

WATCHING OUR TONGUES (James 3:1-12)

God is a God who speaks. By His Word He brought the universe into existence. He fostered His chosen people by sending them prophets to speak in His name. Although no one has seen the Father, He sent His own Son as the Word, to reveal His mind. Jesus left us no books, but sent the Holy Spirit to remind His chosen disciples of all His Words, and sent them to speak and write in His name. God's Word is powerful and active, and through it He still works in people's hearts.

The power of the spoken word is obvious in God's confusion of tongues at Babel, to prevent even greater wickedness on earth. We rightly see Pentecost as the beginning of the reversal of Babel, which will be a feature of the new age of salvation.

It seems strange that James should warn us not to be too eager to teach. Too many people who want to be pastors or teachers hanker after the prominence that those positions give, and forget the responsibility that is involved in teaching, and the possibilities for evil that leading speaking positions have. James continues by painting a horrifying picture of the evil that misuse of the spoken words causes. Since that is so, people who take up an occupation where their work is primarily speaking must be particularly careful. In the church the most serious misuse of the tongue is misrepresenting God's own Word.

For once, Post-modernism and a biblical writer seem to be travelling on the same road. Post-modernists suspect that words are usually just hypocritical fronts to mask what people really want. One woman wants an abortion and argues that the baby is only expendable tissue. Another sues someone for causing an accident that took the life of her unborn baby, and argues that the unborn baby was a human person, and that taking its life was culpable homicide. However, both are only using words as masks for what they want, and not guided by God's commandment about human life. People think, cynically, "Just words!" James also tells us to be reluctant to use words.

Jesus warned that at the Last Judgment all would give an account for everything that they have spoken. For teachers, that will also mean giving an account of the lives of people whom their words have influenced. James included himself when he wrote that teachers would be judged more severely. For us all, the principle should be "swift to hear, slow to speak."

What James wrote about the use of the tongue was chiefly its use for evil. Three comparisons remind us that small things produce results that are out of proportion to their size. The first two examples, a bit in a horse's mouth, and the rudder on a ship, are neutral (Jm 3:3-5). They can produce good or evil results. The third, that a small fire that can ignite a large forest, emphasises destruction. Things are even worse than may appear. James wrote, "[The tongue] is a world of wickedness in our members" (3:6). Often in the Bible, "world" means the world in disorder as a result of the fall into sin, and estranged from God. The tongue is not just a world in this sense, but the world, and in the members of our own bodies. Our tongues are the ambassadors, or representatives, of the estranged world, and enemies of God within our own persons. Our tongues expose all the powers of human beings' minds, wills, and feelings as they have been corrupted by evil. The world is big, and our tongues are small, but, if you want to witness evil in concentrated form, listen to the tongue!

James affirms "it sets the whole course of life aflame, and it is set aflame by hell." The tongue ignites the whole of human life with a fire that comes from hell itself. Hell is the place of punishment after this life and also the centre of Satan's activity. Satan himself controls human tongues, and that is why our tongues are the unrighteous world in our own members.

James stresses the destructive power of the tongue by a contrast. Human beings can tame most animals, but the human tongue cannot be tamed. The tongue is "a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (Jm 3:8). James says that the tongue is a power for good and for evil. Blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth. That is unnatural. A fig tree cannot produce olives, and a grapevine cannot produce figs. A spring does not yield both bitter and sweet water. This is a great contradiction, because God made human beings to be in His own likeness. Even after the fall, human beings, who have lost God's image, are still His creatures, and ought to follow their Maker's intentions. Sadly, they do not. Paul wrote that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says: "Cursed be Jesus" (1 Cor 12:3). That has always been so. For the Israelites in the wilderness cursing God incurred the penalty of death. God told Moses: "Tell the Israelites: 'Any man who curses his God shall pay the penalty for his sin. He who blasphemes the name of the LORD shall certainly be put to death'" (Lv 24:15-16). Arguably, therefore, one of the worst and most damnable misuses of the tongue is coupling the name of God with profanity.

The tongue is the point where the condition of every person's heart becomes obvious. Jesus said that what a person's heart is full of runs over through his mouth (Mt 12:34). So when we hear a person who has the name

of Christian abusing the name of God, or using other bad language, what do we think? The tongue readily exposes the hypocrisy in us all. Some act as if bad language is excusable as long as it is not in the presence of a clergyman or his wife. What does that say about their own hearts and their relationship to God, who knows hearts?

If we slander others, can we take a step further back? Hypocrisy lurks. We know our own sinful hearts so well that we cannot allow that others might appear better than we are. So running others down satisfies our old sinful natures with the thought that in comparison with others we are putting on a good appearance. We fool ourselves into forgetting that God sees our hearts. The truth is that we cannot lift ourselves to heaven any more than we can pull ourselves off the ground by tugging at our shoelaces, and we also cannot do it by comparing ourselves with others and criticising the sins of others.

However, in this exposure of hypocrisy we must bear in mind that it is deceptively easy to turn all this against other persons who have the name of Christians instead of aiming this corrective at ourselves. What James is on about is really the same as Jesus had in mind when He condemned hypocrisy, or double standards. When we talk about the tongue as the revealer of people's sinful natures, their hearts, our first concern must be our own. James already touched this subject when he wrote: "If anyone thinks that he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, his religion is worthless" (Jm 1:26). The tongue is not an independent member of a person's body. Each human being is a unit, and all his members form a united person. Our words express not only our minds, which others cannot read, but our personalities. The whole of human nature is corrupted by alienation from God, and the tongue is the point where this sad fact first becomes obvious.

When we speak about hypocrisy, there is a parallel danger for the people who think that their use of their tongues is at least above average. God's standard is absolute perfection, and therefore all comparison with others is deceptive. Self-righteousness is always people's greatest danger. The Pharisees who took pride in their own goodness were further from the kingdom of God than disreputable people who were very conscious of their great need.

This sober lesson about the tongue illustrates the truth that human beings cannot save themselves. Here, as elsewhere, the great contradictions in God's Word emerge. God is serious about His demand of strict holiness, His anger against sin, His just judgment, and His threat of hell as the punishment for sin. However, in grace He reckons to sinners who believe in Jesus the righteousness and holiness of His Son. Those who believe in Jesus' obedience to God's holy will on their behalf and in His suffering the penalty for their alienation from God receive His forgiving and justifying verdict. God promises eternal life with Himself through the holiness and righteousness of His own Son. We praise God that He has redeemed our whole natures, of which our tongues are small, but such powerful members.

For a fuller picture, we leave James' depiction of the evil that the tongue reveals and causes and move to the picture of Jesus' redeemed in eternal life. When sin is no more, tongues will be put solely to holy use, in praise and thanks. The redeemed will use their tongues to sing a new song. They will use their sanctified tongues to say: "You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, because You have been slain; and by Your blood You have purchased people to be God's own out of every tribe and language and people and nation; and You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign on the earth." (Rv 5:9-10). What an incentive for pure hearts and mouths already now!