

Sermon 21 November 2021 'The Tongue.'

James 3.2-12

In this passage James warns us of the dangers of the tongue, what a potent weapon it can be. He begins by making the point that we all make mistakes. This certainly lies at the heart of our Christian theology – sin is part of our DNA. John puts it so very well: *'If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth.'* 1 John 1:8. The writer of Ecclesiastes, thought to be Solomon, puts it in a similar vein: *'There is not a single person in all the earth who is always good and never sins.'* Ecclesiastes 7:20. The concept of innate sin goes right back to the story of Adam and Eve giving into temptation and eating the forbidden apple in the Garden of Eden. So we regard the propensity to sin as being part of being human.

James goes on to say that the tongue is quite a small part of our anatomy but it has the potential to make a significant impact. *'So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.'* He compares the tongue to the bit in a horse's mouth. The bit is attached to reins which are in the hands of the rider. The rider controls the horse through the reins. By pulling back on the reins, the horse will stop. By pulling on the right rein, the horse will turn to the right, and so on. When a horse is well-trained, it takes just the slightest pressure one way or the other to make that horse change direction.

James also uses the illustration of a large forest fire, which can begin with just a spark and the outcome is disastrous. *'A tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is full of wickedness that can ruin your whole life. It can turn the entire course of your life into a blazing flame of destruction.'*

The picture of the forest fire is quite common in the Bible. *'As a fire roars through a forest and as a flame sets mountaintops ablaze.'* Psalm 83:14. *'This wickedness is like a brushfire. It burns not only briars and thorns but forests too.'* Isaiah 9:18. The picture was one the Jews of Palestine knew very well. In the summer the grass and low-growing thorn bushes and scrub were as dry as tinder. They easily caught fire and then spread quickly.

So James mirrors Jesus in using imagery that the average Jew can relate to. The thing about a fire is that once the damage is done, it is almost impossible to resurrect. Once a building, or even a life, is destroyed, it is destroyed and that is final. The same applies to hurtful words that are spoken. I am sure you have heard the story about the wise man who was teaching someone about the ramifications of hurtful words. He gave the person some feathers and told him to scatter them. When the person returned, he then told him to go and collect them. The person naturally replied that it would be impossible because the wind would have blown them away. *'Precisely,'* replied the wise man, *'and it is exactly the same with hurtful words. You can't retrieve them.'*

We have focused on the negative aspect of the tongue and that is very much the focus for James in this passage. However, there is, of course, a positive side and James does briefly allude to this. *'With it we bless the Lord and the Father. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.'*

Praise is very much the positive side to the tongue. By and large, I don't think we do praise very well. We do find it easier to criticise than to praise; it is very much a human failing. There are reasons for this which I won't go into now, but the giving of compliments and praise is one of the most effective ways of spreading the love. We all like to be praised, it makes us feel good about ourselves and about life. So surely it behoves us to praise others. If we are to put into practice the words of Jesus, *'I command you to love one another,'* (John 15:17), then we could do worse than make a conscious effort to compliment and praise.

There is the story of the wealthy woman who called her cook in and said, 'Tonight, the man I love is coming to dinner. I would like you to serve the most pleasant dish you can create.' That night the cook served up many delicious appetizers and then announced, 'Tonight's main course is tongue of pig.' 'Tongue of pig,' the woman exclaimed, 'I told you to serve the most pleasant dish you could think of.'

The cook nodded. 'When two people love each other, their tongues are capable of expressing that love in a beautiful way. So shouldn't tongue be the most pleasant dish in the world?' The woman smiled. 'That is true. You are not only an excellent cook, but a very wise man also.' The cook bowed and left the woman and her guest to enjoy the delicious meal. Later, however, they had a terrible argument and parted not on good terms.

The next morning the woman said to the cook, 'My guest will be here again this evening but I want you to serve the most unpleasant dish you can create.' That night, when the couple sat down to dinner, the cook announced, 'Tonight's main course is tongue of pig.' 'What!' exclaimed the woman, 'Yesterday I told you to serve the most pleasant dish you could and you served tongue of pig. Today I asked you to serve the most unpleasant dish and again you serve tongue of pig.'

The cook bowed respectfully, 'When two people argue and fight, their tongues are capable of saying the most hurtful things. So the tongue can also be the most unpleasant thing.'

He was, indeed, in the words of the woman herself, a very wise man.