

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI www.goodshepherdwi.org

“A Mind of Its Own”

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“When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 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. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:3-8).

A number of years ago, as Dr. Grosnick was working on my teeth, I asked him, “What are our tongues doing in there while you’re working on our teeth?” “Usually misbehaving themselves,” he said. “The tongue just wants to know what’s going on.” I asked the hygienist, and she said, “Tongues follow my instruments around the mouth, and some tongues, heavy and strong, even try to push the instruments out of the mouth.”

According to them, the tongue almost seems to have a life of its own. Also, in God’s Word. The apostle James noticed that “man has been able to tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, even creatures of the sea. But no man can tame the tongue.” James uses vivid and unforgettable imagery. “We put bits into the mouths of horses” he writes, “to control the whole animal. Ships too are steered by a very small rudder. Similarly, the tongue, though a small part of the body, makes great boasts and corrupts the whole person, steers the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life.”

If you can’t control your tongue, what else can’t you control? The answer of James is everything . . . “The whole person.” That is, the tongue gets body and soul into all kinds of trouble. But we are not just victims. Our tongues are the offending agents. Your tongue, James says, “is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

With the tongue, we manage to break every commandment in the book. With my 8th grade confirmation class, at some point we always do that exercise where I tell a secret to the first student, who then passes it on to the next and the next and so on, to see what we end up with at the end. After just four or five students, it’s pretty clear the original message has been mostly lost.

If that’s what happens when there’s no ill will, imagine what happens when there’s hostile intent. Imagine what happens to the truth when we *want* to knock a person down a few pegs. Better yet, don’t imagine anything . . . just remember. Remember the last time you chose to put a sharp edge on something you heard, before you passed it along to a friend or a spouse. Remember the last time you lied rather than spoke the truth. How you chose to malign another person’s reputation with your tongue. You chose not to defend him, not to speak well of her, not to put the best construction on everything, as God commanded. Rather, you took a shot. You squeezed the trigger, and your tongue fired off a lethal volley.

Have you ever considered what a shame that is, that we can take such a marvelous bit of creation, the tongue, and use it for such evil? The tongue really is an extraordinary bit of engineering. We admire birds for their beautiful songs, but human languages are beautiful too. Without the tongue we’d be reduced to grunts and groans. Food would be tasteless; eating would be a chore. Yet, we can take that good gift, along with every other good gift, and use it for wickedness. “The tongue is set on fire by hell” James says. The tongue belongs to us, but sometimes we allow the devil to take command of it.

In this text James is particularly concerned about false doctrine, so he’s directing his gaze on preachers who deliver a false gospel. Words matter. They have weight and power. They lead people into truth or heresy. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” He’s talking mostly about pastors here. They are judged with greater strictness because false preaching can destroy a person’s faith in Christ and that has grave consequences. To point to salvation coming from anywhere or anything else, other than the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, is to destroy true Christian faith. To give people the impression that the Christian faith is mostly about social justice, is to torch the Gospel of Jesus Christ. James would have us think about a once beautiful forest, now burned and charred black and destroyed. Heretical preaching leaves that kind of destruction in its wake.

So James singles out the preachers, but ultimately his words hold all of us accountable. Quicker than anything else, our tongues expose our true nature. We can present ourselves so well . . . for a time. We can greet others with a

sparkling smile and a warm handshake, and express interest in them. We can be so cheerful and attractive and polished that a stranger might even conclude, "Now here, at last, is a good person." But sooner or later, our tongues will expose the truth about us. Sooner or later, our tongues will break free of their restraints. Sooner or later, the viper within will hiss and strike and inject its deadly venom. Quick to criticize; slow to encourage, happy to backstab, too cowardly to defend. It's true: we can't help ourselves. At times, each of us has a tongue so sharp we could probably use it to uncork a bottle of wine. But don't be too proud. God holds us accountable for what we say, for the words we use. In Matthew 12, Jesus says, "I tell you that you will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word you have spoken." I wince every time I hear it. God help us.

God has helped us. He has sent his Son, in large part, to save us from our tongues. The Word became incarnate in Bethlehem who came into the world wordless. As a newborn infant, he starts with sounds, a stuttering grunt when he soiled the swaddling cloths, high squealing cries when He hungered for His mother's milk, faltering whimpers as He fought off closing His eyes in sleep. It would be many months before His own tongue would form His first words. I imagine Mary's face close to His own. Say "Abba." The Word became wordless, speechless. Yet when the tongue of Jesus began to learn words and speech, even as a boy His tongue remained pure for us . . . without cursing or slander or lies. 1 Peter 2, "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth" (v. 22). Every time He opened his mouth, He spoke truth. Often He preceded His words with, "Truly, truly I say to you . . ." Once He even said, "I am the Truth." A bold claim, don't you think? This isn't just another prophet. He is the source of truth. It's what got Him crucified, not feeding the hungry or healing the sick, but for the truths He spoke. We couldn't tolerate the truth He said about us. We couldn't tolerate the truth He said about Himself. So we silenced His tongue with untrue accusations, and an unfair trial and an unjust, inhumane execution. Through it all, He kept his tongue under control. He measured His words. He didn't even defend Himself. Isaiah 53: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (v.7). Why? Because it's what He came to do, to die for us and our forgiveness. To be silent in suffering for all the times we were loud with our slander and lies.

You recall, when He was hanging on the cross, there was a withering stream of curses and condemnations . . . going towards Him, not from Him. In reply, His tongue formed these words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34). And forgive, He does. His forgiveness goes straight to the problem.

In the Old Testament lesson, Isaiah was given a vision of the Lord in all His glory, sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. He is surrounded by seraphim, holy creatures, but even they dare not look at the Lord in all His glory. And so Isaiah cries out, "Woe is me!" which means "I'm finished. I'm done for. I'm as good as dead." Isaiah knows he's a sinner in the presence of Holy God. He could have mentioned anything, but as a prophet, Isaiah focuses on how he has sinned with words. "I am lost" he says, "for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (6:5).

Then one of the seraphim went to the altar, and with tongs retrieved a burning coal. In the temple, this is where the animals were sacrificed and burned, as a substitute for the death of the sinner. This coal may in fact be a charred portion of the whole burnt offering. With tongs, the seraph picks up the burning coal and touches Isaiah's lips. It is purifying fire from the Lord's altar. The seraph says, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." The seraph doesn't say I have taken away your guilt. No, it is from the altar of God. It's the unclean lips over which Isaiah was despairing. It is the unclean lips that are touched with the live coal. "With that" Luther says, "our sacraments are established." We have the visible means of grace: the coal. And we have the Word: "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." The coal is not plain wood but wood united with fire. Similarly, the bread and wine are not plain bread and wine, but bread and wine united with divinity.

See what good things the Lord has for our tongues. We sin against Him and others with our tongues. But with His tongue He says, "Take and drink, this is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Our lips and tongues are the first to be touched by His cleansing blood. He passes through the door of our lips and goes straight to the tongue washing it with his blood.

Where there is forgiveness, there is salvation. So then, after we die, as His redeemed people we will one day be resurrected. We'll have new tongues, but they won't be a restless evil full of deadly poison. We won't have to contend with slander or cursing or heresy from ourselves or others. The Lord our God will have prepared something for our tongues. Not hot, burning coal. And not His body and blood. No longer any need for that. He will serve us with the best of meats and the finest of wines. And with our new taste buds, we'll enjoy every morsel of the unending feast. Our tongues will know they are in paradise and will rejoice and sing and laugh and praise and give thanks . . . forever and ever. Amen.