

THE NATURE OF THE TONGUE

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 10th, SEPTEMBER 2023 14th, SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

TEXT: JAMES 3:1-12

“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. 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. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! 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. 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. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.”(NRSV)

Introduction

Welcome to today’s sermon which is developed from the Epistle of James. The subject as indicated above is *“the nature of the tongue.”* The writer of the book of Proverbs opines that *“Life and death is in the power of the tongue,”* (Pro. 18:21). When God changes us through the Holy Spirit, He grants us the saving faith that must inevitably reveal itself in a life of good deeds. But in today’s text, he moves from generalization of good deeds to the *specifics*-the words that come out of our mouths. A genuine believer should yield to Christ’s lordship over our tongues. The tongue is a small but a very powerful tool that is often used either constructively or destructively. It contains the power for life or death depending on how it’s used as echoed by the author of the book of Proverbs. David understood this principle and thus prayed for God’s wisdom on the best way to use this instrument, *“Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips,”* (Ps. 141:3). Despite the fact that the small instrument that can become a monster may never be totally tamed, we can ask God to guide us as we get engaged in the ongoing battle to tame this terrible tool.

None of us is innocent!

Our conversion doesn’t result to a total change of the mouth. The tongue reveals some elements of the old nature or what is referred to as the flesh in the Bible that constantly wars against the Spirit (Gal. 5:17). In other words, the tongue is one of the major spiritual battlegrounds. James knows that to win this battle we must begin by recognizing the magnitude of our problem. The nature of human beings including you and me is to justify ourselves by pointing to others who we think are notoriously bad. We consider ourselves better than the other people. Therefore, the war is from within and not without. Similarly, the enemy is within and not without. Locating the enemy to know their strength is the first step in any battle. Therefore, to become godly people, we must wage war on this front by confronting our sinful nature head on daily. We should open our eyes and face our own sins-the sins of our tongue. James doesn’t give us any advice on how to control the tongue but just displays the portrait of a monumental problem.

Our monumental problem

Knowing the following four truths will help us to endeavor to tame our tongues always:

1. *We must recognize that we will be held accountable for what we say (3:1-2)*

Admittedly, the local churches to which James wrote must have had too many self-proclaimed teachers. In other words, many individuals desired to be recognized as teachers or rabbis who were highly respected among the Jews and thus the office was coveted by many people. It was

quite in order to respect the rabbis because they taught the sacred scriptures but out of order to accord men the honor that God alone deserves. Jesus confronted the Jewish leaders on this account. *“They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues.... respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men”* (Matt. 23:6, 7).

You would agree with me that there’s some prestige in becoming a teacher for presumably, you know more than those that you teach, which means that in some way they must respect you. If anyone becomes a Bible teacher for this wrong intent, then s/he will fall into the temptation of becoming proud. One of the best ways to tame the tongue is to recognize that we will be held accountable for our speech. Jesus said, *“But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the Day of Judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”* (Matt. 12:36, 37). Jesus was teaching that our works/words reveal whether our faith is genuine faith or not. What we say either validate that we are true believers or reveal that we do not know God. We shall be held accountable for what comes out of our mouth.

2. We must recognize that the tongue has power for good or for evil (3:3-5a)

James demonstrates two analogies here to make the point that the tongue is small, but mighty: the *bit* and the *rudder*. A bit is a relatively small instrument, but when you put it into a horse’s mouth, you can control the entire horse. Without the bit, some horses might become violent and cause extensive damage. The same thing is true of a ship’s rudder. It is relatively very small compared to the size of the ship, but with his hand on the wheel, the captain can steer the mammoth ship, even in a strong wind. If it fails, it’ll be very difficult to steer the ship. In the same way the tongue, a small part controls the whole body. We shouldn’t set loose our tongues because the damage it can cause may be enormous. More so, it’ll be very difficult to tame it. As asserted by James, it has the power for good or for evil. Controlling our tongues pleases God who will bless us. Misusing it will attract God’s punishment.

3. We must recognize that it is a source of terrible evil (3:5b-8)

James uses two more word pictures for comparison and contrast: a forest fire and tamed animals. A small spark can burn an extensive forest within a very short time. In verse 6, James directly says that the tongue is a fire which defiles the entire body. In other words, the tongue is a deadly powerful source of evil that taints every part of our being. Careless use of the tongue can damage your entire life, marriage/family, job and so on through gossip, slander, deceit, half-truths, sarcasm, etc. We should ask God to help us to confront these sins in our lives and with much care confront them in others.

4. We must recognize that its inconsistencies are rooted in its source (3:9-12)

Finally, James points out gross inconsistencies that he had observed. Christians say, *“Praise the Lord”* in one side of their mouth, and in the other they say evil things, they curse, slander etc. Then he points out that what happens in the nature. The same spring does not send out fresh water one minute and bitter water the next. Neither can a fig tree produce olives, or a vine produce figs. Nor can salty water produce fresh water.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the heart is the source of what comes out of the mouth. Thus, we should allow God to reside in our hearts through the Holy Spirit and strive to become consistent in our lives to avoid creating the confusing impression. Is your tongue like fire which destroys a vast forest? Ask God for grace to tame it today! Have a blessed Sunday and week ahead.

PRAYER POINTS

1. That God enables us to tame our terrible tongues
2. That we allow God to reside in our hearts

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