

Sermon: Taming the Tongue

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles Ottawa, Sep.15, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I still remember that moment when I let loose a few F-bombs, rolling off the tip of my tongue, in a most inappropriate manner. Daisy and I were living in Toronto back then, in our early thirties, and serving as youth counsellors in a church. We made it as part of our regular duties, to pick up and drop off a number of youth, to and from the church for fellowship. So on that particular Friday, a young girl by the name of Alice was in our back seat. She was maybe 14 or 15-year-old, I don't quite remember. Anyway she was young, and also a family friend (that is her parents knew my parents).

The traffic was bad, as rush-hour traffic in Toronto is notoriously known to be. Temperature was hot, and we were late and stuck in a slow moving jam. A car suddenly cut into my lane in front, in a most aggressive and dangerous manner, and I just couldn't hold back and let loose a string of profanity laden verbal rage.

Bare in mind back then, I was working as a commodity floor trader in both the Toronto Future Exchange and the Bourse de Montreal. It is no excuse, but profanity was no stranger to me, where traders with wicked tongues were my daily companions. And sadly to say, I was no exception.

So after I let loose those F-bombs in the car that day, Alice was in shock (understandably), Daisy was frantically trying to signal me, reminding me of our backseat passenger, to put a stop to this conduct unbecoming. But it was too late. By the time I realized what I had done, there was no taking it back, and all I could offer was a lame response of 'opps'.

"No one can tame the tongue", declared James in chapter 3 verse 8. It is a *"restless evil, full of deadly poison. [For] with it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse people. From the same mouth comes a blessing and a curse."* I can almost imagine James, with his arms extended, pleading with us, *"My brothers and sisters, this ought not be so."*

Preaching from the book of James poses, from a Reformed tradition, an inherent problem. I've briefly touched on this two weeks ago, that is Martin Luther had famously dismissed this particular book in the Bible as

the ‘epistle of straw’. Of course Luther had his own theological reasons of doing so—reasons that are by and large dated and no longer hold true. But that dismissive attitude has survived and morphed into another form of ‘don’t tell me what to do’.

The book of James, as the only Wisdom literature in the New Testament, is heavy on what some people would call ‘moralizing’. Most of what James teaches are very practical, sensible but the tone of his teaching is blunt, no-holds-bar. A dismissive attitude with regard to this passage of ‘taming the tongue’ would argue since the tongue cannot be tamed, then why bother to even try.

Profanity is very much parts and parcels of our daily lives. We see that in television, in movies, online, in the twittersphere, in schools, and at home. Not just profanity, obscenity and absurdity fill our political discourses—just listen to that former president of the United States who is running again for the top job. What was that he said the other day...immigrants are eating cats and dogs, in Springfield Ohio? Are we sure that is not just another silly episode of The Simpson? So what’s a little road-rage F-bomb’s worth; what damage could it really do?

Such dismissive attitude seeks to justify one’s own action, one’s own tongue, but really at the expense of what we as followers of Christ are called to be—that is be ambassador of the Gospel and a shining example of faith.

An alternative attitude to this passage is to approach it with a superficial acceptance and with a superficial solution—if a tongue cannot be tamed, then perhaps one should simply hold it.

Let me just say that holding one’s tongue, depending on circumstances, could actually be wise. Publius, a teacher in Ancient Greece, famously said, “I have often regretted my speech, but not my silence” There is some wisdom in that. I can definitely relate to that, for as a preacher and a teacher in the words of God, I have definitely regretted some sermons preached, but never those not preached.

However, is silence really the answer to the problem? What exactly is the problem? Well, I will say the problem isn’t what comes out of our mouth, but what is actually inside of us.

According to James, in chapter 3 verse 2, “*anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is mature, and able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle*”—that is the tongue. It is a hypothetical scenario that I don’t think James truly believes in, for the tongue is inherently uncontrollable. As

a matter of fact, it is the tongue that seemingly controls what the body does.

James then offers up three metaphors all sharing the same characteristic: horses guided by bits put into their mouth (v.3); a large ship steered by a small rudder (v.4); or great forest set ablaze by a small fire (v.5) The point James is making is that the tongue, even though small, has the capacity to cause great harm to self and to others. Tongue is a fire that stains the whole body, that set life on fire, and sets itself on fire, with fire from hell. No one can control it, for it is a deadly poison, a restless evil from within.

Yet, the tongue has the capacity, and is the bodily instrument that can utter praise, that gives glory to God. What can we make of this double-mindedness of the tongue, or shall we call it double-tonguedness? James calls it evil.

Mark Douglas, writing in *Feasting on the Word*, reflecting theologically on James 3:1-12, has this to add. "For James, evil is not defined by consistently foul action but by its capricious movement between the fair and the foul". I think what Douglas is trying to say is that when such movement is unrecognized and unaccountable, trouble ensues.

Human beings are made in God's image, and are capable of great good and great harm. Mistakes do happen, slip of the tongue is eminently human. It is what we do with it that really matters. Will we choose to self-reflect, or will we simply deflect? Will we recognize mistakes as opportunities to change, or will we dig in, double down, and blame others. Will we let the 'good impulses' guide us, or become misguided by our own 'evil impulses'.

For James, and in the best of the Jewish mindset, righteous life is marked by one's holding the evil impulse in check so that the good impulse could lead one to do justice. Wisdom, in this case, is simply learning from one's mistakes, and learning to integrate one's thoughts, will, speech and actions in faithful ways.

No one can tame the tongue. Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can, as some would say 'never hurt me', but I submit to you that words can actually break souls.

The message of James is harsh and blunt, and it is easy to read this chapter of James with a sense of doom and gloom. But I submit to you there is a kind of joyful playfulness in his use of words. We see it in his use of wide-variety of sources: of philosophical tradition, and Old Testament

allusions. We see it in his fertile metaphors: of horses' bridle, ship's rudders, tongues as fire. We see it his a subtle yet playful triple alliteration of verse 5 in the original Greek language—*micron melos estin kai megala auchei*: or “a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits”.

Now some might see this as James having a silver tongue, or being clever with words. I can totally picture James, preaching this fire and brimstone sermon on the danger of evil tongue, yet crafting it playfully and delivering it with a smirk.

Is this double-mindedness or double-tonguedness, a forked tongue? Far from it. In my humble opinion, through such grace in language, James is reminding us that the tongue, like every other parts of the body, is a gift from God. As James has already reminded us in his opening chapter, in verse 17-18, “*Every act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.*” In essence, even the so-called ‘wicket tongue’ is God given, and thus salvageable, tameable, even redeemable.

Chapter 3 of James reminds us that wisdom, at least in part, is learning to use the tongue, in ways that are both increasingly playful and increasing good, while admitting our mistakes and learning from them along the way. And that is grace on the tip of my tongue.

I will leave with you this scene when Prophet Isaiah was first called (in Isaiah 6). He was transported, perhaps in a trance, or in a dream to the heavenly throne, where he witnessed a fantastically sight of seraphs (that is angles) gathering around the throne of God, calling out to each other, saying “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

In response, the prophet falls on his knees and confesses, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Then one of the seraphs flew to Isaiah, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched Isaiah’s mouth with it and said, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then, in verse 8, the prophet describes, “I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “whom shall I send, and who will go for us? And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

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