**Tongue on Fire**

**James: Learning to Reflect Jesus Well.**

**James 3:1-12**

Game – 5 volunteers! All sit up front and tie a cherry stem into a knot. Who can do it the fastest?

**Story: Burnt 70-80 acres of my Grandparents acreage.**

All it needed was a spark. Just a tiny spark and the grass caught fire. Before we knew it this blaze got out of control. A few gusts of wind and the sparks found their home in the tall grass and the little blaze turned into a raging inferno. Our parents quickly dropped the wiener sticks gathered anything and everything they could to try to beat this fire down but to no avail, it only got larger. Eventually the fire spread and took 70-80 areas with it. I still remember this old school fire engine showing up, only much too late. The damage had already been done.

**James 3: 5-6** says “But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And the tongue is a flame of fire.”

Today’s message is entitled **Tongue on Fire.**

**Read text James 3:1-12**

**Proverbs 18:21** says the tongue has the power of life and death. Those who love to talk will reap the consequences.”

We all know the power of the tongue to bring life and to bring death.

It’s easy to focus on the negative consequences of the tongue, but there are many positive examples.

James begins by using 3 analogies that give example to the positive impact that very small items can have and as a result influence something quite large.

Small items like a small bit in the mouth of a very large horse the rider or the one in the lead can make the animal go wherever they want it to go.

Or through the use of a very small item like a rudder on a sailing ship, the ship captain can make the very large boat go wherever he or she desires it to go.

In the same way, the tongue, a very small item, can make a huge impact on both the one and on the many.

It can make these grand speeches, which can cause huge positive impact or huge negative impact.

Our tongues may be small, but like a tiny spark that sets a blaze, our tongues can do untold damage to others.

In the chapter entitled “Queen Alice” of his *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll has the Red Queen say, “When once you’ve said a thing, that fixes it, and you must take the consequences.”

Interesting, some of us immediately go to personal experiences where someone told you something, and your life was changed forever, either positively or negatively.

And some of us go to examples on a larger scale. Examples from politics or religion where someone in a position of influence and power influence incredible change.

I think of Martin Luther King, Billy Graham and Nelson Mandella.

Both are true here. Positive & Negative.

**Vs. 6** James says, “that through the tongue, a whole world of wickedness can corrupt the entire body.”

Here the word body can be used in two ways.

**Physical Body** – individually – someone’s words impact us on a personal level.

In our week of prayer Laura gave an example of a teacher who spoke life into her as a teenage girl, telling her that she saw incredible potential in her. These words had the power to set her on a whole different positive trajectory.

But words can impact us negatively can’t they?

**Winston Churchill knew the power words could have on others.**

Growing up, Winston was ignored by both his parents. His father Lord Randolph Churchill detested Winston, and his mother merely paid no attention to him. The fact that Winston scored a 53% in English Composition on his entrance exam to British Military Academy, seemed to confirm his parent’s opinion of him and seemed to justify their neglect.

Upon graduation from Sandhurst young Winston imagined his father would be proud. Instead his father was furious that he didn’t score high enough to make the 60th rifles, one of the best regiments, he wrote this letter to his son.

*Do not think I am going to take the trouble of writing to you long letters after every failure you commit and undergo.… I no longer attach the slightest weight to anything you may say about your own acquirements & exploits.… If you cannot prevent yourself from leading the idle useless unprofitable life you have had during your schooldays & later months, you will become a mere social wastrel one of the hundreds of the public school failures, and you will degenerate into a shabby unhappy & futile existence. If that is so you have to bear all the blame for such misfortunes yourself.*

Randolph ended the letter brutally: “Your mother sends her love.”

Upon hearing this story our minds can go to the time we heard similar cutting wounding words; or the times we spoke words like this.

The tongue is powerful and not to be taken lightly.

What flows out of our mouths reveals what’s in the heart.

Jesus said in **Matthew 15:11** “Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.”

The tongue left to it’s own devices can cause so much good, and so much pain.

So words spoken can impact us on an individual level. The Body.

And it can impact the larger Body –

**The Church Body.**

Teachers and Leaders in the church make up a small percentage of the church as a whole, but like a rudder and a bridle, can make a huge impact.

I think of the words spiritual leaders have spoken into my life. I still remember them. They live in my heart and have born incredible fruit.

But just shows the power of our words. James’ warning is be careful. This is the human condition; the tongue can bring about so much good, and so much evil.

So James begins this text with this warning.

“Not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly.”

This is no small matter. We will one day stand before our creator and give account for what we taught; what we said; how we used our position of influence and power for the kingdom or for evil.

**Seminary Class on Leadership.** I remember my professor challenging us as a class about this; just the sobering reality of the task of leadership and influence – the call to represent Jesus with our words, to enter into the office of teacher with humility and sober judgment.

I was tempted to quit that day. I didn’t know if I wanted the responsibility. I was afraid. Apprehensive. Questions of “do I have what it takes?” I knew the power of the tongue to do evil and I knew my heart –

Like James confessed in this text – “Indeed we all make mistakes” – I knew some of the darkness in my heart, and so didn’t want the mantle of leadership – what if I was given a position of leadership and let the position of power go to my head – and wounded others; wounded the cause of the kingdom; misrepresented Jesus.

I wanted to walk away.

**Lord Acton’s** famous words, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

But we have all been given positions of power and influence haven’t we?

Yes, the call to teach and lead a church is huge. Can influence so many for good or for evil.

But we have all been given positions of leadership and influence in this way haven’t we?

* You can teach over coffee.
* You can teach your child.
* Your class.
* Your staff.
* You can teach your simple church.

Sometimes our actions can speak louder than words.

We have all been given positions of power and influence. **Question** is, how is our heart in it? How are we using it?

This is what James is saying. This is a human condition. Left to our own devices we are all prone to misusing power. Wounding others. Misguiding others.

James is saying you can’t just control what comes out of your mouth by focusing on the tongue – that’s not the way to go about it. Your tongue doesn’t have a mind of it’s own.

If the pathway to health is found in merely controlling our tongues, we would be able to reach perfection, able to control all the rest of our behaviors in the same way – just by simply applying self-control. But we all know that doesn’t work.

That’s not how to go about it. It’s bigger than that.

**It’s a matter of the heart.**

There was a lot going on in James’ day around this area.

There were likely those in the church in Jerusalem who should have lay aside their gift of teaching, to look at their heart. James knew it.

You see in the context of Roman culture and influence, people sought after positions of status and power.

Judaism also attracted people who wanted status positions.

And what made matters worse there were no standards set. This is why James and Paul devoted so much other writings to giving criteria for teachers in the body of Christ.

Jesus knew this to be true. He saw the Pharisees words and position of power and the ill effect it was having on people’s perception of God.

So much was damaging. Detrimental. Life taking rather than life giving.

Jesus words in **Matt. 12:36** says, *“We will have to give an account for each careless word spoken.”*

I look back when I was just a youth pastor. I know there is grace, but some of the things I said I wish I could have back.

We all know how easy it is for any teacher, whether in school or in church life, who in short order can devastate years of careful healthy growth in the life of people. Years of growth – gone in short order.

The power of the tongue to corrode or to nurture.

**Ken Blue** says, “One strategically placed abusive leader has the power to thwart life in the church just as a misplaced placenta blocks life in a mother’s womb.”

Sobering.

**TS:** **So many examples of this kind of misuse.**

There’s a story of a young man in his internship days who was causing quite a stir. This man claimed that God called him to exercise the spiritual gift of rebuke (run away!).

He wasn’t deterred or phased one bit when told that this spiritual gift isn’t mention in all of scripture.

This man began to terrorize the congregation, firmly believing he was God’s agent by giving his frequent insensitive accusations of imperfection.

That’s the thing, so often people who abuse with words have been abused somewhere down the way.

I’m not a psychologist but it seems to me that in most cases you have people who wrap themselves in a mantle of spiritual maturity in order to exercise a human and petty need to improve their self-image by decimating the self-image of others.

Just like a bully in the playground.

**As the cliché goes. “Hurt People Hurt people.”**

**And not just hurt people but also hurt people’s perception of God.**

**Philip Yancey** writes, “In my 25 years of journalism I have received my share of mixed reviews. Even so, as I read through stacks of letters, I get a strong sense for why the world at large doesn’t automatically associate the word grace with evangelical Christians.”

**Ken Blue** goes on to say “Today when church leaders set themselves up as keepers of the gate, using religious performance rather than faith in Jesus as the criterion for acceptance, they become strategically placed leaders who thwart the life of the body of Christ.”

In teachers desire to be right, to be keepers of the gate, to have the right doctrine, to manage people’s sin – by our harsh controlling words - we may well alienate the very people Jesus came to save.

**I think Christian teachers can also stray when there’s an over emphasis on one truth or on one doctrine.**

I went to visit the **Airport Vineyard Church** in the day. I went to hear John Wimber – a man I have great respect for. One thing that concerned me was Wimber’s involvement with the Signs and Wonders Movement in the 80’s.

Wimber claimed that Satan caused sickness. If you just have enough faith God will heal you. And that the performance of signs and wonders by Christians was God’s plan for world evangelization. He wrote the book entitled “power evangelism”. Much of the book I liked, but there seemed to be an imbalance.

**Don’t get me wrong;** I believe we have much more to experience as it relates to a deeper filling and experience of the Holy Spirit; more open to the gifts and healing – but when we have too much focus on one aspect of God’s gifts over and above all the others we get into trouble.

It wasn’t until Wimber’s own experience of cancer in 1993, a stroke in 1995 and a triple bypass in 1996 that he was forced to re-evaluate his theology. God doesn’t change, but sometimes our view of God or understanding of God has to change.

**Though Wimber died in 1997 at the age of 63 he** didn’t lose his faith; but had to work out his disappointment in order to keep his faith intact and alive and vibrant. Something we all must do in similar circumstances.

As a result John has found a more balanced view.

**The sad part of that story is all those who have been wounded by such theology.**

I have one such story of a pastor who taught that to go to the doctor is not relying on faith. This one young man started showing severe symptoms that needed to be looked at by a specialist but rather than going to a doctor he trusted the words of his pastor, and continued to trust Go for healing. Today his parents are grieved over the fact that their boy sits forever bound in a wheel-chair, unable to move his arms and legs.

**Ken Blue says there are two types of spiritual abusers.**

1. The leader who feels insignificant and seeks significance by gaining domination over others. He or she is plagued by inner doubts and fears. This person may have been personally wounded by spiritual abuse in the past and may grab power as a form of self-defense. There may be no desire to hurt; the injuries to others are simply a byproduct of this person’s quest to become somebody while protecting themselves, not allowing anyone to get too close.
2. Power seeking ministers attempting to compensate for a sense of inner weakness will often put their heel on the necks of those under their authority. Leaders who secretly themselves unqualified often wield a heavier hand than those who are secure.

But it isn’t merely the problem of the leader, the teacher.

We need people who can detect poison when they hear it.

No better illustration that this scene from **Lord of the Rings**.

**Wormtongue** is this type of deceiver. And he is preying on Eowyn who is full of despair and grief.

*“Oh but you are alone. Who knows what you have spoken to the darkness alone, in the bitter watches of the night, when all your life seems to shrink, the walls of your tower closing in on you. So fair, yet so cold like a morning of pale spring still clinging to winter’s chill.”*

How does Eowyn respond? “Your words are poison.”

Such an amazing example of who these wormtongue’s prey on. People who are legitimately grieving a loss; people whose hearts are vulnerable for whatever reason.

What is it in the heart of the person sitting in the pew that makes them so susceptible to this kind of abuse?

**There are two markers:**

1. Those who are brought up to believe that God is a perfectionist tyrant will be vulnerable to leaders who call for religious performance as the way to please Him.
2. Others who suffer chronic guilt (either true guilt or false guilt) and seek to remedy that guilt through religious works are also potential victims of leaders who will manipulate and control them

There are many in our communities who have come out of similar toxic spiritual environments. If this is your story, our prayer is that you experience the healing grace of Christ. That you come to know Him as friend who sticks closer to you than a brother.

The tongue so reveals what’s in the heart doesn’t it?

James’ warning is pretty severe.

No small matter.

**Vs. 6-9.**

The tongue is likened as a flame of fire. It has the power to set things on fire.

**The image of total damage and destruction.**

In the ancient world people feared fire uncontrolled fire – more than any other disaster because they would have the resources to deal with it.

In the same way James is saying the tongue can cause the same kind of damage.

James is saying that if your tongue is spewing this kind of abuse, it is working in line with Satan. The evil one. The Accuser.

**John 10** describes Satan as the one who comes to steal, kill and destroy.

Jesus describes Satan or the Accuser as the father of lies. Who masquerades as an angel of light.

Satan knows the power the tongue, not governed by the Holy Spirit to stain an entire body. The power it has to stain an entire church body.

**Vs. 7** is cool. James brings the reader back to Genesis, the call of God on mankind to rule and subdue; to take care of, to garden, to weed and till the soil to bring life. To bear fruit.

Our tongue is called to do the same. Speak words that bring life like sunlight and rain add life to a garden. To speak words that bear fruit.

But that’s not all that took place in the garden. Satan, Lucifer is introduced in the garden as the liar, the deceiver; the one whose lies brought death and destruction.

When we speak lies. When we deceive, when we speak words that bring death we are sending the listener to hell.

The word is Gehenna. Gehenna was a place outside the people where people would bring their garbage. Where the pagans would worship Baal and Molech and practiced child sacrifice. It signified death and evil.

That’s what James is saying.

He is speaking into an actual situation. These false teachers favoritism. Their disrespect of the poor. They’re marginalizing all those who they deemed as useless.

It’s like they weren’t treating these people as **fine china**, which God created them to be. Rather they were treating them as **paper plates**; good for being used then discarded – good for the garbage heap, not the china cabinet.

And James is choked.

Devaluing people, treating people as less then; and teaching this was so evil.

James knew this teaching would lead to so much more.

* oppression of others
* disrespect
* abuse
* control of others to fulfill my agenda
* slavery
* prostitution
* pornography
* what we’re seeing today; groups like ISIS and Boku Haram – killing thousands, raping and strapping bombs to 10 yr old girls to their agenda can be reached.

So contrary to the law of love. So contrary to whom we were all created to be.

Image bearers of our loving Creator.

James is calling for integrity within the body.

That our words match what’s in our heart.

Jesus promised his followers that out of us streams of living water would flow from deep inside. Splashing onto others.

To be streams that flow fresh water of life not poison.

He says a fig tree doesn’t produce olives; and a grapevine doesn’t produce olives.

And a salty spring doesn’t or can’t hope to produce fresh water.

Why? Because the heart has never been transformed by the grace of Christ. The starting point is faith in Jesus; surrendering your heart to the only One who can transform it from the inside out.

**We need a transition from Tongues on Fire to Tongue of Fire.**

Acts speaks of the Day of Pentecost when the Apostles were confronted with the person of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture says that tongues of fire lighted on their heads and they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Fire all through God’s Word speaks of God’s Holy presence.

* Moses encounters God in the burning bush.
* Fire from heaven in Elijah and the Prophets.
* The fire in the lamps in the temple that burn 24/7 365 days a year.

John the Baptist in **Luke 3:16** says this about Jesus at his baptism.

*“John answered their questions by saying, “I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”*

When we are confronted with the grace of Christ on this level our hearts undergo a deep transformation.

And we experience the fullness of Christ; the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

This is both now and not yet.

When we put our trust in Jesus we are automatically filled with the Holy Spirit.

You can’t be born from above; made new apart from the Holy Spirit.

But to what degree are we filled?

Have you experienced all there is? Are you experiencing the fullness of the Spirit?

Like a balloon we can be filled, but not completely. The more the balloon is filled, the more of ourselves become displaced.

**More of Jesus, less of me.**

Interesting that when we are filled with Jesus; this Jesus who modeled true servant leadership – leading through friendship rather than fear – becomes a marker in our own lives.

**Story of Fatima.** Have you hear it?

One line that caught my attention.

A few lines that grab my heart when I hear them.

“It’s easy to be a Christian in your head; to honor God with your words. But being a Christian with your heart and with your actions – a Christian in the deepest fiber of your being – that’s where faith comes alive; where it materializes from faith into action.

And your natural response to your relationship with Jesus is to express it, any way possible.”

**John 7:38**

“Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.”