

Taming the tongue

James 3:1-12

Which part of your body do you take most pride in?

Is there a part of your anatomy that you are very pleased with?

When I was younger and mucking about with my friends playing cricket,
I discovered that I was able to bowl leg spin!

Leg spin is not an easy thing to do, but I was able to do it:

Pitch the ball on the stumps and move it away from the batsman.

I could even bowl a wrong-un, where it went the other way!

Now this was in the days before Shane Warne was famous

so leg spin wasn't very fashionable,

so as a shy teenager I gave it away,

but my hands had the capability to move the ball,

looking back now I'm very proud that I was able to do it!

Are *your* hands capable of great things?

Do they know how to decorate a cake?

Do they know how to work with timber?

Maybe your feet know how to dance.

Is there a part of *your* anatomy that can do wonderful things?

Maybe as we get older it's the opposite question that's most relevant.

Are there parts of your body of which you are ashamed,

parts of your anatomy that you wish to hide?

I saw an interview with the American Actor Tom Hanks who is now in his 60s.

As well as revealing that he's recently been diagnosed with Diabetes,

Hanks also said that he is painfully aware

that he now has a good side and a bad side to his profile;

so when the photographers are flashing away

he finds himself maneuvering

to make sure they're getting him on the right angle.

Is there a part of *your* body that you try and hide?

What about your tongue? Are you good with your tongue?

Is that a part of your body that you take some pride in,

or is your tongue a part of your anatomy that has caused you trouble?

As we continue in our series in the NT book of James,

we come to a section where James speaks at length about the human tongue.

James wants our actions to align with our beliefs,

and this week he's particularly concerned about how we speak.

In fact, the impression you get from this passage is that for James,

the tongue is the part of the body that deserves the *most* consideration,
because what we do with our tongues has a massive flow-on effect.

The tongue is a small part of the body,
but James thinks it's worth our full attention.
Let's have listen to what he says. James 3, starting at verse 1.
Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers,
because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

James begins with a warning about a very particular type of speaking,
He addresses those within the church who have a responsibility to teach:
—preachers, growth group leaders, sunday school teachers, youth leaders—
all those who have taken on the responsibility of teaching God's word.
These are people who, on the final day, will be judged more strictly.

Why will teachers of the Bible be held to a higher level of accountability?
Part of the answer is given at the beginning of verse 2
We all stumble in many ways.
We human beings find ourselves in a tight spot:
we are fallen creatures who sin against God and against each other,
but one tool that God has appointed to help remedy this situation
is the speech of those who teach the Bible.
As *I* teach the Bible, it's my responsibility to remind all of you:
about where we are going wrong;
about the grace that God extends towards us despite our sin;
and to encourage us all as we seek to mend our ways.
God is concerned that I carry out this responsibility well.

In fact, speech has always been a very important tool used by God.
How did God create the world? He spoke it into existence.
How did Jesus calm the storm and cast out demons? He issued a command.
How does the Holy Spirit equip the church for its ministry?
He appoints prophets, teachers, evangelists: people who speak for a living.

Many of you would know our dear friend Eion Millar [from our 8:30 congregation]
who in recent months has moved into an aged care facility.
Eion has lost his sight, but he can still speak,
and he tells me of the conversations he has with the staff of Regis Hornsby
(the facility where he lives).
He tells them of his church,
he tells them of his faith,
he tells them of his savior.
God can use a blind man to spread his gospel
because it's the *tongue* that carries the message.

So the first thing to say is that the tongue is really important

because it's God's special tool to carry out ministry.

But the tongue's power is not only something for the minister to watch,
its power is something the rest of the church must consider as well.

Let's have a listen from the second half of verse 2.

Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect,
able to keep their whole body in check.

The NIV translations that we use here at Waitara Anglican
have used an unhelpful word here in verse 2,
we ought to replace the word *perfect* with the word *mature*.

Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is *mature*,
able to keep their whole body in check.

Rather than being an impossible goal, James is giving us something to *strive* for.

"Work hard with what you say, because that's the path to maturity," he says
"watching your speech is the gateway to maturity in other areas."

James wants us to understand that speech has tremendous flow-on effects,
sometimes for good, sometimes to our detriment.

To help us picture this,

James provides a list of illustrations where small things produce big results.

Verse 3: When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us,
we can turn the whole animal.

I remember when I was teenager we lived near Parramatta Park

I used to go running around the park and if you know that park well
you may recall on the Westmead side there are some wide open spaces
and one afternoon there were two horses at full gallop [...]

from one side of the park to the other.

It's the only time I have ever seen these animals up close at full pace.

It is a fearsome sight!

And how to you control such power? Just a small piece of metal in the mouth.

A small tug to the left, a small tug to the right

and all that horsepower is at your disposal.

Perhaps your not a person of the land, perhaps you're a person of the sea!

James has another image that might mean something for you.

V 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.

On an other occasion when I was young,

my father took me to inspect a naval vessel during a Navy open day

I remember standing on the bridge

and hearing my father ask one of the navel officers

"How do you steer this thing?"

and he pointed to a little dial on the control panel, wiggling it with his finger.

"this What we use" he said.

This giant machinery of war, controlled and maneuvered into position
by a tiny little switch.

And so it is with the tongue, James says in verse 5

The third illustration is one that's particularly relevant to our local context
here in the 'bushland shire'

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. James says
Now I've never been caught in a bushfire,
but I have heard stories of survivors who talk in shocked terms
about how unbelievably fast a bushfire can be,
and of the incredible noise it makes as it overtakes you.
And how do these firestorms start? With a cigarette butt out the window,
with the sun passing through a piece of thrown-away glass.

You get the point, don't you?

The tongue is a small part of the body,
but it creates an effect which far outweighs its size.

A few years ago I read a story in the newspaper about a man named Rex Crane
who in the 1980s began telling others about his experience during WWII:

He would tell people about how he was captured by the enemy
and how he spent time as a prisoner of war.

The problem was that it wasn't true.

He had met real veterans and was fascinated by their stories
and adopted those stories as his own.

He started to join veterans' groups

where he made friends and was accepted into their circles,
and soon his new friends started to ask why he wasn't receiving a pension. So
he applied and started to receive government money,
He was caught out when he was invited to speak at an event,
But unbenown to him a military historian was in the audience,
and she realized that the story he was telling didn't add up.

So he was charged and ended up going to gaol

for defrauding the government a total of \$690,000.

And so you see how one lie starts to snowball,
the lies become more elaborate and soon he starts committing fraud,
and then he loses his friends, he loses his dignity, he loses his freedom.

No wonder James says in verse 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 (Rex Crane knows
all about that, doesn't he?), and is itself set on fire by hell.

When James says the tongue is itself set on fire by hell,

my first thought was that perhaps James is being a little bit melodramatic.

But then I realized that Paul has the same concern.

We've spoken about lying, Paul speaks about anger in Ephesians 4.
 He says that dwelling in anger is one way to give the devil a foothold.
 It ruins friendships,
 it stops us from issuing forgiveness,
 which in turn puts our own salvation at risk

Satan isn't stupid, he knows that language is so important,
 he knows we can be destroyed through our words,
 and so this is why he wants to have a say in how we use our tongues.
 Lying, anger, malicious words, profanity, bitterness,
 all of these types of speech have the capacity to ruin us,
 and so friends we need to pay attention to what it is we say.

So what can we do? Verses 7-8 make things sound hopeless
 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.
 Is the situation really as hopeless as James describes?
 What James is saying is true,
 but it's a truth that leads us to consider something else.
 Look at verse 8 again but no *human being* can tame the tongue.

I'm reminded of that moment in the Gospels
 where Jesus is speaking about how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God
 The disciples exclaim Who then can be saved?!
 and Jesus answers With man this is impossible, but *with God* all things are possible.
 God is willing to forgive the sins of the tongue,
 and his Holy Spirit is able to train us in a new language, the language of
 love and encouragement, and graciousness, and forgiveness and thanksgiving.

And it's with the help of the Holy Spirit
 that we can avoid the *inconsistency* James warns about from verse 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.

We've spoken about lying and we've mentioned anger,
 cursing is another form of evil language:
 words directed at other people that seek to cut them down, to wound them,
 to put them in their place,
 words that let them know exactly what's wrong with them,
 words that might turn other people against them.

James provides a very helpful insight as to why cursing is a wicked type of speech.
 It's there in verse 9. Human beings have been made in God's likeness.
 When we read in the Easter story how the passers by hurled insults at Jesus,
 we feel the injustice and the *blasphemy* of the situation, don't we?

And yet hurling insults at our fellow human beings is no different,
It doesn't matter if it's to their face or in private conversation,
an insult against another person is an insult upon the image of God.

And James reminds us that such language has no place among those
who spend at least some of their time praising God.

¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing.

Hypocrisy is never a good look for us Christians,
and it's very easy to allow our tongues to lead us into hypocrisy,
with godly talk on Sundays and malicious talk on Mondays,
but James would let us have none of it,
My brothers and sisters, He says this should not be.

In the final 2 verses

we have another hint as to what the solution for our speech might be.

Verse 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.

Water flows from a spring deep within the ground,
And the type of fruit we might enjoy depends on the stalk that holds it.
And Jesus said that it's out of the overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks.
What comes out *here* is an accurate gauge of what going on in *here*,
and so we must invite the Holy Spirit to dwell within us,
changing our hearts, and therefore changing our tongues.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if our speech was like fresh water?

A sign of inner spiritual health, and also a blessing to other people,
words that refresh and energize those around us
instead of words that crush and ruin people

God wants to do that work in us, and if we allow that work to proceed,
then our tongues will be organs we can be proud of,
our tongues will be able to achieve some truly wonderful things.
Let's pray that God might do this work within us. Join with me.