

THE RIGHT KIND OF SODA FOUNTAIN
7th in a Series on James, Called, "The Outsider Manifesto"
Topic: The Tongue

I have mentioned before that living with Laurie is a lot of fun. One fun aspect of it is that she often does or says these quirky things that you would never expect, and odd things just happen to her. One of these curious incidents happened at a show we went to on vacation. It was a magic show that we had heard about for years, but never attended. So a few weeks ago we went, and it was pretty good. It featured two illusionists, one after the other. The first was very good and pretty funny. The second guy was also good at his craft, but in addition he was hilarious. After the show as we exited the theater the two magicians were standing there greeting people, thanking them for coming and shaking their hands. It turned out that one of them had been on the same adventurous flight we came in on and it had shaken him up a bit. As I got to him he talked with me briefly about it as Laurie moved on. When we finished our conversation I turned to thank the other guy and was surprised to see that instead of just the 2 of them standing there thanking people, now there were 3! Laurie was standing next to them and as they left, people were shaking her hand and thanking her for the great show and she was saying, "Thank you for coming"! I asked her "How did that happen?" She said, "I don't know. I shook their hands and thanked them, then turned to wait for you and people just started thanking me and shaking my hand."

Another incident happened several years ago when we were going through TSA at the airport and an airport police officer came through a side door right next to us into the area we were moving through. He was an imposing guy, tall and powerfully built, just what a cop should look like. He was wearing one of those orange vests for working out in traffic, but it was all twisted in the back. As he walked by us, wanting to be helpful Laurie said to him, "Uh, Sir, you're twisted." His head whipped around and he said, "What?" He apparently thought Laurie was commenting on his character. When we open our mouths to speak we run the risk of saying something that can be either completely misunderstood, or it can be unfortunate. We're going to look at a passage today that has everything to do with what we say. Let's look at James 3:1-12.

THE TONGUE IS POWERFUL

James begins this part of his letter by warning, "not many of you should become teachers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." Well given that a big part of my job involves teaching I don't find that to be very comforting news. But we all know that's how it should be. There should be a higher standard for leaders in the church than for others.

That makes great sense for two obvious reasons. First, when you presume to stand up and say, “Thus says the Lord,” you’d better be right. History is replete with supposed teachers who led people to believe what is absolutely not true and to live in disastrous ways. People’s souls, their eternities and their lives right now can be significantly impacted by teachers, so you’d better be right. The second reason is that the credibility of the gospel is at stake. If someone claims to be a teacher yet obviously does not believe his own stuff or lives in ways that obviously violate it, that can easily cause people to doubt that validity of the gospel itself.

The subject of people opening their mouths led to James address a broader topic. He didn’t want to just speak to teachers, he wanted to speak to all believers about the crucial topic of our speech. He has already written about this in 1:19, 21 and 26, but now he returns to that subject with a vengeance.

He begins by talking about how powerful our words are. Our tongues, representing our ability to speak, are relatively small muscles compared to the size of our bodies. But this small organ exerts an influence all out of proportion to its size. James gives a couple of illustrations of how a small thing can have a huge effect.

The first is a horse. Horses are large animals. They are usually measured at the point where their neck meets their back. At that point they can stand between 4.5 and 6 feet tall. They can weigh between 850 and 2200 pounds. They are known for strength and speed. How does a much smaller, weaker human being control an animal that is big, strong, fast and can literally weigh a ton? If it wanted to, such an animal could run over me and trample me to death and there would be little I could do about it. He’s faster than I am, bigger than I am, and stronger than I am.

I’ve never ridden a horse. Honestly, I have no desire to ride one. This is because I sympathize with their plight. They’ve been enslaved by human masters. People even own them! How cruel. (Free the horses!) How would you like it if somebody sat on you and made you carry them everywhere they wanted to go? Okay, actually I don’t care about that. The one advantage we humans have over horses is we’re smarter than they are. A large, powerful animal like a horse can be directed and controlled by a small bit in its mouth. The bit is a tiny fraction of the size of the horse, but it exercises power over the animal anyway. James says our tongues do the same thing to us.

James follows that up with the analogy of a rudder on a ship. Compared to the size of the ship, the rudder is quite small. The rudders on a Nimitz class aircraft carrier are enormous. They are 29 by 22 feet and weigh 50 tons. However, as large as that sounds they are relatively small compared to the size of a carrier. They are actually used to very effectively

turn a ship that is almost 1100 feet long, just short of 4 football fields, that displaces over 100,000 tons. The ship carries 90 aircraft on it! Again, in proportion to the massive size of the ship the rudders are relatively small, but they control where the ship goes. James says this is an apt analogy for our tongues, which may be small but exert huge influence on our lives.

Life is mostly about relationships, and relationships are all about communication. Since our ability to speak is crucial to our relationships it is obvious that our tongues play a central and pivotal role in what our lives and the lives of others around us will be like. Proverbs 18:21 says, “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” Our tongues are so powerful that they can actually give life and they can destroy it.

I like the English Standard translation of Proverbs 25:11 which says “a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.” In other words, an appropriate word spoken to others is like a piece of fine jewelry. I’ve mentioned before that I’m just not a jewelry guy. I’ve never really understood the appeal of it. But I can see the power of it on some people, especially on women and professional athletes. I’ve observed this up close. It amazes me when we walk by a jewelry store Laurie can’t help herself. It’s like a black hole with a powerful, irresistible gravity field that pulls her in. She looks in the window at all that beautiful, shiny bling and her eyes sparkle. Proverbs says that helpful, affirming, encouraging words, are as beautiful and as powerful as a dazzling piece of jewelry. They are gift that will be as welcomed and appreciated as that.

Proverbs 16:24 says, “Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.” Think about that for a moment. Sugar wasn’t widely known and used outside of Asia until the Middle Ages. Chocolate was basically unknown in western society until the 16th century. The sweetest food known when Proverbs was written 3000 years ago was honey. That was a delicacy that in their minds would have rivaled Laurie’s apple pie. They were wrong, of course, but you get the point. The writer of Proverbs says that gracious words are like honey, the sweetest things on earth.

As you know I have always loved sports, and have been cursed by combining that great love with a confounding deficit of athletic ability. I always wanted to be great as an athlete, but simply lack the size, strength, agility and coordination for that goal. That never stopped me from pursuing it, dreaming of it and longing for it. This is so true that I have grabbed onto the little snippets of encouraging words I have received over my many years. When I was in 8th grade all the boys in my junior high practically worshiped Mr. Denton, the P.E. teacher. In our minds he was maybe one of the greatest athletes in the world. He could play anything. Looking back on it I know he was probably some 20 something guy who was moderately coordinated, but oh how we all looked up to him. I wasn’t very big, I didn’t have a great

arm, but I could catch pretty well, so I played wide receiver on our football team. One day Mr. Denton was holding court during recess with a bunch of boys gathered around him. I walked up to the group though he didn't see me. As I walked up I overheard him say to the group, "I'll tell you who probably has the best hands in the school. It's Rick Myatt." Wow did that feel good. I was 13 years old at that time, and more than 20 years - er, more than 30 years - er, more than 40 years - er, a *lot* of years later I still remember those words. I can still recall the time when I was a freshman in college that I overheard a teammate praising me to another teammate in the locker room when he wasn't aware that I was there. I was 19 at the time.

Gracious words are beautiful, sweet, and powerful. They can even be deluding, as for a brief time I actually thought those encouraging words I heard meant I actually was pretty good. Reality intruded soon enough, but consider how long lasting and powerful your gracious and encouraging words can be.

THE TONGUE CAN BE DANGEROUS

In the fall of 2003 Sergio Martinez was hunting in the open areas east of San Diego when he lost his way. He could not figure out where he was or how to get back home. He became desperate. Figuring that after hours of being lost rescuers were probably searching for him he decided he would light a small signal fire to help them find him. He gathered a few sticks and some brush and lit a very small fire, just enough to produce a bit of smoke that might draw some attention. It was a really bad idea. This was in San Diego County in the fall, fire season, and the Santa Ana winds were blowing. The predictable happened. The parched brush near the little fire ignited and the conflagration was on. What became known as the Cedar Fire would burn 280,000 acres, destroy 2,232 homes and kill 15 people. It was the most destructive fire in San Diego history. It started with a tiny signal fire.

James says our tongues can easily be like that little signal fire. They can ignite a firestorm that wreaks untold havoc in the lives of other people and can rebound to seriously mess up our own lives as well. He says in verse 6 the tongue is a "world of evil" that can corrupt the whole body, that it is full of deadly poison and is "set on fire by hell." Those are some stark words. All too often our tongues are tools of Satan!

The easiest thing in the world is to talk about other people, and the overwhelming majority of the time when we do that it is to say negative things about them. We so often use our tongues to share private facts, to share rumors, to spread gossip, to create division and dissension, to slander, to gossip, to criticize people, or to express harsh, angry feelings or unkind thoughts. When we do those things we are lighting brush fires that can cause no end of damage.

University of Michigan Psychologist Dr. Ethan Kross led a team of people doing research on emotional pain. They found a pool of subjects who had experienced an unwanted romantic breakup. In other words, they had been dumped. They had the subjects look at pictures of their exes and think about their feelings. As they did so they performed MRI's of their brains. In a second phase of the experiment they administered a physical pain stimulus to their arm and again did imaging of their brains. They found that the same areas of the brain lit up in the same way whether the pain they were feeling was emotional or physical. In other words, the old children's rhyme that kids are taught to help them deal with rejection, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," absolutely is not true. Words can hurt in the same way and to the same degree as a physical attack. If you say critical, unkind, thoughtless or angry things to me, you might as well punch me in the face. The pain and damage is the same. Or maybe not, because the face will heal much more quickly than the heart.

In fact, Dr. Martin Teicher, Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard, conducted studies that showed verbal abuse of children actually had larger long term impacts than physical abuse. They found that verbal abuse in the middle school years actually caused structural changes in the brains of young people, and not in a good way.

I recently read an essay by a young adult named Kari on this matter. She wrote, "I can still hear a girl in my 6th grade class telling me, 'you know, you wore that shirt less than a week ago. That is really gross.' The feelings of embarrassment and shame are still with me today. I am still very conscious about how many times I wear an outfit." We all have had the experience of someone saying something cutting, something catty, something shaming to us. We know those words like they are burned into our souls. They can and often do have impact far beyond their real significance. Why would a 6th grade girl say something like that? It obviously was not out of concern for Kari, out of a desire to help her. It was petty, and it was intended as a put down. It was about shaming her and sending her the message that she was unworthy, and she got the message. In fact, she has never forgotten it.

Unfortunately all of us know what that is like. I have quite vivid and still a little painful memories of moments in my years of ministry when people shared their very critical opinions of me. In a couple of instances it was people whom I regarded as friends. How deeply it hurt when they ambushed me. Proverbs 12:18 says "the words of the reckless pierce like swords." Have you ever seen a sword up close and personal? They are scary weapons. Imagine how it would feel to be stabbed or cut by one. It would hurt terribly. Proverbs says we fire out our reckless words all too often without realizing we might as well attack a person with a sword. It hurts that badly and does that much damage.

One of the difficult things about this is that James uses the tongue as a symbol for communication. Communication involves a great deal more than the words we say. It also involves our expressions, our tone of voice and our body language. Have you ever had someone roll their eyes when you have said something? How did that feel? That is powerful communication. It communicates disdain, and it does so painfully. An unfortunate thing is that sometimes we don't intend words to hurt, but we are insensitive. Our words are reckless in the sense that we haven't thought about how they will feel to someone else and how they might hurt that person. I've had this happen more than once, but I recall one specific occasion when I had just preached a sermon on a particular passage of scripture and a church member spoke to me all excited. He said, "I recently heard a sermon on this passage by Francis Chan and man was it powerful." He proceeded to tell me in some detail all that Francis said about the passage. I'm quite sure he intended well. He was excited about what he had learned. But he obviously didn't think about the message he was sending. If you were in my shoes, how would you have taken that? It's pretty hard to hear anything other than, "Francis Chan did a great and powerful job talking about this passage. You, Rick, just took up my time and weren't helpful at all." I don't think that's what he intended. I hope he didn't. But he wasn't sensitive to the fact that he was clearly sending that message to me.

So often we can blab out words that are thoughtless but hurtful. Laurie and I got ourselves in a couple of uncomfortable situations on our recent vacation. We have been looking for some pictures to put in our house in a particular place. We walked into a small art gallery, more to look around than anything. The main artist and owner of the gallery was there along with a sales person. They were all over us. They had several paintings they were sure would be just what we needed. We didn't agree, and they began lowering prices as though we were using "just say no" as a negotiating tactic. My problem was I really did not like the guy's work. I didn't want any of his pictures, no matter what the price. We finally began extricating ourselves from the situation when the assistant said, "Oh, hey, he's also a DJ, and he's opened a new dance club in town." Then he proceeded to show us a picture of the new club. It was a plain, unadorned room, with about 4 of those plastic folding tables at which sat folding chairs. It would have been an unappealing place for a church potluck. Most break rooms at work have more charm. My initial reaction was to want to laugh out loud and say, "Is this a joke?" However, I was able to catch myself. That might have been an honest reaction, but it would not have been the most sensitive and kind thing I could do. So we just said, "Thank you, but dance clubs really aren't our kind of thing" and left.

THE TONGUE CAN BE INCONSISTENT

Finally James points out the incongruity of our words. In verses 9-10 he says, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's image. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing." That's not a good thing.

Our little granddaughter, Ella, has a funny aspect of her character. She loves to clean things. When we were taking care of her recently she got a big kick out of finding a pack of hand wipes in Laurie's purse, then taking out wipes and using them to clean various things. She even tried to use one to clean the dogs. Apparently as part of this takes she great delight in helping clean up the dog poop in their back yard. She locates it and points it out so that we can pick it up with a shovel and dispose of it. On that particular day I thought we had gotten all of it, but she is quite thorough. I had put the shovel away, when she found one small piece of poop. She started to bend down to pick it up with her hand, because, after all, we had to clean it up. Just in time I shouted, "Ella, stop. No, no, no. I'll get it with the shovel." I know those hands are going to go in her mouth at some point. The hands that go in the mouth really should not be the hands that touch dog poop. James says our praising God with our tongues then using them to run down other people, to discourage, to spew anger or dirty words, is just as incongruent, as disgusting and as wrong as that is. It ought to make us sick to our stomachs. We must either quit praising God or quit using our words to injure others.

I recently was struck by the difference between a couple of drink machines at two fast food restaurants. One was the kind you most often see. It had 6 different nozzles, one each for Pepsi, a lemon lime soda, an orange soda, lemonade and so on. Whichever nozzle you used, all that would ever come out was that particular kind of drink. The other machine I saw had just one nozzle. It had a touch screen that displayed all the various drinks it could dispense. You would touch the icon for the drink you wanted, put your cup under the nozzle and out would come whatever drink you ordered. All the drinks came out of the same nozzle.

So which of those nozzles do you think God wants your mouth to resemble? Is it one nozzle that dispenses praise to God, love for others, encouragement, but also anger, complaint, discouragement, criticism, gossip, foul language, and all the rest? Or is it a nozzle out of which only comes praise, encouragement, grace, faith and love? I submit to you that God desires it be the latter.

APPLICATION

UNDERSTAND THIS APPLIES TO ALL OF US

I think James wrote this because those early Christians lived in difficult circumstances and were often abused and mistreated by people in their own communities, often members of their own extended families. There was considerable temptation to use their words to dispense a steady stream of discouragement, complaint, bitterness, anger, verbal attacks against people who made their lives so hard and so on. There were also some disagreements

going on among them, as we will see next in the letter, and words were being used as weapons in those interpersonal battles.

We might think this was relevant for the people James wrote to but maybe it doesn't relate to us. After all, who among us thinks we have a problem with our tongues? We know we're not perfect, but we're not so bad. We kind of tend to read this passage think we don't have much of a problem with this.

If you write in your Bible and you have it with you I suggest that you underline these words in verse 8. "***No human being can tame the tongue.***" Are you a human being? If you are, then you have not tamed your tongue. In other words, you have a problem. We need to raise our awareness of the issue. We need to pay attention to how we use our words, our expressions and our tone of voice. We need to start with the premise that we have a problem and that we need God's help to go through the process of taming our tongues. We need to believe with all our hearts, that when we open our mouths, something powerful happens. It can be powerfully bad, or powerfully good.

REALIZE IT IS A BIG DEAL

This is now the fourth time in this letter that James has brought up the issue of our tongues. In fact, in this letter of 108 verses he refers to matters of what we say in 16 verses. That's a lot in such a small letter. That says to me that God thinks this is a really important matter.

Remember how starkly Proverbs 18:21 put it. Your tongue has the power of life and death. When you open your mouth it is a life or death matter. You are potentially unleashing a sword! I liken it to the power of the atom. In the 20th century humans tapped into that power. And it is a truly momentous power. That power has been harnessed to provide electricity for large cities. It runs magnificent ships like those massive aircraft carriers and stealthy submarines that can stay submerged for months, limited not by power but by the necessity to have food for the human crews. It is used to treat terrible diseases and help heal people.

But the power of the atom has also been used to create some of the most fearsome weapons known to humanity. Nuclear bombs have the ability to kill and cause damage to an almost unimaginable degree. So we need to think of our tongues like that. We have nuclear tongues that can literally sustain life, or can destroy and harm at ghastly levels.

If we care at all about following Jesus and glorifying God, then what and how we communicate must be a matter of utmost concern and attention at all times. For every time we open our mouths and use that nuclear tongue we are either empowering others or we are destroying.

SEEK TO BE A LIFE GIVER

If we have the power to give life or destroy, don't you want to be a life giver? Don't you want to bring love, affirmation, encouragement, hope and strength to people? What kind of person wants his or her words to end up being weapons of mass destruction? Certainly not a follower of the Lord Jesus.

In Ephesians 4:29 Paul wrote immortal but all too often ignored words. "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

On our trip last month back to the Midwest we flew into Chicago and landed at O'Hare airport. We got our luggage and caught a shuttle that took us to the rental car facility. We entered the rental car office and were confronted with a line that apparently had been borrowed from Disneyland. It wound back and forth and was packed with people. At the counter when we got in line there was a grand total of 2 agents that were dealing with the mess. And they were not doing so with much alacrity. It seemed like it took 15 minutes to help each customer, and of course on occasion a special, privileged "express" customer would show up and they'd have to stop everything to help that person. I first thought, "At this rate I'm not sure we're going to make it to the wedding 2 days from now." As time dragged on I began thinking we were going to end up just skipping the whole thing and returning to the terminal to catch our flight home a week later. I started kind of eavesdropping on conversations around me. What I heard was a lot of complaint and criticism. I noticed the effect that had on me. It made me want to become indignant, to disparage the rental car company, to get grumpy. It was all true and it was all deserved by the company, but here's the thing. It didn't help me. It didn't make me more joyful, more thankful and certainly not more patient. It didn't enrich my life in any way. It just fanned the flames of disgruntlement.

John Gottman is an expert on marriage. He has done a tremendous amount of research on what makes a marriage successful and what destroys it. He has identified what he calls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse for marriages. These are 4 factors guaranteed to lead to divorce. 2 of the 4 are contempt and criticism. They have to do with how we use our tongues. The flip side of that is critical. He says for a marriage to be successful there must be a minimum of 5 positive interactions between a couple for every negative one. In other words, the more we affirm, encourage and express love the better off our relationships will be.

START WITH THE HEART

In Luke 6:45 Jesus said, “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” Jesus said that what our mouths say is directly related to what is in our hearts. It all starts there. If your heart is full of anger, bitterness, criticism of other people, dislike of them, lack of trust of God, selfishness, what do you think is going to come out? I guarantee you it is not going to bring glory to God and it is not going to bless people.

My mother owns mineral rights to some land in Oklahoma, and buried deep under that land are some large pockets of gas and oil. It has been a source of considerable frustration that we can't get anyone to actually drill down there and access the petroleum that's there, thus producing large royalties for her. Perhaps that will never happen, but if some day it does I know what will come up through those wells. It will be gas and oil, because that's what's there. It will not be lemonade, fresh squeezed orange juice or Coca Cola. What will come out is what's there. And if what is in our hearts is a desire to bring praise and glory to God, love for other people and a desire to bring them grace, life and blessing, then when we speak, and tap into our hearts, that's what will come out.

We must start with what is in our hearts. If what is there is the Spirit of Jesus, if our hearts are a reservoir of God's grace and goodness, if we are full to overflowing with love for him and with awe at his glory, what do you think is going to come out when we speak? It is going to be God's goodness, kindness, love, peace as we trust in him, encouragement to faith and praise of our gracious God. It is going to be grace and blessing for other people.

There was a guy in our former ministry who was a very successful and smart man who had held leadership positions in several different churches, including ours. He was mature and he loved Jesus. However, in our situation he was something of a bull in a china shop. He stepped on a lot of toes and he hurt several people. He created a situation where he hurt and alienated quite a few of the staff. As things turned out he was not a supporter of me, which you would typically think we make me not especially fond of him. However, oddly, in one conversation though he wasn't necessarily a supporter of mine he said some very complimentary things to a friend about my character. That friend passed the comments on to me. His glowing comments about me did two things to me. First, whatever else he may have said or done, it caused me to think of him fondly. It overshadows the negatives that I have experienced with him. Second, it creates in me a powerful desire to actually live up to the comments he made about me. It makes me even more want to be like Jesus. I suspect he doesn't even remember saying that, but I do. Never forget what power your words can have, for good and for ill.