15-21 September 2024 What comes out when you are squeezed?

James 3:1-12

### Taming the Tongue

**3**Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. **2**We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

**3**When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. **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. **5**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. **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, and is itself set on fire by hell.

**7**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.

**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. **10**Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.**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.

**Bible notes**

James makes a powerful argument on the power and potential consequences of what we say. This passage addresses the importance of controlling our tongues. In a technological age, we might want to include the many instruments of communication we use that would have a similar impact. James cautions aspiring teachers that they have a greater responsibility to bear. Teachers influence and guide others. They may, however, point people in the wrong direction or misuse their power. Teaching should not be undertaken lightly but with self-awareness, humility, and integrity.

James seems resigned to the fact that controlling the tongue is a universal human struggle. Mastering the tongue is a sign of overall self-control. And just as a small rudder guides a massive ship, our words, though seemingly insignificant, have the power to direct the course of our lives and impact those around us.

The tongue is compared to a fire that, though small, can cause immense destruction (vv.5-6). James points out that our words can potentially create chaos and harm. Harmful speech can spread like wildfire, damaging relationships and reputations. The paradox is that humans have been able to tame many aspects of nature but struggle to control their own tongues. James emphasises the difficulty of consistently using speech in a positive and constructive manner. We may use our words to praise God and then turn around to speak negatively about fellow human beings who are created in God’s image. Unsurprisingly, a freshwater spring cannot produce salt water, or vice versa (v.12). Therefore, despite being in difficult situations and pressed on every side, our hearts should manifest consistent, positive speech that aligns with God’s Word.

**Reflection**

Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.

How long does it take to change a habit? If you decided to no longer wear a wristwatch, how long do you think it would be before you stopped looking at your wrist for the time? Days? Weeks? Sometimes we lapse into well-worn habits when we are tired or distracted. It is the same with speech – we respond automatically when we hurt or when we are under pressure of any kind. Going back to the example of the wristwatch – would you have a plan to find out the time in this new situation, e.g. by using your mobile phone, or by looking at someone else’s watch? You might decide that time is not an issue and is a human construct! Similarly, we can prepare now in order to control our speech in the future: we might resolve to listen more attentively, to pause before we speak or to make a different choice of words. This will prepare us to act and speak in a Christ-like way, even in times of stress.

Questions for reflection

*You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss issues arising from this week’s Bible passage.*

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**Questions**

* How do you react under pressure?
* How can you control what you say so it doesn’t cause hurt to others?
* What words can you use to bless others this week?

## Prayer

God of mercy, we thank you for rescuing us and saving us.  
When others desert us and all seems lost,   
thank you that you steadfastly walk alongside us.   
As we sink into the abyss,   
thank you that you hear our cries for help   
and pull us out of the pit.   
Help us not to forget you and to praise your name,   
so others too may know your power to heal   
and give us a fresh start.   
**Amen.**

**A prayer to end the Bible study**

Come, Holy Spirit,  
dwell in us and help us to praise you.  
Give us words of encouragement  
to support those who struggle.  
Train our hearts to be generous and kind.  
In Jesus’ name we pray.   
**Amen.**