

“A Slip of the Tongue” – James 3:1-12 – September 16, 2018

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The Book of James is an interesting part of the New Testament. It almost didn't make it through the canonization process, and Reformer Martin Luther had strong reservations against it. It opens like a letter, however it doesn't feel like one. It seems to have a rather broad audience, being full of moralistic teachings, and it has more of a philosophical slant rather than a strict theological focus. More recently the Book of James has been read as wisdom literature such as we find in the Old Testament books of Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

The third chapter of James focuses on one's control of the tongue. He uses the metaphors of bits in the mouths of horses or the rudders of ships to illustrate how such a small instrument can have such a powerful effect on the direction one follows. For a more modern example, think of the tiny mouse we use with our computers. It directs the cursor on our screens allowing us to explore the vastness of the internet. Or on a touchscreen, a finger or a stylus has the same ability to direct our exploration. The tongue is but a small muscle in the entirety of our bodies, but it has incredible power as it allows us to form words and speech. Words are powerful.

James reminds us that we are created in the image of God. This comparison takes us back to the creation story, where God's first acts of creating everything we know and understand came about through the action of speech. God spoke creation into existence and it was good. Then later God brought all the creatures to Adam, so see what the human would call them. The act of naming is an act of power over something. Such is the power of the word created by the movement of our tongues.

This third chapter in the Book of James is a cautionary essay, to emphasize the power of words to either create or destroy. I was watching an old episode of Doctor Who recently. If you're not familiar with it, Doctor Who is a TV show that focuses on the exploits of alien called the Doctor who travels through time and space with human companions. One of his ongoing missions is to keep the earth safe, especially from unsavory aliens who want to harm the earth or claim it as their own.

In the particular episode I was watching, the Doctor was having a confrontation with the British Prime Minister, who had just used unnecessary brute force against a foe. The Doctor was upset by this show of gratuitous violence and said so. The Prime Minister basically responded to him, "what are you going to do about it? I'm in control here." The Doctor replied, "six words. In six words I can bring you down." She looked unimpressed by his threat. So the Doctor motioned one of her aides to come over, and he whispered in the aide's ear six words, "Don't you think she looks tired?" The aide looked over at the Prime Minister thoughtfully. And the damage was done. (Doctor Who, 2005, *The Christmas Invasion*)

Words are indeed powerful. And when used maliciously or deceitfully, the damage wrought by them can be great. As a wildfire can be started by the careless mis-tending of a campfire, so too can our words can cause great harm. This can happen in any number of ways. Intentional untruths are often spoken by politicians. As we are approaching the midterm election cycle, we will have to be so careful about the information we receive from the various campaigns. Words can be so easily twisted to serve any agenda.

We know too that marketing companies use words to persuade and seduce us into believing that our lives are somehow less without their particular products. The wise among us have learned, sometimes the hard way, that if something sounds too good to be true, then it probably is. Often our young people and our seniors become the targets of scams and fraud, where the catch or the hook is conveniently hidden out of plain sight. James cautions those who have influence over others, in the example of teachers, because others are looking to them to learn how to be and how to act. But this applies to all of us who claim to be followers of Christ. What we say and how we say it matters.

James rightly wonders how we human beings, who have been created in the image of God, can use our words to both bless and curse. It seems impossible to him, that we who have such a gift for good could possibly use it for harm and destruction. Here James is appealing to our sense of rightness. If we claim to follow God, then our words should match that claim. It is inconsistent to say we believe one particular way, but then use our words in the opposite way. From a rational point of view, it makes perfect

sense. If I say that I follow God, then I am going to act like I follow God. But James knows our human nature, and knows that we are prone to mistakes.

As we become wiser people, we can see the truth in James' words. We all have been on the receiving end of hurtful comments. We have witnessed the destructiveness of words that are cutting or abusive. We've even experienced the hurt of words that are thoughtlessly tossed our way, because the speaker was tired or distracted or ignorant. Offhand comments or microaggressions can wound just as much as intentional insults. How many of us have been guilty of speaking out before thinking something through? I would imagine most of us have put our foot in our mouth a time or two in our lives.

And it's not just the spoken word. Social media and texting has exploded and magnified our impact. Our words, when put out on social media, can have a devastating effect. There have been numerous examples of people being fired from their jobs for making stupid, thoughtless comments on Twitter or Facebook or in texts. When email first became popular, people quickly learned to not hit send after writing a message that was inspired by negative emotions. Just as we can speak without thinking, so too can we write and send it out into cyberspace without thinking. And once it's sent, it's out there for all to see.

Words are indeed powerful. Able to create, able to destroy. James appeals to our sense of logic in this brief cautionary essay, reminding us, that as we are created in God's image, our words have the capacity to create, to work for good, to build others up. Why on earth, given this marvelous gift, would it seem logical to use our words for evil, for hurt or for deceit? It doesn't. But we are prone to mistakes. Knowing the power our words have to harm, may we always strive to speak in love, sharing the truth of God's grace in Jesus Christ.