

The Mouth as a Mirror

James:1-13

Wow – James doesn't pull any punches, does he? Last week, we took a closer look at his insistence in the last verse of chapter 1 that true religion involves helping the truly helpless, even if that involves real sacrifice on our part. And he made it clear that doing such good works isn't optional, that there's no way we can truly say we have faith in Christ if we don't demonstrate it in the way we love one another.

But at the end of chapter 1, James says that there's another part of true religion – keeping ourselves unspotted, or unstained from the world. And it turns out that's no easier for us to do than it is for us truly to love our needy neighbors.

Oh, I know. When we think of keeping ourselves unstained from the world, it's easy for us to lower the bar. It's easy to imagine that all we need to do is to maintain our social respectability, to keep our jobs and our families intact, to avoid the scandalous sorts of sins that we so love to criticize in others.

But James will have none of this. Instead, he condemns the type of criticism that we all too easily dish out. For the sad truth is that we can sin just as much by what we say as by what we do.

Now, before we go any farther, we need to remember that James doesn't excuse himself from having to meet such high standards. In fact, in verse 1, James applies the need for correct, loving, helpful speech especially to himself. He says that teachers just like him – just like me – will be held to a stricter judgment.

And why is that? Well, just think of the scorn and scandal heaped upon the church when its leaders are found to be unfaithful. It isn't just God who judges the teachers of the church more severely. When Jimmy Swaggart or Jim Bakker fall into sexual sin, everything they have said about God and His grace becomes tainted. Whenever a Christian leader is revealed to live selfishly or in a way that hurts others, in a way that contradicts what he preaches, the world says, "See, there's nothing to this Christianity after all."

But who among us teachers or preachers can consistently live up to such a standard of purity? Perhaps that's why James goes on to verse 2, where he admits that we are all offend, we are all guilty of impure, unloving speech. But in the same verse, James says that pure speech is something toward which we should all strive. Notice that James calls a man of pure speech "perfect," which means, "mature, complete, whole."

Okay, so what does it mean to be perfect, or mature in our speech? Well, the first component seems to be simply understanding what tremendous damage we can do to others with our words. Just as a small bridle can turn a huge horse, just as a small helm or rudder can turn a huge ship, so a few words can make a big difference. Just as a forest fire can be caused by a single spark, so a few words can have a huge impact.

In 1896, William Jennings Bryan gave a powerful speech at the Democratic National Convention, which swept him into nomination for the Presidency and wed his party to the big-government, progressive message it still proclaims: "We will answer their demands for a gold standard by saying to them: 'You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.'" More recently, think about what giving the Keynote address at the 2004 Democratic

National Convention did for a state senator and first-time candidate for US Senate from Illinois. Just four years later, he would go on to become President.

But we Southerners don't have to look to historical figures for examples of the power of words, do we? Oh, we are experts at being nice, and we practice the art of smoothing over conflict, sometimes by telling half-truths, and sometimes by saying things we don't really believe at all. But does our politeness ever degenerate into hypocrisy, or worse yet into being two-faced?

And living in a small town the way we do, we know everybody, and pretty much what everybody does. We feel like we belong to one another, which is good. But do we ever say hurtful things about the people we know so well? Do we ever justify our harsh words by saying, "Well, it's true. Everybody knows it?" It may be true, but is it loving? Does our speech consistently build others up or do our words sometimes tear them down?

And our words can cause problems even without our intending it. For how many of us Christians have engaged in gossip by sharing prayer concerns? Now, this is not to say we shouldn't pray for one another. That's one of the greatest blessings in the Christian life. But it is to say that we should only mention prayer concerns when we know the person would want to be prayed for, and when we know it will not embarrass the person. So let's be honest: in our concern for others, do we ever violate confidences? Do our words cause more damage than they seek to correct?

No, we know the truth of what James says about the tongue in verse 6. And notice how the richness, the vibrancy of his own language in this very verse proves his point: the tongue is a fire: its influence spreads far beyond our reach. It is a world of iniquity: every sin that can be imagined can be articulated. And sometimes when we talk about sinful things, we actually increase the temptation for others to do those same things. Speaking of sin can spread it like contagion.

So, why is the tongue so important? True, it's just part of the body, but James is looking at the end result of the words it speaks. Just as he illuminated our spiritual condition in chapter 2 by looking at the works it produces, just so he illustrates our spiritual condition here by the words it produces. The sinful thoughts behind the tongue are what make the tongue so deadly. And as the mind guides the actions of the body, so its sinful thoughts pollute the whole body. So when our tongues express callous, malicious, selfish, spiteful thoughts, they are inspired not by God but by hell.

Jesus said the same thing in our responsive reading this morning, didn't He? He said that our mouths speak from the abundance of the heart, out of the deepest recesses of our souls. Our mouth is thus a mirror reflecting who we really are—sooner or later what we say will reveal the truth about us.

That's why, even though we can't really know what's going on inside anyone else's heart, we can get a pretty good idea of what's driving them by listening to them and looking at what they do. Jesus said just as we can know a tree by its fruit, we can know what's really going on inside someone's heart by what they say and do.

But Jesus goes farther, doesn't He? After all, the fruit that comes from a tree doesn't just tell us about the condition the tree is in—it also tells us what kind of tree it came from. Grapes, Jesus says, don't come from briars, and figs aren't produced by thorns. In the same way, He says, a good man brings forth good words and good deeds from his heart, just as an evil man naturally produces evil words and deeds.

James agrees, saying that it would be nonsensical to expect figs from a grapevine or olives from a fig tree. And then he uses another analogy – a spring or fountain of water has the same sort of inherent characteristics.

Where I grew up in South Georgia, if you dug a well down far enough to get drinkable water, it would often taste like sulfur. Even the city water, which had been treated, would have the faint aroma of rotten eggs when you ran the water hot enough to steam. Around here, I'm told that manganese is the primary mineral in our groundwater – they say that's what makes the water brown. The point is that you can determine the source of the water by looking at what's in it.

You can judge a tree by its fruit. You can judge a spring by its water. So, doesn't it make sense that we can tell what's really going on inside someone by what they say and do? And if that's true, shouldn't we take seriously what people say?

Now, none of this should be a license for pride. We should not look down on others who use bad language. After all, in verse 2 James reminds us that we all offend, we all stumble in many ways. In the same way, Jesus says we have no business worrying about the speck in our brother's eye while we have a log in our own. And so maybe instead of using other people's words to help us figure out what's going on inside them, we need to start by using our own words and deeds as a mirror to help us see into our own hearts.

I used to have a terrible time with language. Now, this is no excuse, but when guys like me aren't big enough to take it out on others with our fists, we tend to use our mouths. I loved high school debate at least in part because it let me show off how clever I was. And I used vulgarity and profanity to make myself appear more manly, more mature. Looking back, I can see it had exactly the opposite effect.

And I still lose my verbal sanctification at times. But when I lose my temper when the printer doesn't do what want it to do, what do my words reveal about my expectations? When I become outraged at other drivers in Jackson, what do my words say about what's inside of me? Perhaps some reasonable fear of being the victim of an accident. But also perhaps some of that old debater's pride – perhaps I think I'm a better driver than that. Certainly a high self-regard – I think I deserve to have everything in my life go smoothly. One outburst can reveal lots of reasons for repentance, can't it?

So, what might abusive or bullying language reveal? What about a belittling bit of gossip? What about the sorts of seemingly casual slights we Southerners are so good at delivering? No matter how polite we might be on the surface, do our words betray motives and feelings that are less than pure, or as James says in verse 2, less than perfect?

So, what can we do about all this? After all, in verse 8 James says that no one can tame the tongue. No amount of personal self-discipline will do the trick, because the real problem, as we have already seen, lies not in our mouths but in our hearts. It's the pride, the self-regard, the bitterness, the envy, the guilt that lies down deep inside that must be dealt with before our words can reflect a new reality. The spring must be purified if it is to produce clear, pure water.

In the last verse of today's passage, James says that our good conversation, our good behavior, our good works will flow out of the meekness, the gentleness, the humility of wisdom. So, maybe the key to cleaning up our mouths isn't just firmer resolve or greater self-discipline. For if it's our hearts that are really the problem, then we need God to clean us up inside first. So if we humble ourselves before God,

confessing the sin that our words so often reveal, we should have an easier time showing a proper humility in the words we use with others. If we surrender our lives more completely to God, what comes out of our mouths will reflect a heart that is purer, that is more loving, that is more like Christ.