

Taming the Tongue

September 12, 2021

Mark 8:27-38

²⁷ Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸ And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly.

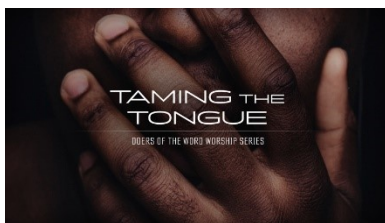
And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

James 3:1-12

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴ Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue — a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can saltwater yield fresh.



This morning we return to a topic that we touched on two weeks ago in James 1 and were reminded of again last Sunday in the message.

In James 1, the brother of Jesus spoke of bridling our tongues and of being quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. Last Sunday James reminded us of our tendency to make distinctions and to then treat and care for others with favoritism. Today we combine and revisit these ideas as we delve into passages from Mark 8 and James 3. As we do so, let us begin with a word of prayer...

As we begin, I invite you to join me in Mark 8. This passage begins with Jesus asking the disciples who people say he is. The answers are typical of Jesus' predominantly Jewish audience: Moses, Elijah, some other prophet. To the ordinary person, Jesus was clearly connected to God. The wisdom in his teachings, the power in his touch - clearly Jesus was sent by God. And then, in verse 29, Jesus turns the question personal, wanting to know who the disciples think he is. In a beautiful declaration of who Jesus is Peter answers, *"You are the Messiah."* We assume the other disciples nodded in agreement.

And then Jesus goes on to explain how the Messiah that he is and that he will be is not what's expected by the Jews. Jesus explains that he will undergo suffering, that he will be rejected, that he will be killed. And he adds that he will rise again on the third day. Make no mistake, the disciples knew what Jesus was saying. In verse 32 we read, *"He said all this quite openly."* There is no vague language, no speaking in parables. Jesus is crystal clear about what will happen to him as his earthly ministry ends.

Turn with me now to James 3. In this passage James wants to help us to tame the tongue. In verse eight he says, *"No one can tame the tongue — a restless evil,*

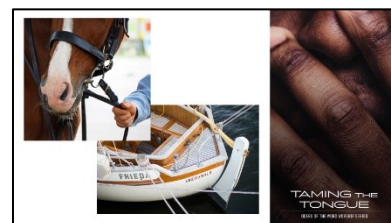
*"No one can tame
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- James 3:8*



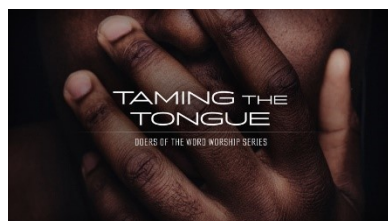
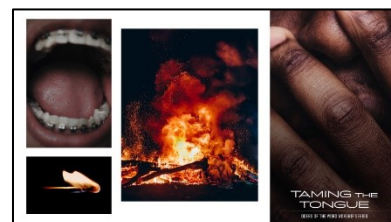
TAMING THE
TONGUE
HOW TO BE A BETTER SPEAKER

full of deadly poison." The tongue is so powerful, so dangerous, that James even warns us that everyone should think seriously before seeking to become a person in authority because *"we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."* Peter experiences this, as we will see when we return to our passage from Mark 8. James is well aware that our words have great power – power to do great good or power to do great harm.

James gives us two examples of how things are tamed or controlled. First, an animal as large as a horse can be controlled by a small bit placed in its mouth. The second example of how a *"very small rudder"* steers a huge ship or boat is also a great illustration for how small things can control or direct large objects.



The tongue is also a small yet powerful object. In verse five James points out that the tongue *"boasts of great exploits."* Yes, for some, our tongues can brag and one-up people with great ease. After noting that a small fire can set a whole forest ablaze, in verse six James notes that the tongue too is a fire – *"set among our members as a world of iniquity"* that *"stains the whole body"* and is *"itself set on fire by hell."* Even though mankind can tame all species of bird, reptile, sea creature, and more, *"no one can tame the tongue — a restless evil, full of deadly poison."*



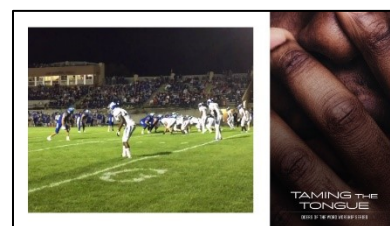
With these words, James is elevating the power of the tongue to the power of life and death, of salvation or damnation. We have all experienced both sides of the

tongue - we've all experienced the sting of the tongue as we were growing up, and even as adults. We all know what it is to bear the brunt of rumors or gossip or words spoken in anger. And just as likely we know what it is to watch our words bring pain to another, intentional or not. We have all said things that we regret the moment that those words left our lips. Words can hurt.

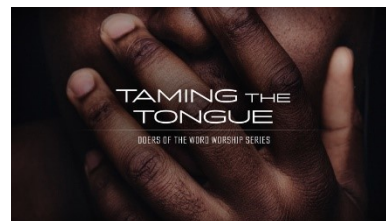
But we also know the ways that we have been touched by words of kindness and encouragement. We can recall the notes and the phone calls – people checking in on us after we have had a loss in the family, people stopping by to make sure that we are alright, little notes of encouragement that we've received in the mail. In the drawer in my office, I have a file folder in my desk of the little notes and cards that I have received over the years. Words can lift us, can build us up.

Researchers have found that ten compliments can be wiped out by one insult. This is certainly something we have all experienced too. For me, for example, ten people can offer kind words spoken about that Sunday's message and then one unkind word comes. What is the one thing I can remember? Our words matter.

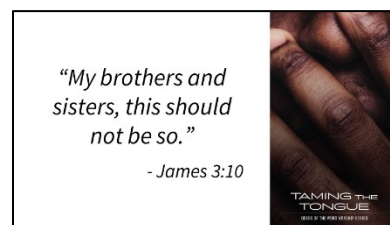
We can also impact others by words of truth, by words spoken with courage. A friend of mine was at a Dakota Wesleyan football game. Her grandson played defensive back. At one game she and her husband were sitting in the stands, watching the game. As the game wore on, a man began to speak rather harshly – cursing the referees and a few other things. After a few minutes, she stood up, turned around, and told him to sit down and be quiet.



The husband thought there might be a fight brewing. The man sat down and never said another word. We too can speak words of truth, words of courage. The words we use reflect our relationship with and belief in Jesus Christ as the Lord of all of our life. Geneice's stand for what she knew was right took not only courage but conviction. The man knew she was right. He knew he was in the wrong. In verse nine James speaks about these two sides of the tongue and about why we need to tame our tongues.

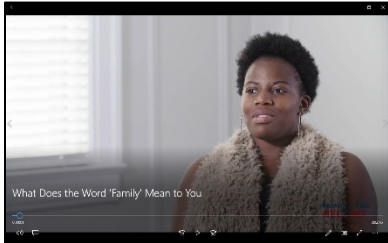


On the one side we use our tongue to bless and praise the Lord and Father. With the same tongue we curse others – those also made in the image of God. In verse ten James plainly says, *"My brothers and sisters, this should not be so"*. Using a few examples from nature, James asks is a spring can produce both clean and salty water, if a fig tree can yield olives, or if an olive tree can yield figs? Just as these are impossibilities, James feels it should be impossible for a Christian to utter evil or harsh or unkind words. If it were only so, right?



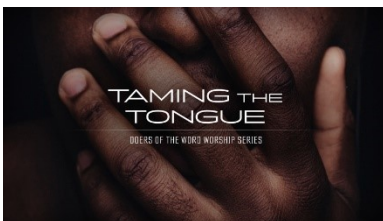
Last week we heard what felt to me like impossible facts concerning the number of children in the foster care system. I would guess that you too were surprised by the numbers – 400 kids and only 80 foster families in our part of South Dakota. We could quote James 3:10 here too, right? This week we will hear from a few kids about how important it is to belong to a family, to know you are loved. Next week we will hear about how we can all play a role in the foster care system.

A quote in the little booklet that I received when I met with the South Dakota Kids Belong organization is a great lead-in to the video that we are about to watch: *"It's a lot easier to fall in love with a child than a statistic. Now that you know the numbers, it's time to start giving them a face and a voice."* Please turn your attention to the screens. Thank you.



[Play video: What Does 'Family' Mean? (2:17)]

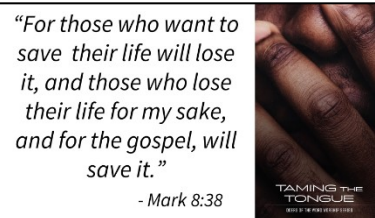
We all know what it means to be family. Thank you to the children and young adults who shared what it means to belong to a family and to those brave enough to express their longing for a family. Next week we will get more practical about the ways we can be a resource or a part of the foster care system, impacting lives and transforming our world. Before we return to Mark 8 to wrap up today, I want to invite and encourage you to share any questions that you have bubbling up inside you. On September 26th a panel will be here to share their stories and to answer any questions that we might have.

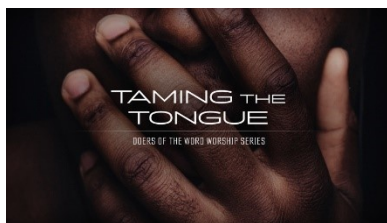


As we turn back to Mark 8, we get a glimpse of what the disciples felt with Jesus – a sense of family, a sense of belonging, as sense of being loved. After Jesus told the disciples all that would happen to him, we read that *"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him."* Reading in Matthew's gospel we get more detail on this conversation. Suffice it to say that Peter forbade such a thing and said, *"This must never happen to you!"* Peter did not want to lose Jesus.

Peter was seeing with earthly eyes and not with an eternal perspective. Peter spoke harsh words that were selfish. Peter was not quick to listen and slow to speak. He does not consider the weight of his words. In response Jesus says to Peter, *"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."* Jesus is calling Peter to deny self and to be willing to take up his cross. Jesus calls us to the same tasks. When I speak words of evil, words filled with fire, it is most often when self has risen up, when I am unwilling to carry my cross, when I do not want to die to self, when I am concerned with the things of this world. Sometimes, like it was with Peter, that happens when I or someone or something I love is threatened or is in danger.

In verse 35 Jesus explains why it is necessary to deny self and to take up our cross: *"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."* When we are willing to lose this life for the gospel, we find true life. Continuing on with the idea of taming our tongue and speaking good, Jesus goes on in verse 38 with this warning: *"Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."* If we are ashamed of Jesus and his words, if we are more concerned with how this world sees us than how God sees us, then Jesus will be ashamed of us too one day. Returning to the words of James, *"My brothers and sisters, this should not be so"*.

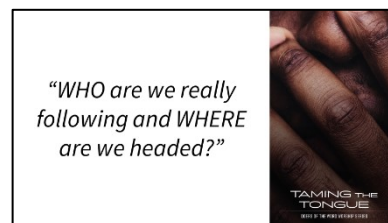




In James 3 and in Mark 8 we hear the call to consider carefully our words. They have the power of life and death. They reflect our relationship with and belief in Jesus Christ. We cannot try and compartmentalize our

lives; we cannot just give parts of ourselves to Jesus. This is an all-in game. The game involves denying self and taking up our cross.

This is the example set by Jesus. All this begs the question: "Who are we really following and where are we heading?" The fruit we produce with our words



reveals our hearts. Are we taming the tongue, offering blessings and words of hope and life? When people hear us speak, do they easily identify us as a follower of Jesus, as one heading towards an eternity in his presence? My brothers and sisters, may it be so. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. In these past few weeks, how has your own taming of the tongue improved as you have sought to be quick to listen...? How can your growth continue in the week ahead?
- 2) *Pray*. When have you felt the urge to speak harshly or angrily recently? Kneel before the throne of grace, seeking God's peace and strength.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 16:13-23. What depth and additional understanding does this passage add to today's passage from Mark 8?