

**“If You Can’t Say Anything Nice About Someone...”**

**James 3:3-12**

March 27th, 2022

You’ll remember that **Patrick Henry** was one of our country’s founding fathers, and the first governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia. *But, did you know that Henry was a diligent student of sacred Scripture and a follower of Jesus Christ?* His speeches were filled with biblical allusions and delivered with the power and cadence of an Old Testament prophet.

On March 20th, 1775, the Second Virginia Convention gathered at St. John’s Church in Richmond to debate rising tensions with England. Henry wanted to raise a militia and prepare for military defense. But, other delegates cautioned patience, hoping for a peaceful solution.

On March 23rd, 247 years ago this week, Patrick Henry delivered perhaps the most eloquent speech in American history. Addressing the president of the convention, Henry said,

“Sir, we are not weak, if we make a proper use of those means which the God of nature has placed in our power. Three million people, armed in the holy cause of liberty and in such a country as that which we possess, are invincible by any force which the enemy can send against us. Besides, sir, we shall not fight our battles alone. There is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations...

Gentlemen may cry, ‘peace, peace, but there is no peace.’ The war is actually begun! Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God. I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”

*Spoken words - the things we say - can be very powerful, can’t they?* Improperly used, they can destroy a person’s character, confidence, and will. Properly used, spoken words can build others up, inspire them, and create positive outcomes. The old adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” just isn’t true.

- Poet Pearl Strachan Hurd has written, “Handle them carefully, for words have more power than atom bombs.”
- “The tongue has no bones, but is strong enough to break a heart. So be careful with your words.” - Unknown
- Washington Irving wrote, “The tongue is the only instrument that gets sharper with use.”

Folks who study such things have concluded that the average person speaks over 9 million words every year. 9 million words that you and I will be judged by - fortunately, if you’re a believer in Jesus Christ, you won’t have to give account of them because Jesus paid for them!

Last Sunday I returned to the pulpit after a 10 week sabbatical. I'm slowly reinserting myself into the body life of Trinity Church. It will take about as much time to get back to full-steam again as I was away. Though things will be different - in a good way. Since last Sunday, I've submitted my resignation to two local councils and boards on which I've chaired or served many years. I have two others in mind. Please join me in praying that the time I will no longer invest on those councils is used carefully and purposely for positive ends.

One week ago, we resumed the sermon series in the New Testament book of James. We looked at the first two verses of **James Chapter 3** last Sunday, and today, we will pick up with verse 3 and read through verse 12.

### **James 3:3-12:**

**“3** “Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. **4** Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. **5** Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things.

See how great a forest a little fire kindles! **6** And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. **7** For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. **8** But no man can tame the tongue. *It is* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. **9** With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. **10** Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. **11** Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? **12** Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.”

In an English country churchyard stands a drab slate tombstone. The quaint stone bears an epitaph not easily seen unless you stoop over and look closely. The faint etchings read:

“Beneath this stone, a lump of clay,  
lies Arabella Young,  
who on the twenty-fourth of May  
began to hold her tongue.”

**These verses teach us that the tongue is a mighty force.** Look at the analogy James uses here to the horse in verse 3. The horse is an incredibly powerful animal. Take 550 pounds, set it on a horse’s back, and it will barely snort as it stands breathing easily under the burden. The same horse, unburdened, can sprint a quarter mile in about 25 seconds. A horse is a half-ton of raw power! Yet, place a bridle and bit in its mouth and a 100-pound woman on its back who knows what she is doing and the animal can literally be made to dance!

Then James speaks of the same impact of a rudder on a ship in verse 4. A true-life episode illustrates this well. In late May 1941, the “unsinkable” German battleship, the *Bismarck*, was sighted in the North Atlantic. Immediately aircraft and British Navy ships sped to the scene.

As the *Bismarck* sped toward the German-controlled French coast where it would be safe from attack, to the astonishment of all, the massive battleship suddenly began to turn in circles,

opening itself to attack from the British navy and air force. A torpedo had damaged the *Bismarck's* rudder and without its control the “unsinkable” *Bismarck* was sunk. As the rudder controls a ship, so the tongue controls a person.

**These verses also teach that the tongue is a world of evil.** Look now at the last half of verse 5 and all of verse 6 - “See how great a forest a little fire kindles! **6** And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.”

Words, which we often speak without thinking of their impact, can create much destruction. Unfortunately, the church is not exempt to her members tearing each other apart with their vicious words. **Gossiping** is among the most destructive tongue lashings. Gossip involves saying behind a person’s back what you would never say to his/her face. In a fallen world populated with fallen people, we delight to hear of the misfortune of other people. “They got what they deserved” may not be spoken aloud, but it is on the tip of the gossip’s lips. But gossip isn’t the full extent of it.

There’s out and out **lying**, as well. **Proverb 26:28** teaches, “A lying tongue hates those it hurts...” Lying is bending the truth, not including all the truth, and often it is pure **deception**. Telling the truth is the flip side to the coin picturing lying. God’s people are to be skilled in speaking the truth and doing so in love!

Gossip begins with one little lie or half-truth - a “spark” to use the fire illustration James uses. But, it becomes a conflagration when that same piece of information is spread widely (social media makes this too easy). Gossiping, lying, deception, blasphemy, slander, profanity, false vows are all spoken sins that smell like smoke and come from the very pit of hell.

The tongue has awesome potential for harm, as the forest fire analogy suggests.

It was October 8th, 1871. The night the “wicked” city to the north burned down. More than 1,500 people lost their lives as fiery tongues lapped at the waters of Lake Michigan. From late winter through the entire summer, almost no rain fell that year. The land was virtually bone dry. How odd considering Lake Michigan, a fresh-water ocean, stood to the east, and a long river snaked its way through town. It seemed as if water was everywhere, except where it counted.

On October 7th, a Saturday, a forgotten line from a newspaper editorial said, “Unless we have rain, only God knows how soon a conflagration may sweep this town.” But Saturday passed, and on Sunday...all hell broke loose. The mighty roar of the flames in the dead of night was terrible to hear. A heat so intense the very earth seemed to melt like butter. The bridges were ablaze, some people lifted their heads from watery cover to inhale pure fire.

You may not know the name of the city whose demise we’ve just recounted - Peshtigo, Wisconsin. You’ve probably not heard of the Great Peshtigo Fire because of a simultaneous tragedy. While 1,500 lost their lives in Peshtigo, publicity favored another fire that very same night where only 250 lives were lost. The other fire, in a city to the south, is known as the Great Chicago Fire.

**This passage also teaches the tongue is untamable.** Look at verses 7 and 8, “For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. *It is* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” On the surface these words seem to instruct there is no hope for overcoming a wicked piehole (mouth). James clearly says in verse 8, “no man can tame the tongue.” In a moment, we’ll see how we can mitigate that situation. For now, we are to realize that tongue control is a very serious need in our culture, to include the people of God who make up the Church. Though wild beasts can be trained and tamed, the human tongue is a far more difficult proposition. Our fallenness makes us susceptible to great sinfulness - we underestimate our propensity to harm others with the conversations we have.

**Finally, this passage of Scripture teaches the tongue is double-minded.** Turn again to verses 9-12: With it (the tongue) we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. **10** Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. **11** Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? **12** Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.”

These verses point out we can just as easily praise God, then insult His creation in the very next breath. We can be so skilled at speaking out of both sides of our mouths. If we’d only embrace the thought that it’s pretty difficult to put a foot in our mouth if you just keep it shut.

*Why is it that a Christian, who belongs to God and should speak the words of God, often speaks words that are destructive and harmful to other humans?* The explanation comes from the fact that we are still sinners even though we are saved. We still have an old nature, and the old nature is contrary to the things of God. It does not do what it ought to do, as Paul so vividly writes in the **7th chapter of Romans**. The solution is, that although with people tongue control is impossible, nevertheless, as Jesus said, “With God all things are possible.” (**Matthew 19:26**)

James Montgomery Boice offers three principles that should help us with the problem of the tongue.

**1 - Present your minds to God.** In **Romans 12:1-2**, the Apostle Paul speaks of mind control. “I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. **2** And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

It is only as we present our minds to God that we can be kept from thinking according to the world’s standards. *Have you surrendered your mind to God?* If you have then God will begin to use that to bring about the tongue discipline that you need.

**2 - Begin to obey Christ’s teachings.** Paul says in **2 Corinthians 10:5** that we have an obligation to bring every thought into obedience to Jesus Christ. “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take

captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (NIV) You are not Christ’s unless you are obeying Christ, and you are not obeying Christ if you do not pay attention to what Jesus taught. As we begin to search the Scriptures to see what God would have us do and then set about to obey it through the power of the Holy Spirit, God will begin to change our way of thinking. As we begin to think differently, we will begin to speak differently, and the matter of tongue control will become a reality.

**3 - Practice speaking helpfully.** We must control our tongues positively, so we say the things we ought to say. It requires practice. Maybe you could determine to say one good thing in praise of God to someone everyday. This is really easy to do on social media! You could memorize a Bible verse each week, so you can recite it to others. There are literally dozens of possibilities.

Those three principles again are:

- 1 - **Present your mind to God.** Don’t fill your mind with sleazy, mindless drivel.
- 2 - **Begin to obey Christ’s teachings.** To please God is to obey God. You must become a believer in Jesus Christ if you want to please Him Who can cast your soul into hell.
- 3 - **Practice speaking helpfully.** Basic good manners - yes, sir; yes ma’am, thank you all show respect to others, and they honor God.

So, James had taught us a few things about speech and words:

MP 1 - **The tongue is a mighty force.** Though it is very small, it can do big things, good and bad.

MP 2 - **The tongue is a world of sin.** Many sins are sins of speech, the tongue, and the lips - gossip and lying are two of them.

MP 3 - **The tongue is untamable.** We can’t do it ourselves. We must have accountability from each other, and God must change our hearts.

MP 4 - **The tongue is double-minded.** It can bless and praise, switching back and forth rapidly.

The opening hymn for today’s service was “Praise Him! Praise Him!” by Fanny Crosby. That hymn’s refrain teaches us to praise God and tell others of His excellent greatness. This can be the word spoken or sung!

Fanny is also the author of the concluding hymn today, her most popular song, “Blessed Assurance.” One day in 1873, Fanny was visiting a friend. During their visit the hostess played a tune on her piano, which she had recently written. She then asked Fanny, “What does this tune say?” After kneeling in prayer for a few moments, she rose and declared, “It says, ‘Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!’”

On Sunday, March 26th, 1905 (117 years ago yesterday!), churches observed Fanny Crosby Day in appreciation of the blind singer’s contributions to worship, and on that day multitudes of churches rang out with Crosby hymns. She was arguably the best-known Christian in America at that time, though she continued living in the slums to minister to the poverty-stricken and the down-and-outers of New York City even at the age of 85.

