

Taming the Tongue

Pray the words of Psalm 19 (NRSV):

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.*

*In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.*

*The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.*

*Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

I – and you too – have prayed the words of the last verse of this psalm many times. I imagine that James often prayed this psalm as well. In his letter to followers of Christ scattered throughout the world, he discusses words three times – maybe four depending on how you're counting. James points out that the way believers talk to and about people shows their hearts and core values. Their words reveal the truth about their character.

James mentions words twice in the first section of his letter. He cautions his readers to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.¹ He lists controlling the tongue as one of the marks of a religion that is pure and undefiled.²

I mentioned last week that James draws heavily from Proverbs and from the words of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount. Let's look at some of the proverbs relating to speech. There are at least 45 of them; I won't read them all.³

There are proverbs about the personal benefits of knowing how to speak well. *From the fruit of their speech, people are well satisfied; their work results in reward.*⁴ *The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.*⁵

Good words benefit others as well. *The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense.*⁶

There are 15 proverbs pertaining to the virtue and benefits of a restrained, disciplined use of words. Here are four of them. *When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech.*⁷ *Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent.*⁸ *If one gives answer before hearing, it is folly and shame.*⁹ *To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble.*¹⁰

And, of course, there are proverbs about harmful speech. It's likely James had some of these in mind as he wrote his letter. In Proverbs we find descriptions of the results of socially harmful speech. *With their mouths the godless would destroy their neighbors, but by knowledge the righteous are delivered. By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but it is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked.*¹¹

There are warnings against slander and gossip. *Lying lips conceal hatred, and whoever utters slander is a fool.*¹² *Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.*¹³ *Whoever belittles another lacks sense, but an intelligent person remains silent. A gossip goes about telling secrets, but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence.*¹⁴

A few proverbs are about evil speech. *Scoundrels concoct evil, and their speech is like a scorching fire.*¹⁵ *An evildoer listens to wicked lips; and a liar gives heed to a mischievous tongue.*¹⁶ And some proverbs point out that harmful speech comes back to harm the speaker too. *The crooked of mind do not prosper, and the perverse of tongue fall into calamity.*¹⁷ *The mouths of fools are their ruin, and their lips a snare to themselves.*¹⁸

The good news is that words can also be healing. *Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*¹⁹ *Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.*²⁰ *A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*²¹ *To make an apt answer is a joy to anyone, and a word in season, how good it is!*²²

¹ James 1:19-20, NRSV.

² James 1:26-27, NRSV.

³ This section draws from John W. Miller, *Proverbs: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2004, pp. 143-154.

⁴ Proverbs 12:14, CEB.

⁵ Proverbs 18:21, NIV.

⁶ Proverbs 10:21, NRSV.

⁷ Proverbs 10:19, NRSV.

⁸ Proverbs 17:28, NRSV.

⁹ Proverbs 18:13, NRSV.

¹⁰ Proverbs 21:23, NRSV.

¹¹ Proverbs 11:9, 11, NRSV.

¹² Proverbs 10:18, NRSV.

¹³ Proverbs 12:19, NRSV.

¹⁴ Proverbs 11:12-13, NRSV.

¹⁵ Proverbs 16:27, NRSV.

¹⁶ Proverbs 17:4, NRSV.

¹⁷ Proverbs 17:20, NRSV.

¹⁸ Proverbs 18:7, NRSV.

¹⁹ Proverbs 12:18, NRSV.

²⁰ Proverbs 16:24, NRSV.

²¹ Proverbs 15:1, NRSV.

²² Proverbs 15:23, NRSV.

An adage we don't find in Proverbs or in James is one I heard as a child. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words shall never hurt me. Words may not be able to inflict the physical damage that sticks, stones, and other weapons do, but the psychological and emotional pain words inflict can be just as damaging. Human words also spread misinterpretations of God's Word and lead people away from the way Jesus showed us to live. This is what James is talking about in the passage we heard a bit earlier, James 3:1-12.²³

James begins with a warning for those who teach.²⁴ Teachers of James' day gave public discourses to which students and other hearers gathered round. Imagine how easily someone might be led astray by the words of these learned people that they held in high esteem. Yet, it's impossible to imagine a teacher who never once misspoke or chose an unfortunate word or phrase. James reminds the teachers that with their greater influence comes greater responsibility to do everything in their power to ensure that what they say is correct.

This warning continues to hold true for preachers and teachers. In fact, the possibility of leading people astray is exponentially greater now than it was then. Today's teachers don't need to be physically present with the people to whom they are speaking. Their words are spread far and wide in print as well as through radio, television, and the internet. And it's no longer those whose vocations are preaching and teaching who can spread their messages to the ends of the earth. We all need to consider how our words, spoken and digital, affect our lives, both in the wider society and within the community of faith.

James knows that small things can do great harm.²⁵ Size is not the main measure of power. The tongue is like a ship's rudder or a horse's bridle – tiny by comparison with a ship or a horse. Yet each of these items controls the directions of the much bigger body to which they are attached. James asserts that the tongue is a driver that controls the direction of a person.

James also knows about fires.²⁶ Big fires often begin with a small spark. They can rage for days, destroy acres and acres, and obliterate entire neighborhoods, defying legions of firefighters on the ground and in the air. So it is with the tongue. Words are like sparks. Relationships slowly built are destroyed by the wrong words said in the wrong way. Misunderstandings and deep wounds are created with no more than a word or two. The whole range of emotions – hatreds, jealousies, ill will – rage like a forest fire set by the tongue.

This can happen even when the speaker didn't intend to cause harm and is unaware of the hurt inflicted. Word choice, timing, and tone of voice can mean one thing to the speaker while conveying something quite different to the hearer. While we can't prevent this from happening, we need to be aware of this possibility and do our best to listen to each other and speak the truth in love when we are hurt.

But sometimes the damage is intentional. Especially vile are words maliciously spoken. These might be what James has in mind when he says that the tongue is "a restless evil, full of deadly poison." The tongue that can bless can also curse. It condemns, belittles, intimidates, slanders, and lies.²⁷

Consider, says James, how we speak. We bless God and then with the same tongues we curse one another. James compares this behavior to gathering olives from a fig tree or finding fresh water in a pool of saltwater.²⁸ This is not the way things work. A person of faith cannot truly bless God and then curse someone else who is made in the image of God. These actions are incompatible. What kinds of output do our mouths produce? What do our social media posts say about us. The tongue and the keyboard are reflections of the soul. Their fruit reveals the source.

Jesus talked about this in Matthew 15. Faithful Jews were concerned about holiness and purity especially when it came to what they ate and how they worshipped. But Jesus told them, "*It's not what goes into the mouth that contaminates a person in God's sight. It's what comes out of the mouth that contaminates*

²³ The rest of the sermon draws from Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year B*, Trinity Press International, 1993, pp. 410-411; Margaret Aymer, *Commentary on James 3:1-12*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-24-2/commentary-on-james-31-12-3>; Pulpit Fiction Podcast, *Proper 19B (OT 24)*, [Proper 19B \(OT 24\) — Pulpit Fiction](#); and Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Studying the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B*, Abingdon Press, 2002, pp. 306-307.

²⁴ James 3:1-2

²⁵ James 3:3-5

²⁶ James 3:5-6

²⁷ James 3:7-8

²⁸ James 3:9-12

the person. Don't you know that everything that goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But what goes out of the mouth comes from the heart. And that's what contaminates a person in God's sight. Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adultery, sexual sins, thefts, false testimonies, and insults. These contaminate a person in God's sight. But eating without washing hands doesn't contaminate in God's sight."²⁹

James returns to the topic of speech a bit later in his letter when he writes about condemning others. *Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?*³⁰

This echoes Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount – one of our top twelve scriptures posted on the wall of our sanctuary. *"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."*³¹

After reading from James, Proverbs, and Matthew we can amend the adage I referred to earlier. Unlike sticks and stones, words may not break bones but evil speech "stains the body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell."³²

These scripture passages remind us of what to avoid: saying things that intentionally offend, saying things designed to wound another person, saying things intended to deceive, and saying things that would lead another person astray. They challenge us to acknowledge the malignant potential of gossip, misinformation, and assumption. They warn us of the power of words to suppress truth and destroy life.

We suppress truth in the seductive language of advertising. We distort meanings in the slippery half-truths of politics cleverly crafted to sell a candidate or to destroy an opponent. We destroy life when we use the language of privilege that denies someone's experiences, perceptions, and identities.

Words matter - whether they are said in the pulpit, in the parking lot or in prayer; whether they are included in our Facebook posts, our tweets, or the email we choose to share. How we speak reveals who we are.

James also invites us to consider the importance of silence, silence as a means to listen for God and to each other but also as a way of taming our tongues. However, silence is not always the answer. There are times when we need to speak up, to speak up for ourselves, for each other, and for God. We will make mistakes, but speech is an act of faith. We must accept grace for the mistakes we make and be diligent that our words – as much as our other actions – are a reflection of our faith and the love found in God and in Christ.

I invite you to consider. How do your words reflect who you are? How do the words of others reveal who they are? Is your tongue a blessing or a curse to you and others?

As followers of Christ, we are called to pay attention to and nurture our language. We are called to keep it open, fresh, and inviting in order to welcome all people into relationship with God. When we listen to and obey God's voice, we show our love for God and for others. Our words reflect our relationship with God and our actions match our words. May God give us the wisdom, courage, and will to tame our tongues.

²⁹ Matthew 15:11, 17-20, CEB

³⁰ James 4:11-12, NRSV

³¹ Matthew 7:1-5, NRSV

³² E. Elizabeth Johnson. *Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Prophets 17-Reign of Christ)* as quoted in Pulpit Fiction Podcast, [Proper 19B \(OT 24\) — Pulpit Fiction](#).