

“Raging Wildfire”

James 3:1-10; Multiple passages in Proverbs ¹

As I’ve probably told you more than once, I was a psychology major in college, after which, in its inscrutable wisdom, the Navy made me an “engineer.” I wasn’t a real engineer, of course. I was really a people manager, but it was necessary for me to learn the rudiments of how the various pieces of shipboard equipment were supposed to work.

One of those pieces of equipment is called “the steering gear.” The steering gear of a ship is its single most important system—even on a warship. The steering gear is a collective term referring to all of the mechanisms that move the rudder or rudders, allowing the ship to be steered.

Generally speaking, the rudder is moved by a hydraulic pump. This primary pump also has a backup pump, and both pumps have four sources of power: normal and alternate power, emergency diesel, and hand power.

Why so much trouble for a pump? Because the rudder, though quite small in comparison to the whole vessel, directs and controls the course of the ship. When the ship is navigating in a narrow channel or refueling at sea, the Conning Officer—who is directing the movement of the ship—dreads failure of steering all else, because while the steering pumps are small, losing steering puts the whole vessel in danger. If you can’t steer the ship, then you tend to run into things, which can ruin your whole day.

In a somewhat similar way, the fires currently burning all over Australia probably began from something very small: one bolt of lightning, one match, one cigarette, one careless moment. Those fires began in a very small way, but what a devastating effect they are producing!

Our text in James cites these two examples and adds a third, the human tongue, also insignificant in size, but with enormous effect. Words seem so small, yet they are so full of power – power to bless or to curse.

In so far as we know, words differentiate humans from other animals. Other animals are able to communicate, but apparently not as we can. This is likely part of what it means for us to be created in the image of God.

Words express ideas and feelings, and they allow us to communicate in a way that we are able to understand one another; yet so often we take our words for granted and are careless with them – far more careless than we might be with a match.

In a relatively small congregation many of us know one another pretty well. And, while such knowledge and friendship is a beautiful thing, it can also be dangerous. Sometimes we know things we have no business knowing, and consequently we may say things we have no business saying.

Our text points out that if we unbridled a wild horse, we’d be in trouble at once. And if we unbridle our tongues, we can set relationships on fire.

Our focus this morning is actually the book of Proverbs, not the book of James, and Proverbs has quite a lot to say about how we use our tongues. You have an insert in your bulletin that lists a good many of those statements.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 12, 2020.

In the time we have this morning, I'm going to talk about four sins of the tongue and three skills of the tongue. Since I've already told you that I spent quite a few years as a sailor, I'm going to begin with **obscenity**, or swearing.

In the summer of 2007, a dozen or so of us from First Baptist Bristol traveled to Mazatlan, Mexico to build a modest house in a slum. When we later watched the video from that trip, one scene especially caught my attention.

The scene was of Matt Newton, our contemporary worship leader, who had tripped on some bricks in the yard of the house we were building and then had fallen on the debris. As he sat in the debris on camera, holding his foot, Matt smiled and said, "I passed the spirituality test." There are many things that could be called "spirituality tests," but Matt was referring to the way I generally use those words, which meant that his mishap hadn't caused him to swear or to say anything ugly.

I've found over the years that a good barometer of the condition of one's soul—including my own—is the unscreened and unfiltered response that comes to our lips when we hit ourselves with a hammer, stick ourselves with a pin, slam a door on our finger, back into another car, or lose a critical document on a computer. While what we say is a part of the test, the more difficult aspect of this test is what we think but don't actually say out loud.

The idea for this test came from Jesus, as I'm sure you realize. It began when some Pharisees and teachers of the Law came to Jesus with a complaint: "*Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat*" (Matthew 15:2). Jesus responded to their question by saying to the gathered crowd, "*Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person*" (Matthew 15:10-11).

In that one sentence, Jesus essentially cancelled the dietary laws of the Old Testament and made a great deal of what the Pharisees did and taught obsolete.² As He always did, Jesus took what had been understood as an external standard of behavior and made it an internal standard of the spirit, a matter of the heart.

In Luke 6:43-45, Jesus said, "*A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. A tree is identified by its fruit. Figs never grow on thorn bushes, nor grapes on bramble bushes. A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart.*" Another version renders that last sentence as "*Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.*" **That's what the "spirituality test" is about: the overflow of the heart.**

Just as ordinary barometers measure air pressure, unscreened and unfiltered exclamations measure the emotional pressure in our hearts. Vulgarity is almost always evidence of anger and anxiety, and anger and anxiety are evidence of a heart that's out of whack.

In another translation, Jesus told us that "*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*" (Luke 6:45). And Paul exhorted us not to "*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*" (Ephesians 4:29).

After **obscenity**, the second sin of the tongue I'll mention is **lying**. Telling things we know are not true even makes "The Big Ten": *You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor* (Exodus 20:16; #9).

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, volume 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), p. 118.

Proverbs tells us that *“Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD,”* and *“A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow”* (12:22, 25:18). And further, I suggest to you that there is very little difference between repeating what you know to be false and repeating what you don't know to be true.³ We must be very careful.

A third sin of the tongue is simple **meanness**. Scripture has a good bit to say about this, too. Proverbs notes that *“Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death is the man who deceives his neighbor and says, “I am only joking!”* (26:18-19).

Job asked his so-called friends, *“How long will you torment me and break me in pieces with words?”* (Job 19:2); and Proverbs reminds us that *“the tongue has the power of life and death”* (18:21). Do your friends think of you as kind, or as one with a sharp tongue? You could always ask them . . . if you're brave.

I want to give a bit more time to the fourth sin of the tongue, because this may be the “favorite sin” of church folk. This fourth sin is **gossip**.

Two women thought they were alone in the ladies' room, and they spoke unkindly about another woman in their church. They were quite surprised when the woman of whom they were speaking stormed out of one of the stalls. Proverbs tells us that *“the godless destroy their neighbors with their mouths,”* and that *“Death and life are in the power of the tongue. Those who love it will eat its fruit”* (Proverbs 11:9, 18:21).

Let me say again that there is very little difference between repeating what we know to be false and repeating what we don't know to be true. James noted that *“if anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue . . . this person's religion is worthless”* (James 1:26).

Proverbs points out that *“when words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent”* (10:19). Or again, *“For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases . . . a whisperer separates close friends”* (Proverbs 26:20, 16:28).

More sobering still, *“the words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body”* (Proverbs 18:8). The unnecessary words of gossip and tale-bearing may feel like juicy morsels of information to savor and pass along or to share, but the “juice” is often the very lifeblood of the person or persons of whom we speak. In this sense, gossip very frequently makes us guilty of other people's “blood.”

While our tongues can be used in the most magnificent praise of God and in the most worthy acts of kindness and blessing, it's awfully easy for our tongues to become inadvertent agents of Darkness and Destruction. So it is that Paul reminds us not to *“let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up”* (Ephesians 4:29).

And if you need something else to keep you up at night, Jesus told us to *“Remember that **you will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word you have spoken.** By your own words you will be acquitted; by your own words you will be condemned”* (Matthew 12:36-37).

Obscenity, lying, meanness, and gossip. Enormous damage can come from our tongues. James reminds us that *“the tongue is a small thing, but what enormous damage it can do. A tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is full of*

³ A good test of such things is to ask ourselves, “Is it true?” “Is it kind?” “Is it necessary?” Internet information can be checked at www.snopes.com.

wickedness that can ruin your whole life. It can turn the entire course of your life into a blazing flame of destruction, for it is set on fire by hell itself" (James 3:5-6).

Well, that's pretty rough stuff, but happily, that's not the whole story, is it? Let's turn our attention to positive uses of our tongues! I'm going to mention three "skills of the tongue," the first of which is not to use it at all. This first skill is **silence**.

Proverbs has a good bit to say about silence, too:

- "Whoever keeps his mouth [shut] and his tongue [still] keeps himself out of trouble" (21:23).
- "Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (29:20).

And then there's one of my Mom's favorite verses: "It's better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool than to open it and prove the point!" That's not a direct quote from Scripture, but that idea is certainly found in Proverbs! (17:28).

Have you ever wondered what the secret is to being a good conversationalist? The secret is being a good listener. Most people don't listen very well. We assume in advance that we know what the other person is going to say and that it is uninteresting, unimportant, or wrong.

What we have to say is obviously superior, so we quit listening and begin composing our answer even as they speak. Proverbs has something to say about that, too: "*If one gives an answer before he hears, that is his folly and shame!*" (18:13).

Learning to really listen and to "hold our tongue" is a crucial skill. Indeed, to listen to another's soul as they reveal themselves to us may be almost the greatest service that one human being ever offers to another. Listen care-fully when others speak, and listen with openness, interest, understanding, and concern. Cultivate the skill of silence.

After **silence**, the second skill of the tongue is **support**.

Lucy: "My life is a drag. I'm completely fed up. I've never felt so low in my life

Linus: "When you're in a mood like that you should try to think of things you have to be thankful for. Count your blessings."

Lucy: "Ha! That's a good one! I could count my blessings on one finger! I've never had anything, and I never will have anything! I don't get half the breaks that other people do. Nothing ever goes right for me! And you talk about counting blessings! You talk about being thankful! What do I have to be thankful for?"

Linus: "Well, for one thing, you have a little brother who loves you."

Lucy: (crying)

Linus: "Every now and then I say the right thing."

Proverbs reminds us that "*A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver*" (25:11). You go, Linus!

You may remember Sean and Leigh Anne Touhy, the Memphis couple who adopted Michael Oher⁴—who later played for the *Ravens*—and whose story was told in the film, *The Blind*

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Oher

Side.⁵ In their book, *In a Heartbeat: Sharing the Power of Cheerful Giving*,⁶ they tell a story about a congressional program that awards internships to young people who have aged out of the foster care system. These are kids who were never adopted and are no longer eligible for state support.

A senator employed one such man as an intern. The senator dashed in for a meeting one morning and saw his intern already in the office, reorganizing the mailroom. The senator said to the intern, “This is amazing—the mailroom has never looked so clean. You’re doing a great job.”

A few minutes later, the senator saw that the intern had tears streaming down his face. He said, “Son, are you okay?”

“Yes,” the intern answered quietly.

“Did I say something to offend you?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, what’s wrong?”

The young man said, “That’s the first time in my life anyone’s told me that I did something good.”

Proverbs tells us that “*the mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life. . . . Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body*” (10:11, 16:24).

Well, one more story and I’m done. The third skill of the tongue, after **silence** and **support**, is **forgiveness**. Examples could be many, but this story has to do with the snarky and hateful things that happen on social media these days.

Patton Oswalt is a comedian who is known to have quick retorts for anyone who heckles him on stage and he has a reputation for “slaying” trolls on the Internet. This story started with a sarcastic tweet Oswalt posted about President Trump.⁷

A Trump supporter named Michael Beatty tweeted back in response, lobbing accusations and insults at Oswalt. Out of curiosity, Oswalt began scrolling through Beatty’s *Twitter* timeline. What he found there prompted Oswalt to post this tweet:

“Aw, man. This dude just attacked me on *Twitter* and I joked back but then I looked at his timeline and he’s in a LOT of trouble health-wise. He’s been dealt some [terrible] cards—let’s deal him some good ones. Click and donate—just like I’m about to do.”

The link that followed was to a *GoFundMe* account dedicated to help cover the burgeoning costs of care for Beatty’s health conditions, which were several and serious. Because of Oswalt’s efforts at donation and promotion, the campaign began trending on social media, and at last check had exceeded \$30,000.

Beatty responded to Oswalt with another tweet: “You have humbled me to the point where I can barely compose my words. You have caused me to take pause and reflect on how harmful words from my mouth could result in such an outpouring.”

My friends, the powers of life and death are present in our tongues. And yes, **there is a fire in the forest. It is the human tongue. Is yours a fire that burns or a fire that warms?**

“Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!” (Psalm 141:3).

⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Blind_Side_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Blind_Side_(film))

⁶ <https://www.amazon.com/Heartbeat-Sharing-Power-Cheerful-Giving/dp/0312577184>

⁷ <https://ew.com/celebrity/2019/01/24/patton-oswalt-helps-ailing-man-twitter-troll/>

*“Let the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be acceptable in your sight,
O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer!” (Psalm 19:14).*