

Sunday School Lesson for August 23, 2020

Good morning, I hope you are well and blessed.

Sunday School Books for Fall Quarter are available in the Church office. Lessons start Sunday, September 6, 2020.

Lesson for August 23, 2020, "Taming the Tongue"
Background Scripture is from James 3:1-12.

From the text section, Taming the Tongue: "Our words have an impact on others. James feels strongly enough about the harmful potential of gossip and other forms of hate speech that he uses all the metaphors he can gather to direct his readers toward blessing rather than cursing one another. Whether with our families, our faith communities, or our neighbors beyond the church walls, Christians need to practice using our words for good, because it does not come naturally."

James continues to address Jewish Christians, as he opens chapter 3, with teaching, concerning the tongue and speech. James believed words were more than "only" words. He believed that little things, especially "words" can make a big difference. The tongue or speech is mentioned directly or indirectly in all five chapters of James (James 1:19, 26; 2:12; 3:1-18; 4:11; 5:12). He gives several illustrations of little things that have a big effect. James wanted his readers to understand what a significant role our tongues and speech play in getting us into or out of trouble. Perhaps James had heard his half-brother say, "Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him unclean, but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him unclean". (Matthew 15:10-11).

James previously counseled us to be quick to listen and slow to speak, to keep a tight reign on our tongue, and that our words are a consideration in the judgement. This reflects a statement of Jesus in Matthew 12:37 that our words will acquit or condemn us. Our tongue is a very important part of living a life in accord with God's will. People often pride themselves in the fact that they are not alcoholics, drug addicts, murderers, whoremongers, liars or thieves. However, those same people will use their tongues to talk about those who are. Most Christians will never stumble until they trip over their own tongues. In fact, misuse of the tongue is the easiest way to sin (Romans 3:13-14). The tongue is a weapon that is always with us, easily accessible, and extremely deadly (Psalm 64:3). A sharp tongue is the only edged tool that gets sharper with use (Psalm 52:2). The more we use our tongues to cut people, the more skillful we become in that task. On the other hand, the more we use our tongues to help and encourage others, the

more we are able to control our tongue and the greater the benefit to those to whom we speak.

Most Christians never pray about their tongue or ask God to keep their speech pure. The Bible teaches us that our tongue and speech is a big deal (Proverbs 15:28; 16:27; 26:20). Jesus said, "You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But, I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment, for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:34-37).

Jesus is saying that your speech is such a revealer of your heart that based upon the way you talk, your eternal destiny can be determined. The tongue provides evidence of what is in the heart.

From the text section: "Why So Salty? By the time the letter from James was written, people had been living in Christian community for decades, maybe a century or more. While its date is uncertain, we can conclude from his writing that people in the first century were not that different from people in the twenty-first. Even those committed to following in the way of Christ got into disputes with each other, or forget to put the good others or the community ahead of their own needs. Out of the same mouths speaking of the good news also came words of pride, condemnation, provocation and cruelty. People gossiped and issued sick burns and trash talk. James offers a warning against the way our tongues get us into trouble when we take off the filters that matter most. Sometimes the filter is off before we know it."

As James opens chapter 3, he explains why many should not be teachers. Teaching was a highly valued and respected profession in Jewish culture, and many Jews who embraced Christianity wanted to become teachers. Those who become teachers of the Word will incur a stricter judgment because of the immense responsibility and capacity to lead others into truth or to lead them astray. It is not a careless ministry that one should undertake haphazardly. This is why those who teach had better study, to show themselves approved unto God. , "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the work of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15). We don't want to be ashamed at Christ's coming because we learn that we have taught incorrectly or been lazy in our teaching and study. If teaching is the good work, to which we are called, we had better take it very seriously.

I believe James is speaking to many people in this chapter, including myself. I think about several passages from the book of James and especially this passage from chapter 3, when I prepare Sunday school lessons. This is also, why we have to remember and ask God for guidance and wisdom.

James is speaking primarily to those who want to teach, those who assert themselves as teachers, and those who should not be teachers at all. Here is why, James see this as a serious problem, which he felt obliged to address. First of all, adversity seems to attract many counselors and teachers who wish to instruct us as to why we are suffering. This is seen in the Book of Job, where his three friends persist in trying to convince him that he is suffering because of some unconfessed sin, and not because of righteousness. In the end, God rebuked these men for not speaking what was true of Him (Job 42:7-9). Second, there will always be those who seek to be teachers in order to promote their own interests. In Acts chapter 20, you find Paul warning the elders of the church at Ephesus that even some of them will become false teachers, in order to gain a following. Third, there was a particular problem with "wanna-be teachers" within Judaism: "They, the Scribes and Pharisees, loved the place of honor at banquets, the best seats in the synagogues, elaborate greetings in the marketplaces, and to have people call them Rabbi (Matthew 23:6-7).

It did not take long for false teachers to begin to emerge in the New Testament church. A good portion of this false teaching came from Jewish false teachers, who seemed to feel that they had a higher level of understanding. They did not abide within sound doctrine, but were constantly engaged in speculation and word wars (1 Timothy 2:4-7, 2 Corinthians 11:3-5, 13-15, 22; Titus 1:4; 2 Timothy 2:23, 4:4).

Among those Jews, who were dispersed abroad were those who felt that they were superior in knowledge, especially knowledge of matters pertaining to the Law, and so they were inclined to teach the ignorant? James tells them – indeed, orders them – to be very hesitant to teach, knowing that the judgment of teachers is more severe (James 1:1). Why would it be a more severe judgment? There are at least two reasons that James does not give in his epistle that we find elsewhere:

First, those who are teachers should have a greater knowledge of the truth, and thus they become more accountable.

"From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more will be asked" (Luke 12:48b). Second, we all will be judged according to our words, so teachers,

whose work involves many words, will be more accountable. Matthew 12:34-37, was mentioned earlier in this lesson.

We've all experienced it. Something we said gets magnified, perhaps even exaggerated, to the point that we don't even recognize it anymore. As James says, "consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark." (James 3:5) While it is true that words once spoken are gone forever and that we cannot fully undo what we have said, we should do all we can to lessen the damage and correct what we can. Taking steps to make things right will also help us not to repeat the same mistake. Peter wept bitterly over his denial of Christ and later demonstrated more openly the genuineness of his repentance (John 21:15-17).

Though no man can tame the tongue (James 3:8), we are admonished to keep our tongue from evil and our lips from speaking lies. (Psalm 34:13) Only, the Spirit of God can help us keep our words in check.

The idea of both blessing and cursing coming out of the mouth of a Christian is disturbing, to say the least. What about someone who speaks the truth and wonderful words about Jesus, only to later be heard telling an off-color joke? These images should be spiritually disturbing because they are contrary to what we know to be right.

James uses the image of a spring. Water quality depends on its source, and the root determines the fruit (compare Matthew 7:16-18). If God's Word is implanted in us, it will be evident in our life. Understanding this truth frees us from the burden to prove our faith. Pure religion is rooted in faith, which is self-authenticating, just as a pure water spring needs no proof other than the water that flows naturally from it.

At the same time, though, one could ask, if we were to take a snapshot of certain devoted followers of God at low points in their experience (Moses murdering the Egyptian, David with Bathsheba, and so on), might we not legitimately question their profession?

The fact remains that sin brings sadness while obedience brings blessing. Moses spent 40 years tending sheep to unlearn the training that led him to kill, and David suffered the death of the child Bathsheba bore, as well as a divided household that threatened his kingdom to the end of his life. Sure, we can be forgiven for our sins after we do them; the problem, however, is that so often the consequences of those sins can remain, often with

devastating results not just for ourselves but for others. How much better to be asking for the power of victory than having to ask for forgiveness afterward, and then plead for the damage to be brought under control.

Parents carry a weighty responsibility in teaching their children, who in turn influence others. All of us, in fact, by the example we set, can have a profound influence on those around us. How important, that we seek God's wisdom, which He has promised us (James 1:5), that we might model His ways and exert a godly influence. We all, for good or for bad, do exert influence over others.

Think about those who have influenced you in a positive way. What did they do? How did they impact you? And how can we do the same for others?

James admits we are not perfect and our tongues are difficult problems. He says our words reflect our connection. Either we have a saltwater source, or we have a fresh water source. Either we are hooked up as branches to the vine, or we are not. What we produce reflects the connection of our life. We have to ask our self, what do our words say about us?

The problem is not out there, it's within us. Something needs to change within us. Our focus needs to be transformed. Instead of looking for the bad in a situation, we need to look for the good. Instead of being preoccupied with self-interest, we need to focus on the interests of others. Changing our hearts is a good place to start.

We need to think before we speak. The Bible teaches, "My dearly loved brothers, take note of this: everyone should be quick listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." (James 1:19-20)

In the text section, "Stepping into the World: It is a Sufi saying: Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates. At the first gate, ask yourself, is it true? At the second gate ask, is it necessary? At the third gate ask, is it kind?

Evangelist Alan Redpath formulated a similar rubric, using the word "think". T is it true? H is it helpful? I is it inspiring? N is it necessary? K is it kind?

Kind communication is a tough spiritual discipline. It takes intention and practice. Maybe we should post the, "Think list", in the Sunday bulletin or on

a meeting wall. Maybe, we should write ourselves a note or draw a picture of the three gates. Or maybe, we start with Thumper picturing a bunny, and quietly, biting our tongues until we find the right words."

James reminds us that our tongues and speech reflect us. Our tongues put our thoughts into words. If our minds and hearts are full of the fire of evil intentions, our tongue will be the flame thrower than sets it all ablaze. If you are able to praise the Lord at church and then speak evil of those you worship with, you are a contradiction to your Christian profession of faith. James simply said, "My brethren, these things ought not so to be." The bit may stop the horse and the rudder may turn the ship but remember you hold the reins and your hands are on the wheel. No matter how hard we try, we cannot, tame our tongue. The good news is, Jesus can. King David ended one of his psalms with a prayer that all of us would do well to pray: "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer." (Psalm 19:14)

Closing: For the love that casts out fear, the faith that sustains and the hope that never perishes, be with us now and forever more. Amen. God watch over us and take care of us.

Next week's lesson August 30, 2020, "Two Kinds of Wisdom"

Background Scripture is from James 3:13-18 and 5:7-12.

Sources for this lesson: The Bible, Lesson on Taming the Terrible Tongue, by Steven J. Coles, The Teacher Notes on Taming the Tongue, Study Guide on James 3 by David Guzik, Sermons from Rev. Bob Utley, retired professor of Bible Interpretation, International Sunday School Lesson and Commentary, and The Present Word Adult Bible Lessons.