

We are going to continue reading from the letter of James today. Some scholars think that the letter was either written entirely by James, or by James and someone within his community.

James is traditionally identified as being the brother of Jesus, who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

While this letter has been accepted as Scripture and has obviously remained in the canon, during the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther questioned its status because it appeared to contradict Paul's teaching on justification by faith, which Luther held to be of central importance.¹

Hear now the Word of the Lord from James 3:1-12.

So, to prepare for the message this week, I did some research...on Twitter and Facebook. I know...it can be a dangerous thing wandering around on social media, and I would not recommend that you do your own research there, but there I was wandering around.

I wanted to read what people were saying this week and people were saying A LOT.

There were rants from politicians and leaders, posts about the cares of life and the world, accusations being flung left and right, agreements, disagreements, friends and un-friends... I have to say that it didn't take long to find the negative.

Sadly, I had to search a little harder for the positive.

Social media has indeed become the "tongue of the people" and while the positive use of the tongue was evident, the negative nature and use of the tongue was profound.

¹ Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV.

In fact, one tweet I came across said that “Twitter is the result of a vast Calvinistic conspiracy to prove total depravity.”² Well, he might be right!

So, James has strong words to say to the people of God regarding the use of their tongues. He calls out teachers, believers, you and me, declaring that we, out of the same mouth, praise God and curse human beings who have been made in the image of God.

James gets it though. He knows we are going to speak...all the time...and he declares that “we all stumble in many ways”. But he still calls all of us out and cautions us to consider the impact of the utterances of our tongues.

We live in a world of fake news, alternative facts, he said/she said and bold-faced lies, but we also live in a world where there is truth. And the truth is that those who are in Christ are called by Christ to live a different way.

In the first scripture reading, we heard that Jesus, when sitting around with his disciples, asked them, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, saying, “You are the Messiah.”

This truth about Jesus was revealed, and Jesus began to tell his disciples what he must endure, but Peter, after hearing this truth, pulled Jesus to the side and rebuked him about all the things Jesus declared would happen *because* He was the Messiah.

That’s fake news, Jesus! You aren’t going to die. Not on my watch.

But then, as we heard earlier, Jesus rebuked Peter--telling all those present what it meant to be the Messiah, and what it *means* to be a disciple of this Messiah.

² @Matthew Kaemingk

You see, God, through Word and Spirit has called us to live differently. Jesus said we must deny ourselves, take up a cross and follow him; lose our lives for the sake of Christ and for the gospel, and not be ashamed to stand up and live a different way in this sinful generation.

James echos Jesus' call for followers of Christ to live differently. He gets right down to practicality in his letter. In the verses we read today, he paints an overall picture of sinfulness by using one of the smallest parts of our bodies--the tongue.

He talks about the use of our tongues and uses vivid imagery to describe our tongues:

- He compares it to the bit that is put into a horses mouth to make the horse obey;
- A ship's rudder used by a pilot/captain to make the ship go where the captain desires;
- These small things control much larger things. Likewise, the tongue, is also such a small thing, but James says it "makes great boasts";
- The tongue is likened to a tiny spark that sets a fire that destroys a great forest;
- In fact, James says our tongues are fire, that can corrupt the whole body and set the course of one's life on fire;
- The tongue, according to James, "is a restless evil, full of deadly poison". Who can tame it?

At this point, you might be thinking, "*Why even speak?*" What hope is there in anything we say if all we say brings evil and destruction? How can the tongue, such a small thing, cause such a fuss? Is there any hope?

I might-as-well sit down and let's all of us take a vow of silence.

However, James offers a caveat of hope when he declares, "it should not be this way!" It doesn't have to be this way! We have a great hope in Jesus Christ who cleanses us from sin and renews righteousness within us!

James instructs us to get hold of our tongues, get hold of what we say, lest our words bring ruin. Sometimes, we need to stay silent and let silence speak wisdom's truth and love's grace. Sometimes we need to speak in ways that tear down evil while offering up grace.

Let wisdom and maturity discern between those times.

Now, let us wonder for a moment--What have we been saying? Let's go a step further even--are the words of our mouths AND the meditation of our hearts acceptable to God?

Jesus said that "out of the abundance of the heart, a person speaks" (Matt. 12:34). We must examine our lives and see if we truly speak words that are holy, truthful and faithful to the gospel we proclaim.

Some of us might have to change our entire vocabulary. Some of us might need a heart transplant.

Listen, this is not legalism or a way to beat ourselves up because we fall short. This is a way of living that reflects the love and light of our Lord Jesus Christ!

You see, we are children of the light--let us speak as children of the light speak. We are children of the Most High God, image bearers, but some of us act like image *barriers* because we won't practice what we profess.

What do I mean?

Well, if we profess wisdom, then our words should be wise. If we profess love, then our words should be loving and kind. If we profess the fruit of the Holy Spirit, then our words ought to sound as if we are truly filled!

What have we been saying? What *are* we saying?

Are we talking about God, appearing as pious as you please, only to be taking God's name in vain? With our tongues, do we praise God and deny God's call against injustice?

With our words, do we sing praises to God's name and refuse to say hello to our neighbors? Do we speak the truth of God's word and fail to speak truth to power?

Do we cry out loud about our religious rights and stay silent about the rights of unborn babies and the women who carry them, and bash and degrade women who choose another way?

What are we saying?

Do we cling to our guns and our religion and sing, "*my country tis of thee, sweet land of liberty*", but only for those who look like me? James' indictment is, "yes, we do!" What foolish pride lies on the tips of our tongues!

James' words are strong. He has a strong word for the people of God. They were people of God then. We are people of God today. We are a prophetic people who can work with God to bring God's kingdom to bear in this world.

Now, can we imagine how our lives would change if we humbled ourselves before the Lord and confess, "Forgive me Lord, for I am a sinner"?

Imagine if we walk as true disciples of Jesus, who consider others before ourselves, who practice suffering love, deep compassion, and healing forgiveness.

Imagine if we lived cruciform lives--lives shaped by Jesus, who suffered though he did no wrong; was rejected because he spoke God's truth, died for you and me and was resurrected so that we might share in eternal life!

Jesus saved us and called us to be His faithful disciples who love a broken world and work together, with Christ, to make the world a better place.

Let us be ever mindful of the teachings of James.

I think we can all pray like the psalmist who prayed, “LORD, set a guard over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Ps. 141:3).

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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