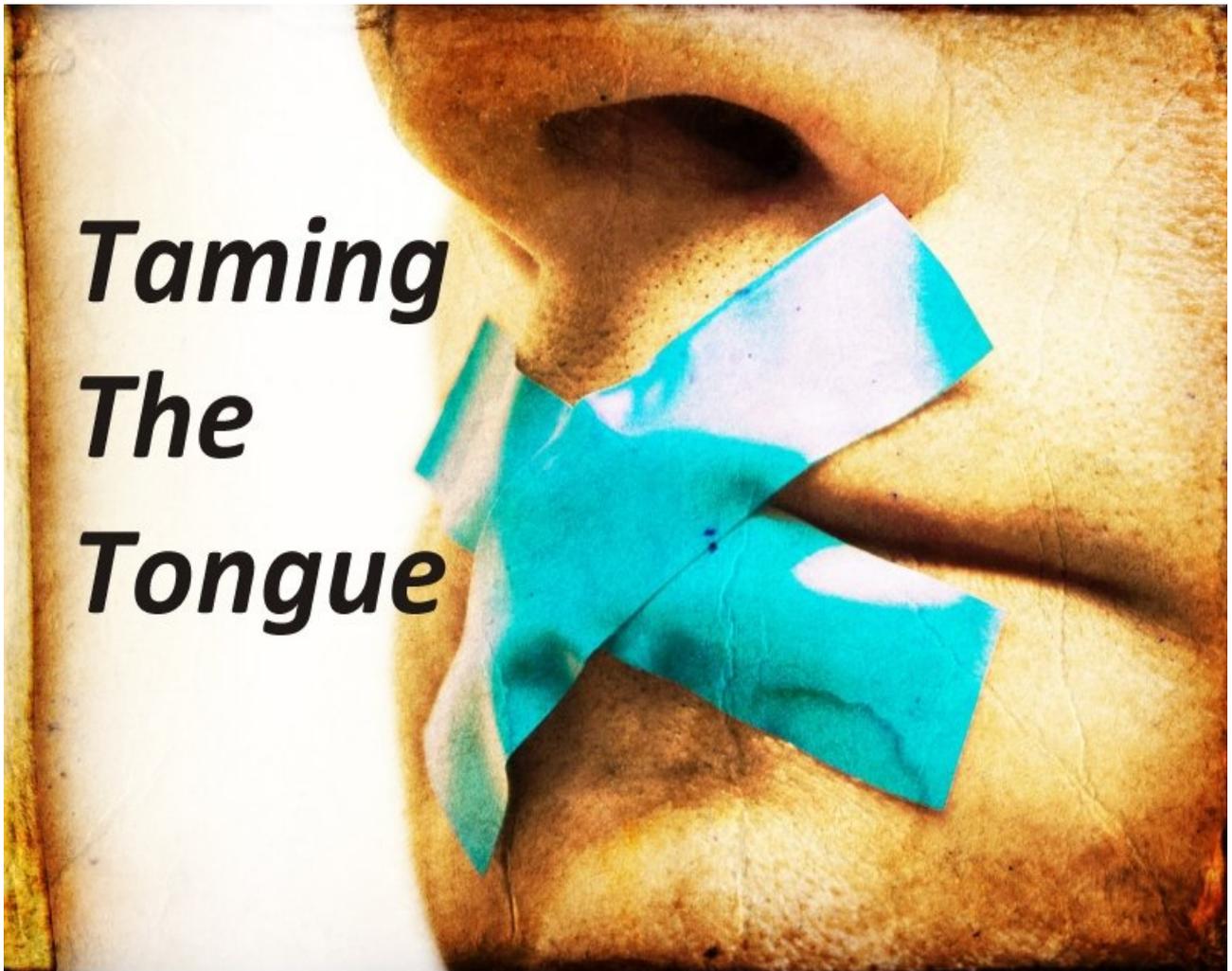


SERMON TRANSCRIPT



Ormskirk Christian Fellowship  
Sunday 18 August 2013

## Taming The Tongue

It's a tough topic to tackle, the tongue. It gets twisted so easily, and can land us in all kinds of trouble; we can open our mouths, and in an instant everything can change. A bad situation can be made better, but a perfectly benign situation can go horribly, irreversibly awry.

Maybe you've heard the story of the man who'd been out on the pier fishing all day but caught absolutely nothing? As evening was drawing in, a couple of women walked past, and as they did so, he finally landed a catch. By that stage, there was obviously nothing to brag about, but one of the women took it upon herself to rebuke the fisherman for reeling in such a pathetic offering. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself for cruelly catching such a poor little fish?" she asked him. The man didn't even look up. "Maybe you're right" he said, "but if the poor little fish had just kept its mouth shut, it wouldn't have been caught."

So often that's the story of our lives isn't it? If only we'd kept our mouths shut ... but all too often we open them at exactly the wrong moment and invariably seem to get caught ... we ensnare ourselves. We can use our tongues for their highest created capacity; presenting prayers and petitions before God, bringing our praises to God ... but all too often, rather than using them in a positive way for sharing encouragement or for preaching the gospel, we poison, pervert and pollute our fellow man.

Our tongues can build up or they can tear down, they can encourage or discourage, they can heal people or hurt people, they can lead people to trust in Jesus, or turn people away from Jesus forever. What an awesome responsibility rests within this tiny 2oz. part of our bodies! It's no wonder that David cried out, **"Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips."** (Psalm 141:3) The bible exhorts us to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), to speak things which are necessary for sound doctrine (Titus 2:1), and to let our speech be filled with grace, seasoned with salt (Colossians 4:6).

We live in a country bent on exercising the freedom of speech, and although people have the right to say what they want, the problem is generally what they want to say! The bible makes it clear, **"Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues."** (Proverbs 10:19) Over the last couple of weeks, we've seen James speaking about dynamic, life changing, soul saving faith. The emphasis of chapter 2 is the work that saving faith should produce in a person's life, as Mark shared with us last week. It's not about what we SAY that we believe, it's about what we SHOW that we believe ... the fruit that comes from our lives.

Now in chapter 3 and speaking about the tongue, James wants to talk about teaching God's word. He's focussing here on one specific thing, but we're ALL going to be called to give an account of how we handle our tongues. Jesus said, **"But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every empty word they have spoken."** (Matthew 12:36) The ability to speak is one of the greatest powers God has entrusted to us. We can build someone up, or we can ruin their reputation and assassinate their character. Our ability to speak can influence others and accomplish incredible tasks, but we take it for granted.

Those who teach God's word have a responsibility to correctly divide it, and accurately portray God's heart. But what he's saying here doesn't apply only to those of us on the teaching team ... perhaps you help in the kid's church, or some kind of bible study, or at lifegroup or whatever. What James is saying, is that if you don't take the time to be properly prepared, in whatever role you play, you run the risk of misrepresenting the heart and mind of God to those that you might be ministering to. You wouldn't believe some of the stuff I've heard people teach (not here, I hasten to add), but if other people take that bad teaching onboard, those teachers will be held accountable for any wrongful influence they've wielded in peoples lives.

It's amazing how many people (even self proclaimed teachers) are ignorant of the Word and don't handle it accurately, or with integrity of heart. James reminds us that from those to whom much has been given, much more is demanded. He's not trying to discourage those whom God has called to teach. He's not trying to send shivers down their spines, so that they refuse to engage people through the word of God anymore. What he's saying is that in every case we must approach the responsibility soberly, and be careful to represent God accurately.

There's a Quaker proverb that says something along the lines, **"Of your unspoken words you are the master; of your spoken words you are the servant, and of your written words you are the slave."** What that means, basically, is that before you say anything, you should take time to think it through, but once it leaves your lips there's no turning back, and once you write it down, it becomes as good as etched in stone.

What James is really doing in this chapter is giving us a way to measure our spiritual maturity; do you want to know where you're at (maturity-wise) in the spiritual sense? Well what kind of control do you have over your tongue? If you don't stumble in speech, you don't use foul or unbecoming language; if you don't use your tongue as a sword or bite at another person, then you're moving towards spiritual maturity.

Our tongue is like an ID badge that we wear. It tells people where we're from, whether we're educated, whether we're a hillbilly or a woolyback, whether we're cultured or crude, a believer or blasphemer ... the tongue tells all, and that's the point James is making here ... it's incredibly small, but incredibly influential. It's like the bit to a horse, the rudder to a ship, and the spark to a forest. It can turn, manipulate and control the course of things, even things that are much bigger than itself.

The bit of a horse has to overcome the wild nature of the animal; the rudder of a ship has to overcome the winds, waves and the currents. The human tongue has to fight against contrary forces as well. Inside all of us, there's an old nature that wants to drive us off course, and cause us to run wild again (well, metaphorically speaking anyway ... for a few people, their 'get up and go' perhaps got up and went some time ago)! There are still circumstances though, that make you want to say things that you shouldn't say; there are still sins on the inside and pressures on the outside, and all of them seek to gain control of your tongue.

James uses the illustration of a horse bit and a rudder, because, even though they're only very small, they have enough power within them to direct and affect the lives of others. A horse or a ship careening wildly out of control could bring injury or death to pedestrians or passengers. **"Death and life are in the power of the tongue." (Proverbs 18:21)** It's like a little fire that spreads throughout a whole forest; it does irreparable damage, tears apart families, ruins churches, destroys lives; it messes up relationships and wrecks marriages.

Never underestimate the power of your words. A fire that's harnessed, watched over and kept in its proper place does tremendous good; it brings life, it warms our homes, it cooks our food and it lights our way. In John chapter 4, we read the story of Jesus speaking to one woman at a well, but her life, along with a whole multitude of others from that city, was changed forever. Peter stood up on the Day of Pentecost and 3,000 people received eternal life in Jesus' name! But a fire that's out of control is incredibly destructive. James says that the tongue is a "world of iniquity", powerful and perverse. Filled with unrighteousness and wicked intent, it defiles the whole body, it sets on fire the course of nature - he means the circle of life that was set into motion at birth, and ends only at death.

It's interesting to James saying here that the tongue is set to defile the whole body. Jesus said, **"Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man ... For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man" (Matthew 15:11, Matthew 15:19)** Our words bear witness to what's in our hearts - that's what it comes down to isn't it? Our tongues, really, are neither a friend nor foe; they simply deliver whatever comes from the heart. They display the sin of the human heart.

A gossiping tongue, like a forest fire of destruction, is only bearing witness to a contentious and ill motivated heart that wants to do someone else harm. The bible says this in other places too. **"As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife." (Proverbs 26:21) ... "A lying tongue hates those who are crushed by it, and a flattering mouth works ruin." (Proverbs 26:28).**

It's ironic really ... we spend the first couple of years of our life learning how to speak, then the rest of our lives learning when to shut up ... and we still can't get it right, can we? We can't

tame the tongue. When it comes to animals, fish and birds - they can all be tamed by mankind. But the tongue is a restless evil; it refuses to be ruled, it's full of deadly poison, loaded with the venom of hate and character assassination and idle gossip. The bible says, **"A fool vents all his feelings, but a wise man holds them back."** (Proverbs 29:11)

James says that there's nothing else in nature as inconsistent as the human tongue. You don't have saltwater and freshwater coming from the same source, you don't have figs coming from grapevines or poisonous mushrooms growing out of pear trees. Nature is consistent, logical, and sensible in that kind of way. But our tongues produce sweet sounds of praise and worship in one breath, then yell at our husband / wife / kids on the way home from church in the next!

You can almost see James scratching his head at this point ... "I don't get it; I just don't get it ... how can two diametric opposites come from the same source?" It's a mystery, the flesh and the Spirit at war with one another. We should be consistent in our speech. If salt in the water means the spring is bad, and no fruit on the tree means the roots are bad, how can our tongue produce praise and poison, praise and pollution, praise and perversion all at the same time? Our tongues shouldn't be so inconsistent; they're not supposed to be inconsistent. We need to be cleansed from our sin and have our tongues brought under the control of the Holy Spirit. If we sing like angels on Sunday but talk like demons on Monday, there's something seriously wrong ... the bible calls that hypocrisy!

It's interesting when Jesus heals the mute man in Mark chapter 7, that He touches his tongue. You see friends, when Jesus touches your heart; He touches your tongue as well. Paul said this in his letter to the Romans. **"If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."** (Romans 10:9) The heart and the mouth work in tandem here, they are as one ... because growing in wisdom isn't about learning about truth from a sermon; it's about applying truth to your life. Godly wisdom is displayed in meekness; it's about those who let their light shine, so that other people can see their good works, and glorify their Father who is in heaven.

In verse 13 we see the words "good conduct" and "meekness of wisdom" ... GREAT ... but in verse 14 we see the words "bitter envy and self-seeking" ... NOT GREAT. One is heavenly but the other is earthly. What a contrast! James says that it's pretty obvious where the root of each of them lies. The earthly wisdom of this world produces confusion and ungodly actions. That's not to say that things don't happen; it just means that they produce a worthless end result; good for nothing ultimately. But heavenly wisdom ... well, that bears eternal fruit; that's the kind of wisdom worth having. True wisdom is full of love; it's giving, willing to yield where there is purity and righteousness, consistent with the heart and the holiness of God.

So what kind of seed must we be sowing to yield this sort of harvest? Peace, says James. But it's difficult to practice peace if you can't at least speak to someone peaceably! It all comes back to taming the tongue doesn't it? Something that man can't do, but what's impossible for man is perfectly possible for God. Man can't tame the tongue, but the Holy Spirit can. Tongues that have been tamed by God can be controlled by His Spirit and used for His glory.

I want to close by showing you a photo ... from a windswept hill in a country churchyard where there stands an old, grey, rather drab headstone. Bleak and unpretentious, it leans slightly to one side, weathered by the passage of time. There's still an epitaph on it but it's really difficult to read unless you stoop over and look very closely. It says this:

**BENEATH THIS STONE, A LUMP OF CLAY,  
LIES ARABELLA YOUNG,  
WHO, ON THE TWENTY-FOURTH OF MAY,  
BEGAN TO HOLD HER TONGUE.**

No mention of family ... devoted wife, mother or daughter of someone else ... nothing. That's all it says. What an awful way to be remembered. Even beyond the grave, the words of Arabella Young continue to impact people. She was 29 years old. Do you see how powerful the tongue is? What does your tongue say about you? What does your tongue say about God? If God can touch your heart, he can tame your tongue ... so, this week, will you allow him to?