

Christ Forest Hills Sermon Christian Education Sunday- Oh be Careful “Little” Tongue James 3:1-12

Did anyone ever sing in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School, “Oh, be careful little tongue what you say!.... For the Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful little tongue what you say.”

I still sing it but it still does not work in my mouth if I say something wrong. It’s just the right thought when the folks at the nursing home are not getting along. 😊

How have you done? How right is your tongue before the Father up above?

Personally, my tongue has gotten me into trouble, and in one case the person calling me out had the most horrible tongue, especially in lies and gossiping!

I had friend in California who was a new “born again” Christian, and as we hung out, he said he had a major problem with his tongue cussing, but he is working on it, and, I’m sure he is happy that as a Christian he curbed his tongue with the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

In NY, I was told of some farming brothers who regularly cursed and swore and offended some ears with their mouth. What amused some members I knew at church was that they would be with the farmers and the farmers would be cussing very fluently on the one hand, while on the other hand they would speak of their born again faith and love for Jesus.

The book of James seems straight forward for a Christian, but I also read that it has “strong vestiges of the Hebrew Wisdom tradition.”

Because of this sort of practical approachability James has long been a field ripe for memory verses and nice practical sermons. James’s statements about the tongue have been a particular source of guidance for many of us. In my days in Lutheran School and Confirmation and youth groups and the like, it was brought out regularly to make clear to us younglings why cussing was inexcusable for Christians.

But when looking at James more closely, there is something far more serious at work in these sayings about the dangers of the tongue. Notice the strength of James’s language: **the tongue sets forests on fire, corrupts the body, indeed it even “sets the cycle of nature on fire.”** What is striking about the strong language James uses about the tongue is that it refers to the power of words to **consume** and **destroy**—most centrally to **disrupt** and **destroy** the world around us.

Given that the statements James makes about the tongue occur precisely in the context of a warning against becoming teachers (v. 1), what might we make of all this? /

It seems that James is not simply talking about the danger of cursing or speaking wrongly, but specifically about the dangers that attend those who speak with authority, who have power

over others, just as the pilot is able to turn the whole ship and all those on it at will, simply by moving the rudder (v. 4). A little thing can seek to control others in a big authoritative way.

What I want to suggest here is that James's exhortation about the nature of the tongue is not simply a reproof about the deceitfulness of our own tongue-speech, but about how that deceitfulness manifests itself in positions of **power**. What lies at the heart of the problem James speaks of is duplicity, doubleness. This is, as we are all too aware, it is something that distinctly attends those in positions of power and authority.

Blessing **and** cursing seem to always come from the mouths of our leaders whether in the church or the world.

What James underscores is the radically powerful nature of that kind of speech in the world. Today, more than ever, we are aware of the power of words, and specifically of lies, that will destroy and lay waste. What James draws our attention to is the radical power of ideology in our world. The way that language becomes a weapon with a will of its own, an instrument **that is set on fire by hell, indeed**.

James's conclusion is rather simple: "Brothers and sisters, **this ought not to be so**" (v. 10).

If I may venture one more suggestion here, I would **advise us** to take the statement that "this ought not to be so" not merely as a wistful statement of the "Why can't we all just get along?" variety. Rather, here James is echoing Jesus's own statements about the nature of power (whether it be you and I or the President of the US:

*(Matt 20:25-28)* "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. *(Matt 20:25-28)*

As James is quick to remind us, "**we all make many mistakes.**" We are called to refuse the form of power that is practiced in the ideologies that set nature on fire all around us.

The deceitful words of those in power, the words of blessing and cursing from the same mouth, these are the words we are called to reject.

This is why Christians should always be the most reluctant to speak with authority, the slowest to claim that their words should be obeyed. The words that set the world on fire all too often come from our own lips.

As we seek to follow after the Messiah who told us that "it will not be so among you" we do well to listen to James as we strive to be "wells that produce fresh water and fresh water alone."

Some cussing and cursing people seem to do it as a habit, as part of their culture, mimicking their family environment or their friends and buddies speech. It's in songs and raps and conversation. Every sentence or two they just seem to say what we learned were bad words. It takes them awhile to figure out what is different about **you**. You do not have to be highly educated to speak well.-

My friends family church and even public high school did a great job of teaching me about good and bad words, and the bad words were not acceptable. When I worked in the summer at Eastman Kodak during college years, I heard a new and very different vocabulary as they spoke openly about some raw topics. It took awhile to comprehend what this was. I didn't adapt is **my** normal speech, but it was surely an education for this naïve farm boy. We cannot control what other people say, unless someone is under our control. If they know what their "little" mouth does to themselves and to others, **they might follow** who controls their heart and soul, and the advice they find there.

We all mess up many times, but our Lord forgives our repentant sins and gives us strength to pursue righteousness....pursue God's way.

When we are in authority, we watch our mouth carefully **as a disciple of Jesus**. When we want to be an authority, even at home, we ought to be careful what we say and how we say it. /

God loves you and is happy to guide you. As we practice HIS ways on this earth, may he give us the power to do just that....learn and do what He has brought to us in His Word.

Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding, keep our heart and mind in the true faith unto eternal life. Amen.