

Introduction

Several years ago, my wife and I took our grandsons to the circus in Cleveland. We saw a lot of spectacular things that night but to me the most spectacular of all was the lion tamer. It was an impressive thing – one man in a small cage with six powerful and ferocious lions. They could have turned on him and torn him to pieces in a matter of minutes. But they didn't. He tamed them, you see, and they did exactly what he wanted them to do.

But there's something more impressive than taming lions. That something is taming tongues. It's more impressive because it's more difficult. Turn to the text I read earlier, James 3:1-12, and you'll see what I mean. This text calls us to be tongue tamers and teaches us five things we need to know in order to be that.

The Problem of the Tongue

The first thing it teaches is the problem of the tongue. James reveals what that problem is in verses 7-8. He points out in those verses what man, meaning human beings, can and cannot tame.

Verse 7 refers to the creation account in Genesis 1-2. In those chapters, God gave man the authority and ability to tame animals. The lion tamer at the circus was a vivid demonstration of that ability.

Yes, man can tame animals but according to verse 8, he can't tame the tongue. James would say that the circus performer taming the lions was easier than you and I taming our tongue. The tongue is probably the hardest part of the body to control. That's a dramatic statement I know. Most people think that the sexual organs are the hardest parts of the body to control, but they aren't. According to James, the tongue is. People sin more verbally than they do sexually.

I was on our denomination's EP&E Board for 10 years. One of that board's responsibilities is to address problems in our local churches. By problems, I mean Christians in the churches disagree about things and

begin attacking each other as a result. Guess what the most common form of attack is? It's verbal attack. One group of elders told people around town that the other group of elders were clowns. A Spiritual Life Commission member stood up in a congregational meeting and told the pastor publicly that he's a "worthless preacher," and so on.

I've been in the church for 59 years now. I've witnessed and experienced many things during that time and hold this opinion based on that. The most frequently committed sins among long established Christians are sins of the tongue. They backbite, gossip, slander, tongue lash, destructively criticize, and more.

But that isn't surprising is it? It isn't hard to figure out. It's because the tongue is probably the hardest part of the body to control.

The Power of the Tongue

This text teaches a second thing that we need to know – the power of the tongue. We see that in verses 5b-6.

Maybe you remember a forest fire that occurred 25 years ago. Someone put out his campfire but allowed a spark to remain. That tiny little spark that could barely burn your finger eventually flared up. It turned into a raging inferno that destroyed thousands of acres of forest.

The tongue is just like that, James says in verses 5b-6. A tiny spark can destroy an entire forest. In the same way, a word, phrase, or sentence can **"defile the entire body and set on fire the course of our life."** That reveals the great power that the tongue has. It can stir up the inclinations and passions of the whole body, all of its parts, and wreak havoc in people's lives.

Take physical violence, for instance. Verbal violence almost always precedes physical violence. I learned that as an attorney handling assault cases. In all of them, someone's words incited my clients to anger and the resulting violence they did.

Along those same lines, I'll never forget the time when I was a boy that Rick Eberle tried to jump his bike over a ditch. "Tried" is the

operative word because he hit the ditch and flew through the air, his bike and he doing a front flip as he did. It was a foolish thing and the only reason he did it was because we had said he was a “chicken” if he didn’t. I wonder how many stupid stunts the word “chicken” has led to.

That’s the power of the tongue. It can stir up the inclinations and passions of people’s bodies and wreak havoc in their lives. That makes it one of the most potent forces in human life. But its power isn’t just natural. It’s supernatural as well. Verse 6 says that it **“is set on fire by hell itself.”** It’s one of the devil’s favorite tools for mischief. He’s able to empower and concentrate its destructive effects and does.

The Potential of the Tongue

There’s a third thing this text teaches that we need to know – the potential of the tongue. James reveals that in verses 9-12. After filling the pulpit at a Friends Church years ago, I left the worship service and overheard three women talking in the parking lot – about the soloist. They were saying to each other how full of herself she was and how she showed off when she sang. Those women did exactly what James says in verses 9-12. With the very same tongue and within the very same hour, they both blessed and cursed God. That is the potential of the tongue.

First, we can use it to bless God, which means speaking well of Him. We do that by verbally thanking, praising, honoring, or talking about Him. Not long ago, I told a Christian I met that God is the most joyful being in the universe. I blessed Him by saying that about Him.

We can use the tongue to do a second thing – curse God, which means speaking ill of Him. Christians think they don’t have a problem with that. After all, they wouldn’t even *think* of cursing Him let alone *do* it. But many curse Him all the time. James explains how in verse 9. It’s true. All the people we talk to and about are sinners. But it’s also true that all are in the image and likeness of God. That means, James concludes, that when we curse them, we are cursing Him.

That is an extreme statement, the implication of which is absolutely

staggering. We curse people with our tongue by backbiting, gossiping, slandering, tongue lashing, destructively criticizing, and more. But James clearly implies that whenever we do any of those things to people we're doing them to God as well. We're cursing Him. A Christian neighbor of mine said that her sister-in-law is "**a two-faced liar.**" She cursed God with her tongue when she told me that.

That then is the potential of the tongue. We can both bless and curse God with it.

The Place of the Tongue

This text teaches a fourth thing we need to know – the place of the tongue.

Verse 2 contains one of the most surprising statements in Scripture. Let me ask you a question. Who is a perfect person? I've asked many Christians that question over the years. They gave three answers more than any other. #1 – A perfect person is one who loves God supremely. #2 – A perfect person is one who demonstrates the fruits of the Spirit. And #3 – A perfect person is one who is like Jesus.

Those are all excellent answers but not the one James gives. His is found in verse 2. A perfect person is one who does not stumble in what he or she says. The word "stumble" means "offend" or "sin." So, a perfect person is one who does not offend or sin with his or her tongue.

James explains metaphorically why he says that in verses 3-5a. He contends that the tongue is like a bit and rudder. If we can control the bit, we can control the horse's entire body. If we control the rudder, we can control the entire ship. In the same way, if we can control our tongues, we can likely control our entire body as well.

Verses 2-5a teach us this vital truth. The tongue is central to life. Let me explain what I mean.

The Holy Spirit wants to do something with your body and mine. He wants to transform it into the image and likeness of Jesus. He wants to impart the grace and power of Jesus so that they inhabit and govern each

of our body parts – our eyes, ears, mouth, hands, feet, and so on. When that happens, those body parts then just automatically act and react the way the body parts of Jesus did.

In that context, the tongue is central to life. That means when the grace and power of Jesus come to inhabit and govern *it*, the effects of that will spread throughout the whole body. If our tongues are transformed into the image and likeness of Jesus, the rest of our body parts are likely to follow.

That's why James defines a perfect person the way He does. He knows the place of the tongue. It's central to life. He knows that if it is transformed, the rest of the body will likely follow.

The Plan of the Tongue

We now come to the fifth and final thing we need to know that this text teaches - the plan of the tongue. It's a plan for spiritual growth.

As most of you know, the growth of our bodies into the image and likeness of Jesus is a cooperative effort between the Holy Spirit and us. His work is primary but we do have a part to play in it. Romans 12:1 tells us what that part is. We must present our bodies as living sacrifices to God. Doing that makes room for the Holy Spirit to bring the grace and power of Jesus to them and transform them.

Which brings us to the plan. Because the tongue is central to life, our cooperative efforts with the Holy Spirit should begin with and focus on it. That's the plan. Presenting our bodies as living sacrifices to God should begin with and focus on the tongue. We should present *it* as a living sacrifice to God. Doing that requires three things.

First, thoroughly understand what James teaches in verses 1-12. This sermon, which is a commentary on the verses, will help you do that. Read and study the verses over and over again until you've mastered their contents. Then reflect on the divine insights they share and ask the Holy Spirit to plant them firmly and deeply in your minds and hearts.

Second, release your tongue to God. In a definite action, almost a

ceremony, actually present it as a living sacrifice to Him. Here's one way of doing that. Find and ponder verses about words and the tongue like Proverbs 12:18, 25; 15:4; 18:8,21; Matthew 12:36-37; Ephesians 4:29; 5:4; and Colossians 4:6. After doing that, kneel before God and explicitly and formally surrender your tongue to Him. Ask Him specifically to take charge of it, to fill it with His life, and to use it for His purposes. Give plenty of time to this ritual of sacrifice and renew it as often as you need to – yearly, monthly, or even weekly if you have a problem with the tongue. Also periodically review your ritual in thought and prayer to keep it in front of you.

Third, following Paul's command in Romans 6, present your tongue as an instrument of righteousness in your everyday routines. Intend to use it for good, not evil and, purposely and thoughtfully, carry out your intention. Do that in between the moments of crisis, when you're not on the spot. Most people can't control their tongues in heated moments. They just go off on them and do what they want. So focus on using yours for good, not evil in the less intense situations of life.

Someone shared with me a piece of gossip about her pastor. I was going to concur with what she said because it's true. But knowing what I just told you, I didn't. I said something constructive about him instead. In this less intense situation, I purposely and thoughtfully used my tongue for good, not evil because I was able to. Opportunities to do that occur scores of times each week and we need to take advantage of them.

The three things I just explained make room for the Holy Spirit to work with our tongues and that's exactly what He does. He forms and transforms them over time until, eventually, they're tamed.

Conclusion

And that's how I close. James is right in verse 8 that you can't tame the tongue. But you plus the Holy Spirit can. So decide to be a disciple of Jesus and do the three things I just explained. You'll be a tongue tamer if you do!