talking about the need to demonstrate our faith by our works. Seemingly out of nowhere, James jumps to a different topic:

Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly. Indeed, we all make many mistakes. (v. 1,2a)

I've discovered something about the way James thinks. He is different to Paul. Paul's writings are very well organised. He makes a main point, and then explores several sub-points which develop the idea of the main point. It is usually very easy to outline his books and see the development of his ideas. However, James is different. James approaches things more like hoping from one steppingstone to another, to another, to another. He talks about one thing, which reminds him of something else, which makes him think of the next thing, etc. It can be hard to know when to make a break because his ideas flow on from each other.

What I think happens here is that after thinking about how our actions should demonstrate our faith, he is drawn to think about how difficult it is for up-front teachers because people are watching them all the time and will judge what they say by their actions. It is impossible for teachers to always get it right because we are sinful human beings just like everyone else. He knows that His actions don't always line up with his words. He makes mistakes – he stumbles (Greek literal translation). He knows that all teachers will stumble at times. And as James is thinking about the need for control over our actions, he is led to think of that which is most difficult to control – the tongue.

The Problem of the Tongue

James has already broached the subject of the tongue.

If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is useless. (1:26)

These are strong words! In this chapter, James returns to the topic by saying,

If we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way. (v. 2)

James proposes that the tongue, even though it is a small thing, is an indicator of what is going on in our lives. He is going to develop this idea through a series of word pictures. We could picture them like this:

<i>small tongue</i>	<i>everything</i> in our lives
<i>small bit</i>	<i>large</i> horse
<i>small rudder</i>	<i>huge</i> ship & <i>strong</i> winds

Notice the repeated contrast between *small* and *large/huge/strong*. James wants to make sure we see the contrast! Whoever has control of the bit in the horse's mouth, controls the horse. Whoever has control of the rudder, controls the ship, even in the face of contrary winds. Whoever controls the tongue, will control the whole person. At this point, one might be quite encouraged – all I need to concentrate on is my tongue – how hard can that be?

James continues on with some more pictures.

<i>small tongue</i>	<i>grand</i> speeches
<i>tiny spark</i>	<i>great</i> forest set on fire
<i>evil tongue</i>	<i>whole</i> life corrupted

The first one might seem positive to begin with, until you realise that the idea behind “*grand*” is not always positive, it can also be translated as “*boastful*” speeches. As I think about this, I think about how two people used speeches in two very different ways in World War 2. Churchill used grand speeches to encourage the British and strengthen them to be able to make the sacrifices necessary to endure the Blitz and continue fighting against all odds. But on the other side, Hitler used grand speeches to lead the Germans astray and convince them to do terrible things. Two *small* tongues leading two *big* nations in two very different directions.

James' next picture is something to which we can attest. We know that a *tiny* spark can set a *great* forest on fire – a fire which can destroy everything in its path. Maybe you have experienced yourself, the terrible destruction that can come from people talking. Rumours and gossip and false information – it is hard to believe the *widespread* damage can be caused by one *tiny* tongue speaking wrongly. There have been times when I have been completely surprised by what someone

has said in a moment of weakness and sinfulness. It can destroy their witness and corrupt their *whole* life.

At this point, James doesn't have much positive to say about the tongue. He says that it is "*a whole world of wickedness*", "*restless and evil*", and "*full of deadly poison*". My mind pictures a snake poised to strike, just watching for an opportunity to sink its fangs into its victim. Have you ever been bitten by this snake? Have you known the paralysing poison of a harsh or derogatory remark? It hurts, doesn't it? We grew up saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never harm me." How we wish that were true! But we know that for many people, words can cut deeper than any knife and the wound can take longer to heal than any broken bone.

However, who of us can claim to be without fault here? I can't. In fact, James concedes that no-one is without fault here. He started off saying that if we could control our tongue, we could control our lives and he ends up by admitting that this is not possible – at least not in our own strength.

People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, but no one can tame the tongue. (v. 7,8)

But why is this true? Why is it so hard to control what we say? It is not that we always say sinful things. Sometimes we say very good and godly things! This is what puzzles James. The same mouth can bless God and curse those made in God's image. It is as if sometimes you go to a spring and scoop up fresh water and sometimes you scoop up bitter, contaminated water. How does this happen? What is going wrong?

But ... wait a minute ... if you had a spring where sometimes the water was fresh and sometimes it was bitter, what would you investigate? You'd look at the source of the spring, wouldn't you? You'd look to see if you could find out if there was something that was causing the fresh water to become contaminated. The source of the water makes all the difference. And this is the direction that James moves in his thinking. Fig trees only produce figs – not olives! Grapevines only produce grapes – not figs! Salty springs only produce salty water – not fresh – and it is deadly to crops and machinery, as some of our farmers are discovering as the salinity rises in our groundwater.

The Problem of the Heart

What does that mean for our words? What do our words have to say about their source – our heart? Jesus has some strong words to say about this, speaking particularly about our words:

A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. (Matthew 12:33-37)

I've thought a bit about why our words in particular are such a strong reflection of what's in our heart. I think it is because we often think very little about what we say. We just automatically react. It is so very easy to put someone down with a casual word. We might not even mean to hurt them, but our words can reflect a low opinion of them. We would never consciously, deliberately hurt them, but without thinking, we say something which can do as much or more damage than a slap in the face. Or, in the rush of the moment, in an unconscious desire to gain people's attention, we spill out some juicy titbit of gossip. Or maybe we're under stress and something happens – maybe totally unrelated to what is causing us stress – and we react in anger or frustration. What we say reveals our hearts because there is often a shorter, quicker passage from our thoughts to our words than from our thoughts to our actions.

If, as Jesus says, our tongue reveals our hearts, then we need to go back to what James says about our tongue and admit that the same could be said for our hearts. Our hearts are “*a whole world of wickedness*”, “*restless and evil*” and “*full of deadly poison*”. Ouch! That is sobering.

But you might say, “I am a Christian. God has cleansed me and made me new. How can my heart be that bad?”. I think it is helpful to go back to where we started in James 1, where he says:

So, as you are ridding yourselves of all the filth and evil in your lives, humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts (the Gospel), for it has the power to save your souls. (1:21)

Ridding ourselves from evil is a process that will take the rest of our lives. Before we were Christians, we had no hope – no way to change the evil in our hearts. But now that God is at work in us, He is able to change our hearts in ways we cannot. As we open our hearts to Him, He has the power to save us and cleanse our hearts. He is in the business of changing wicked, restless, evil, poisonous hearts into godly, peaceful, loving, and life-giving hearts which result in words which are godly, peaceful, loving, and life-giving. Our hearts guide our words and if God is increasingly in control of our hearts, then He will be increasingly evident in our words.

So, how are our words? Do we use our tongues to build people up and give life? Or do we use our words to tear people down and attack others like poisonous snakes? Maybe we need to ask God to make us more aware of our words and how they are affecting others.

And what do our words say about our hearts? This is the crux of the matter. What we say comes from our hearts and if our hearts aren't right, then our words will reflect this. We need God to change our hearts – to cleanse them and fill them with His love. Then we will say things which reflect His love and holiness, His grace and truth. You know, none of us are young anymore. We've been around long enough to develop some pretty ingrained habits of life – ways we react without even consciously thinking. However, it is never too late for God to change us! It is never too late to begin to speak as God wants us to speak out of a heart that is fully surrendered to Him. We might not have a long life ahead of us but, as we walk with God, every moment we have left can be an opportunity to become more like Him. We might not be able to do much, but if we can talk, He can enable us to talk blessing instead of cursing. How's your heart?