

James 3:1-12 The discipline of the Tongue

Introduction

Words are incredibly powerful for good or evil. It is very possible to cause immense harm without telling lies or slandering someone's reputation. The truth can be spoken in a way that causes serious harm. The story was told of a ship's mate who had been spoken to by the captain for being under the influence of drink while on duty got his revenge by making an entry some weeks later in the ship's log concerning the captain. It simply read: 'The Captain was sober today.' He was every other day as well, but those carefully chosen but misleading words could do a great deal of harm. The natural reading of the mate's entry appears to suggest that there were question marks being over the Captain's sobriety which could in theory lead to a cancelling of his commission. We are all well aware of the unfair and unhelpful questions that sometimes people might be asked to which there is no obvious answer: 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' is the most well known example. If a man has never engaged in that inappropriate behaviour he is placed in a difficult predicament, if asked that kind of question in a public place, because the question by definition casts aspersions on his character. It is not necessary to tell lies or make formal allegations against someone to undermine them –simply to raise questions concerning someone's character or competence over a period of time can accomplish the same ends without the risk of a formal rebuttal or challenge from the other person. Is there anyone here (of an appropriate age!) who doesn't remember *The Sun's* famous headline: 'Will the last person to leave Britain switch the lights out'; this was perceived by many analysts of the 1992 General Election as being crucial in persuading thousands of skilled working class voters to support John Major rather than Neil Kinnock for Prime Minister. A skilful portrayal of the Labour Party leader was produced which ensured many people had serious doubts about his competence to serve as Prime Minister of our country. There are plenty of other examples that could be used to make the same point. However, what is abundantly clear is that our most powerful weapon for good or evil is our tongue. It can do more good or harm than anything else we possess. The question is as Christians, how are we using our tongues? Are we consciously seeking to build people up or bring people down?

1. The Fundamental Power of the Tongue (James 3:1-4).

(a) The perils of opening our mouths *Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.* ² *We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check* (James 3:1-2). There are examples of appalling misuses of words in public speech. Newspapers on Saturday 9 March 2013 reported the astonishing scenes from the Glasgow University Union recently when two women debaters in a debating contest were subject to abuse of a nature most though had disappeared in the Nineteenth Century, let alone the previous one. Rebecca Meredith, a Scottish girl representing Cambridge University and Marlena Valles, from Edinburgh University were repeatedly heckled with vile comments about their gender and appearance by prominent male members of the Glasgow Union. At last it appears that action will now be taken against those responsible for such appalling and offensive taunts. It is easy to condemn such folly. Anyone with the slightest sense of right and wrong instinctively knows that certain forms of speech are completely out of order. There are a number of Bible verses that make reference to this issue. In Psalm 52:2 David speaking with reference to an evil man in his lifetime said this of him: *Your tongue plots destruction; it is like a sharpened razor...* The potential for good or evil in speech is stated in

stark contrast in Proverbs 10:11-12: *The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.*¹² *Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs.* However, the ability to control the words that we speak or omit to speak is a daily challenge for even the most sensitive of people. Alexander Whyte, Minister of Free St George's Church of Scotland, was one of the outstanding Edinburgh preachers of the Nineteenth Century. He wrote in a letter to a friend this observation about the use of words. No man living has more woe than I have at myself because of my unadvised and offending words. And, however often I keep silent, and however much I prepare myself before I speak, my feet will sometimes go so far from under me that I suffer some sore falls, and am an offence to my best and most patient friends [D. Prime, *From Trials to Triumphs*, p. 77]. From my limited knowledge of this man and his manner of life, it appears to be probable that his view of himself in this respect was much more severe than other people would have judged. His reputation with words in Edinburgh, Scotland's capital city was of the highest order indeed in his lifetime and his books also sold very well. What is important is that he felt he could have done better and constantly struggled to gain a greater mastery over the words he uttered. The challenge here is not so much about blasphemy or other forms of bad language. James would be assuming that this would be rejected by his readers. He has gone a stage further to ask us to consider not speaking too hastily when the pressure is on; as far as we can to avoid partially truthful statements that may be correct in themselves, but can convey a very different message to a hearer. James wishes his readers to avoid passing on unhelpful or inappropriate information about other people that could harm their reputations unnecessarily. Peter could say of Jesus in I Peter 2:22 (quoting Isaiah 53:9): *He committed no sin and no deceit was found in His mouth.* The ultimate standard of course was set out by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:48: *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* Thankfully there is a remedy for this problem. I John 1:9: *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

(b) **The potential power of opening our mouths** (James 3:3-4) *When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.* ⁴*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.* James uses well-known examples from daily life. First of all a horse – it is a powerful animal able to carry much heavier weights than a human being; because of its usefulness it has been domesticated so that it can carry humans in races, in ancient wars as well as for pleasure trips. Yet even a younger person who has been trained can successfully ride a horse, even though they are much less powerful than the creature on which they are riding. How can this be possible? It is due in part to the bit put in the horse's mouth. It is part of the equipment by which a skilful rider guides the horse in the direction it should go. It is a subtle form of control not the exertion of greater physical power over the animal. A modest tightening or loosening of the reins, or the movement of a jockey's legs, are signals to a well-trained horse about the direction in which it should be going. The same principle is at work with the rudder of a ship. Compared to the overall size of the ship the rudder is miniscule! Yet this small object enables a ship to be steered in the right direction. In the same way our tongue is small in size compared to many other parts of the human body, yet what it accomplishes can be greater than some larger components of our anatomy. The versatility of the tongue is well-known from speaking to shouting to singing and whispering. The ranges of speech can be words of the most affectionate expressions of devotion and love to the rawest outpourings of anger and hatred. It can be used to confuse and mislead in the propaganda of a Joseph Goebbels in Nazi Germany during World War II, or to uplift and inspire as in John F. Kennedy's famous 'ich bin ein berliner' speech in June 1963, during the famous airlift to overcome the Soviet blockade of Berlin at the height of the Cold War. The residents of Berlin were encouraged to know that the most powerful leader in the Free World was declaring he was on their side. Our words may be remembered longer than we ever imagined. A New England farmer Luke Short was converted at the age of 100. This man had

remarkable health and strength and lived a good life. How was he converted? It was through a sermon preached by the Puritan preacher John Flavel (1628-1691) in Dartmouth, England, eighty five years earlier when he was fifteen years old. The message had come back vividly to his mind through the influence of the Holy Spirit. No other human being was involved in the means of his conversion. Proverbs 10:20 declares: *The tongue of the righteous is choice silver...* how accurate is this for the words you and me have used this last week? Or will use in the week to come?

2. **The Destructive Power of the Tongue** (James 3:5-8)

James used two images to convey the danger that can potentially be caused by a misused tongue. The first comes from nature. (a) **An All-consuming fire** (James 3:5-6) ⁵*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.* ⁶*The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.* (i) **Its effects can spread so quickly from such small spark** (James 3:5) In the age of Facebook and Twitter the phenomenon of cyber-bullying can be terrifying to some young people. Even in their own bedrooms they have no escape as messages of hate and disrespect swiftly appear in their inboxes. On the night of 2 September, 1666, a small fire broke out in the premises of a baker's shop in Pudding Lane, London. In the close-packed streets of London, where buildings jostled each other for space, the blaze soon became an inferno. Fanned by an east wind, the fire spread with terrifying speed, feeding on the tar and pitch commonly used to seal houses. Our best account of the Fire comes from the diaries of Samuel Pepys, Secretary of the Admiralty. He watched the course of the destruction from a safe position across the Thames, and called it: a most malicious flame, as one entire arch of fire... of above a mile long. It made me weep to see it. The churches, houses, and all on fire and flaming at once, and a horrid noise the flames made, and the cracking of houses at their ruin ...Over the Thames with one's face in the wind you were almost burned with a shower of fire drops. After four days while helpless citizens stood by and watched the destruction of their homes, the wind mercifully died and the fire was stopped. When a dazed populace took stock of the damage, apparently 80% of the city was destroyed, including an estimated 13,200 houses, 87 parish churches and 52 Company (Guild) Halls. The iconic place of worship in the city, the earlier St. Paul's Cathedral, was nothing but rubble. It was a disaster of unprecedented proportions

This disaster was similar in ferocity to blaze in Chicago on 8 October 1871. On that occasion the cause can be clearly identified. Mrs O'Leary's cow kicked over the lantern as she was being milked at 9pm that Sunday evening. From the smallest of incidents three and a half miles of the city, in excess of seventeen thousand buildings were destroyed. The fire was stopped by controlled gunpowder explosions two days later, but not before 250 people had lost their lives. *Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down. As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.* (Prov. 26:20-21). Have you ever been present when someone has been seriously winding another person or persons up just to get a reaction? It is so common that no-one can pass through life without coming across this kind of inappropriate behavior. Yet how unhelpful it can be; No wonder Solomon wrote, *"A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered."* (Prov. 17:27). Thank God for people who can speak wisely; thinking through the words they choose, that can build people up rather than inflame situations. May that be true not only for each one of us; each other person in our families and church families, but with God's help become more common in our society in general.

(ii) **The potential harm that can be caused** *The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body...* (James 3:6a). James here uses the word *world* (cosmos) to describe this negative potential. In other words no limit on the damage it might potentially inflict. In terms

of long-term damage it is as dangerous as explosives, both can be lethal when misused and cause so much harm. In the last month of my first year in a hall of residence as an undergraduate student in the 1980s I saw a sight I hope never to see again, a fellow student tormented by a throw away taunt in a pub some months earlier was endeavouring to take his own life. Our student rooms were on the upper floor and sanitizing and cutting short the story his final action was intended to be leaping to his death through a large window at the end of the corridor. Two of us rushed out on hearing a disturbing sound. I must admit to momentarily freezing with horror. My colleague had the presence of mind to put out an arm and shout stop in the most authoritative voice he could muster and our fellow student collapsed sobbing into his arms while I then called for medical assistance. I suspect that the one who had uttered the taunt months earlier had long since forgotten it, but its recipient recalled those words on a daily basis, usually when in bed at night. Thankfully he got the help he needed and the problem was resolved, but how close it came to a very different outcome. The power of our words is so much greater than we ever imagine.

(iii) The impact of this kind of misconduct *It corrupts the whole body and sets the whole course of one's life on fire...* (James 3:6b) Fiery words can defile a home, a club, a church congregation. The only thing that can wash away that defilement is the blood of Jesus Christ. Fire burns and hurts, and our words can burn and hurt. All of us have seen on television the impact of an oil tanker going down off the coast of our own country or another location. The devastation caused on the beaches and the impact on wildlife can be devastating. The damage goes on and on, until finally the clean up appears to be completed. However, if only it could have been prevented in the first place. We are so grateful for the heroic efforts of those who rescued the situation investing so much time and energy into gaining the resolution, but how we wish circumstances had been different and the difficulties avoided. A few weeks into pastoral ministry I spent an hour one evening with a relatively new Christian in the church. I expected to have a very pleasant evening and did so, but I was left also with plenty of food for thought. She had looked forward to playing a full part in the life of that church and had come into membership some years earlier. She recalled to me what happened at the first members meeting she had attended. Her experience that evening ensured it would also be her last. What happened at that meeting? Quite simply some of the older members of that church were unhappy about a possible decision that might have been taken and spoke at the meeting towards others present in a way that fell demonstrably short of anything acceptable to the Lord Jesus Christ. To that young Christian who had learned to respect these people who had spoken so warmly and graciously to her in church on a Sunday were now speaking to one another in a manner inconsistent with the Gospel they claimed to profess. Let us think very carefully how we speak to and about one another, and other people as well; a Church Meeting, for example, is an act of Worship every bit as much as a Sunday service. Our respect or lack of it towards another person is just as significant Monday to Saturday as well as on a Sunday. The corrosive impact of improper speech in the ranks of Christian congregations, I suspect, has done as much harm to the cause of Christ in this land than all actions by outsiders put together. In Ecclesiastes 5, in a context of advice about honouring God in our lives, there are a number of references to our speech. *Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God...⁶ Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?⁷ Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore fear God* (Ecclesiastes 5:2, 6-7). I thank God for a number of instances, that came to mind while writing this message, in meetings in this church where well-chosen words by different people, have been so helpful to those gathered. One of the sorrows our Lord had to bear when He was here on earth was the way His enemies talked about Him. Because He graciously accepted invitations to dine with people the Pharisees did not like they

called Him a “*glutton and a drunkard*” (Matt. 11:19). When He performed miracles, they said Jesus was in league with Satan. *It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons* (Matthew 9:34). Even when He was dying on the cross, His enemies could not let Him alone but threw vicious taunts into His face (Matthew 27:41-42). Fire spreads, and the more fuel you give it, the faster and farther it will spread. The tongue *sets the whole course of his life on fire* (James 3:6). James suggests that all of life is connected, and therefore, but for the grace of God, we cannot keep things from spreading.

(iv) The source behind this kind of misconduct and is itself set on fire by hell (James 3:6c); In addition to these words, Jesus also in Matthew 23:15, in words to some synagogue elders, declared: *...you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are...* Our various gatherings as God’s people are intended to have something of the fragrance of heaven and reveal something of the grace and love of Jesus. When people come in they ought in words familiar to their experience to articulate a sense of the presence of God in our midst. We need always to think as best we can if this person comes to one Sunday service or one Church Meeting or one other activity in this Church –what view of Jesus and what view of His professed followers would they come to as a result of our interactions with one another? Jesus makes it very plain as did James that sometimes that which is potentially of greatest good can be misused and be the very opposite. It is easy to point the finger at the Roman Catholic Church for its failure to remove paedophile priests from duty at the earliest opportunity. These extreme cases are obvious, but it can be the corrosive impact of ill-chosen words or apparent disrespect for fellow-believers that can potentially cause as much long term harm as outward physical misconduct by a much smaller number of individuals.

(b) An uncontrolled wild animal (James 3:7-8) ⁷*All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind,* ⁸*but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.* The ability to exercise self-control or mastery over ourselves is familiar from the Word of God. It is also part of the training in various sports and martial arts. A person who cannot control themselves can quickly become a liability. How many examples spring to mind from various life-settings when we allow our minds to wander on that theme! It is a lot and so easily done. The fruit of the spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23 includes *self-control*. God gave humanity the responsibility for looking after the rest of creation in Genesis 1:28: *God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.* No other species can even come close to humanity in the damage it has caused to the ecosystem. Human selfishness appears at times to know no limits. Yet this is so contrary to the design of the Creator for us as creatures. It is not only outward misconduct that is a problem. In Romans 7:18-19 the apostle Paul highlights the fact that he and we struggle with what goes on inside us as well. *For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.* ¹⁹*For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.* Winston Churchill once said: The power of man has grown in every sphere except over himself (John Blanchard, *Truth for Life*, 195] One could imagine the apostle watching a young horse being broken in by a trainer as it learns how to behave properly to harness its immense strength on a farm or as a military mount for an officer. An animal is easier to train than the human tongue, because the former might be accomplished within a few months or years, but the latter is a lifetime accomplishment. Then James uses another picture describing the tongue as being like a deadly poison. *It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison* (James 3:8). The Psalmist in Psalm 140:3 made a similar point: *They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent’s; the poison of vipers is on their lips.* The writer of Proverbs 18:21 went so far as to say: *The tongue has the power of life and death...* Oh may God help us to gain and retain mastery over it.

(3) **It is capable of treacherous inconsistency** (James 3:9-12)

(a) **It is impossible in the natural world** (James 3:11-12) ¹¹ *Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?* ¹² *My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.* What is inside will come out. Jesus declared in Matthew 12:33-37: *“Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit.* ³⁴ *You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.* ³⁵ *A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.* ³⁶ *But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every empty word they have spoken.* ³⁷ *For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”* An American pastor was involved in a work party doing manual labour in the church, his case hammering nails into some wood. One of the labourers for the building firm seemed to want to work quite close to him. When asked his motivation he sheepishly replied: ‘I want to hear what you say when you hit your thumb with the hammer. Food for thought!

(b) **It is improper in the spiritual world** (James 3:9-10) ⁹ *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness.* ¹⁰ *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.* God has given us the ability to control our speech. Paul told the Church in Colossae: *Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.* (Colossians 4:6).

What does this look like?

Pledging to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15)

Refraining from being a party to or the means of spreading gossip (Proverbs 16:28; 17:9)

Refusing to engage in insincere flattery (Proverbs 26:28)

Declining to get involved in ruining someone’s reputation (James 4:11)

Avoiding inappropriate forms of affirmations or oaths (Ephesians 5:12; Matthew 5:33-36)

Avoiding demeaning forms of speech (Proverbs 26:24-25)

Remembering the words of Psalm 19:14 as a template for our own speech patterns

The best way to conclude is Psalm 19:14 –it couldn’t be put better.

The Psalmist’s prayer in Psalm 19:14 is a good one to pray in every generation: *May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*