



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau
January 1, 2017

"Talk Stink...Ships Sink" (Real Faith for Real People) - James 3:1-12
Ron Mathieu

James 3:1-12 - **1** Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

2 For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.

3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. **4** Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!

6 And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.

7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,

8 but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. **9** With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we

curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. **11** Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?

12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Good morning and Happy New Year!! I hope all of you had a wonderful and blessed Christmas and are looking forward to a new or renewed journey with Jesus Christ.

This morning we go back to our series called, "Real Faith for Real People," a study of the Book of James. And today we're going to examine what James, the brother of Jesus, has to say about controlling what we say.

Okay, I'm gonna be candid. I think it's ironic that this passage just happened to fall on the Sunday I was assigned to preach!

First, I'm an extrovert, and anyone who knows me knows I like to talk. When I volunteered to serve on submarines, my commanding officer lamented that the Submarine Force, also known

as the "Silent Service," wouldn't be silent anymore!

Secondly, my mother used to frequently tell me that God gave me two ears and only one mouth because I should listen more than I speak.

And when Pastor Dan explains different ways we can fast during Lent, he often cites an unnamed staff member who once fasted from being sarcastic for 40 days. I'm not going to identify which staff member he meant, but I will observe that some people just have trouble discerning the difference between sarcasm and witty repartee!

The reality is that our tongue can get us both into—and out of—tricky situations:

I had a friend who worked in Safeway, and he liked to tell the story of the young man who worked in their produce department. One day a grumpy customer walked in and said, "I only wanna buy half of this head of lettuce."

And the kid replied, "I'm sorry sir, but we only sell whole heads of lettuce."

"Are you serious? I live alone and half the head will go rotten before I can eat it!

So the kid says, “Okay sir, lemme check with the manager,” and he walks through the swinging doors at the back of produce—not realizing the grumpy customer is following right behind him.

“Mr. Williams, there a grumpy old man out here who insists he only wants to buy half a head of lettuce.”

Suddenly realizing the customer is right behind him, he quickly adds, “And this nice gentleman has offered to buy the other half!”

Well, the manager was so impressed with the young man’s quick wit that he calls him in later and says, “I’m going to recommend you for assistant manager at our new Safeway store in Montreal, Canada.”

And the kid says, “Montreal, all they have there are hockey players and ugly women.”

The manager says, “I’ll have you know my wife is from Montreal!”

And the kid says, “Really? Which team did she play for?”

Controlling what we say is one of the most frequently discussed topics in the Bible, especially in the genre known as “wisdom literature.” In the Old Testament, the “wisdom” books include Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes.

And many Biblical scholars say that the Book of James also falls into this genre. As we’ve been learning, it’s on a very practical book how to live a Christian life.

In the five chapters of the Book of James, there’s guidance on

how we use of our mouths in four of them.

The Book of Proverbs addresses the subject 46 times by my count. Here’s a quick sampling:

“The words of the reckless pierce like swords.” (Prov. 18:2)

“The lips of fools bring them strife, and their mouths invite a beating.” (Prov. 18:6)

“Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” (Prov. 29:20)

“An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips.” (Prov. 12:13)

And Proverbs 18:21 puts it this way: *“The tongue has the power of life and death...”* (New International Version)

Life and death? Really? Really.

I was in the Navy for 26 years and it’s a fundamental principle that we would not discuss any ship’s movement except to those who had a strict need to know.

During World War II there were posters everywhere that read, “Loose lips sink ships.” The local version might have been “You talk stink, ships sink!”.

The point was that an unguarded statement could allow an enemy advanced knowledge to destroy our ships and actually kill people. It still applies.

On October 12, 2000, Al Qaeda didn’t just show up with a small fishing boat full of explosives when the USS Cole pulled into

Aden harbor in Yemen. The Cole moored to refuel at 9:30, and less than 2 hours later this happened.



The terrorists had to know the ship was going to be there with enough lead time to find a fiberglass boat, obtain and install powerful explosive charges, and recruit, train and position two suicide martyrs to detonate right where the most sailors would die as they lined up for lunch.

Loose lips sink ships. The tongue has the power of life and death.

How big is your tongue? If it’s not uncomfortable for you to do so, stick out your tongue! I doubt if anyone here qualifies for the world record.

According to the Guinness Book, Nick Stoeberl of Salinas, California has the world’s longest tongue measuring just under four inches from its tip to the middle of the closed top lip. That’s 2/3 the length of a dollar bill! I better there wasn’t any peanut butter left in the bottom of his jar!

How much do you think your tongue weighs? Well, the average male tongue weighs about 2 1/2 ounces. For women, the average tongue weighs just 2 ounces.

Yep, statistically women’s tongues are smaller than men’s tongues. (Guys, this moment is known as an invaluable opportunity to hold your tongue!)

Because the Book of Proverbs also says, *“Watch your words and hold your tongue; you’ll save yourself a lot of grief.”* - Proverbs 21:23 (The Message)

James says that although your tongue is but a small part of the body, (less than 1/10 of one percent of our body weight), it can have a huge impact.

3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can guide their whole bodies. 4 Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

James isn’t just providing a reminder of previous wisdom writings. The central theme of his book is that if we want to follow Jesus, it’s important not only to have faith, but to express that faith in the way we live.

He’s not saying we have to be perfect or won’t make mistakes with our mouth. In verse two, he acknowledges: *“all of us make many mistakes in what we say.”*

I appreciate that grace, because I get my mirs wixed all the time!

But we should try to control our tongues, much like a bit in a horse’s mouth can control a huge powerful beast. The list of English words that describes people who don’t control their tongues is a long one...words like:

Gossip
Manipulator
Complainer
Brow-beater
Liar
Motor-mouth
Nag
Braggart

Pessimist
Windbag...

Okay, I was reluctant to mention that last one while I was preaching, but James has no such hesitation in addressing teachers and preachers:

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” James 3:1

Let me give a little context here. In the early church anyone could rise and speak—that’s how Jesus was allowed to stand up in any synagogue and teach—and great honor was afforded rabbis in Jewish society.

William Barclay explains: *“The title rabbi meant ‘great one,’ and those holding that office were accorded the greatest respect. One’s duty to help a rabbi exceeded even the duty to help one’s parents. In fact, should a rabbi and one’s father and mother be captured by an enemy, duty demanded that the rabbi be ransomed first!”*

So James is reminding his audience that if you teach you may get authority and great prestige, but higher standards, huge responsibility, and accountability come with it. I assure you that every one of us who take this pulpit are aware that it’s not enough to share God’s truth, but we also have to be sincere in trying to follow His ways.

Teachers should be well-prepared, and our spiritual lives must be healthy as well. This is true for all kinds of teachers: parents, supervisors, mentors. The toughest part is not what we say... it’s how we live our lives. Because if you’re teaching one thing and

living another it can have a devastating impact on those who hear you.

This is the basic message for the whole Book of James. He wrote it as a practical guide for real people to practice real faith. He was deeply concerned that those who have faith in Jesus express and reflect that faith in the way they live.

Back in Chapter 1 he said, *“If you claim to be religious but don’t control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.”* - James 1:26

Which is why he reminds us repeatedly that the FIRST challenge for someone who follows Jesus is control of the tongue. Taming the tongue is not for sissies. James tells us:

“This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can’t tame a tongue—it’s never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth!” - James 3:7-10 (The Message)

When I was a child, our family physician used to start every examination by asking us to stick out our tongues. He seemed to be able to tell a great deal about our health just by looking into our mouth.

That’s a great metaphor for spiritual reality as well: What comes out of our mouths is usually an accurate index of the health of our hearts.

Earlier I said that loose lips can sink ships... and they can also wreck lives.

An unguarded or unkind statement can sink hopes and aspirations, even drive people to the dark side, sometimes with disastrous consequences.

In his book "Just A Minute" my good friend Wess Stafford repeats the true story of a young German boy who was physically beaten and verbally berated his father until he ran away at age 14.

His seven-year-old younger brother "Adi" then became the abusive father's target, receiving constant physical and psychological maltreatment. Adi wanted to become a priest, and later an artist, which drew even more cruelty from his father.

One night Adi decided to run away. His father got wind of his plans and locked him upstairs. Undaunted, he tried to squeeze through the bars on the window, but couldn't quite fit, so he took off his clothes to see if he could wiggle through. But he heard his father coming up the stairs, withdrew, and hastily draped a tablecloth over his naked body.

This time, instead of beating him, his father just laughed and laughed and mocked him as "toga boy." He called the boy's mother to come and laugh at "toga boy." This ridicule hurt him more deeply than any beating.

Is it any wonder that Adi, known to us as Adolph Hitler, became determined that no one would ever make fun of him again. And he set out to rule the world, unleashing the most horrific atrocities in history.

I see this all the time in my Compassion International work with poor children around the world. Children raised in extreme

poverty are told from an early age to believe that they're no good, they're worthless, and they'll never amount to anything!

It's a lie! But I bet even as I was just describing that lie, there are many of you who heard the echoes of similar words you heard in your childhood. Such words aren't just etched in our memories...they're branded on our hearts.

"Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words can never hurt you."

Tell that to any kid that's been bullied and they'll say, "What planet did that poet grow up on?"

Words can be so powerful, and like all forms of power, they can be used to bless or to curse, to heal or wound, to motivate or discourage.

Imagine, if you haven't already heard them, how these words must FEEL:

A doctor says, "We need to discuss your test results..."

A boss says, "I know you can do it!"

A husband says, "I'm leaving you."

A parent tells his kid, "Can't you do anything right?"

A wife says, "I am so proud of you."

These words carry such power...a power mightier than the sword...a power that can wound deeply if our tongues are not tamed. Or...they can inspire and lift people to great heights if they are controlled.

Earlier I mentioned Compassion President Emeritus Wess Stafford. In all the years I've known Wess, I've never heard him say a discouraging word to anyone...not once!

A few years back he stayed at our house and wrote his second book, Just A Minute on our back lanai. Wess is convinced that if God stands a child before you, for even just a minute, it is a divine appointment. And we should not squander that opportunity to notice them, to value them, and to encourage them. It can transform a child's life.

I've shared before that my mother had some serious mental issues while I was growing up, and I now realize that what was going on at home really affected my behavior in school.

I was a class clown, and always getting into fights. My third grade teacher Mrs. Dunphy saw through my disruptive behavior and took every opportunity she had to tell me I was smart and I could be a good student.

To this day I can picture when she'd call me to stand up read out loud because I had such a nice voice. It changed me. I stopped getting into fights and became determined to prove to Mrs. Dunphy that she was right...I could be a good student, and I wouldn't disappoint her!

And this is what happens when you sponsor a Compassion child. You send a strong message that the lie of poverty isn't true about them...that someone on the other side of the world thinks they are important...that they can succeed, and that God loves them too.

Your words of your letters fall on fertile, receptive young ears and give them hope and encouragement. Your letters are like precious gold. They keep them and treasure them.

This last week I asked my small group if anyone had said something to them (positive or negative) that changed the trajectory of their lives, and the stories were very moving...in some cases, moved the teller and the listeners to tears.

And the most common thread in all the stories was that it was as if it happened yesterday. They could remember the exact place or time or circumstance.

Such words are not just *heard*...they're *felt* very deeply.

When your words reflect a warm heart, you can have a similar impact on people you encounter every day: your kids, your spouses, those you supervise or work beside, even the Safeway cashier or stranger on the street.

Or not.

Untamed, your tongue can be "a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

James tells us, "*From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.*" James 3:10

It's so easy for us to slip and to criticize or say something cutting about others. This ought not to be so!

"Would that it was so simple!" you might say.

One way First Prez encourages taming our tongues is with our strong prohibition: "No parking lot politics!" That means if

you disagree with something the church is doing, say so in a way that your concern can be effectively heard rather than just grousing.

When I hear someone doing that, I simply say, "Could what we're doing be considered parking lot politics?"

Avoiding gossip is another way to tame your tongue. It takes two people for gossip to grow roots and it's true that gossip dies when it hits a wise person's ears. But pastor and author Chuck Swindoll says it can be stopped before that:

When someone says to him, "I want to tell you about so and so," he says, "Wait a minute, is it okay if I quote you on that?"

Invariably the response is a pause to which he adds, "If I can't quote you, maybe you better not tell me in the first place."

I'll make a final point and then leave you with a challenge. My final point is that sometimes the best way to tame the tongue is to hold it! Seriously.

I know for me the biggest mistake I make with my mouth is to open it when I shouldn't, even when I'm well-meaning.

This has been a lifelong struggle for me, one that I'm still working on. Sometimes I feel like I'll burst if I don't get the words out... and that's usually a big hint that I should be especially careful!

I also confess that if someone's looking for an opinion, they don't wonder if I have one. And that's often true when people aren't looking for an opinion.

So I consciously try to remember Mark Twain's wise advice that, "it's better to hold your tongue and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt!"

I'm not alone, and this has always been so. In the Middle Ages they called it "keeping your tongue behind your teeth."

On a windswept hill in an English country churchyard stands an old, gray slate tombstone. The epitaph reads:

"Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, lies Arabella Young...Who, on the twenty-fourth of May, began to hold her tongue."

Earlier Angela read today's Scripture passage with an accent that was immediately recognized as British.

Pastor Steve is a powerful preacher. But does he have to tell us where he grew up?

No, they both have distinctive accents that shed light on where they're coming from. Often in more ways than one!

"What? You got a problem with that?"

And I contend that if your tongue is controlled, that too is a very noticeable accent.

Jesus taught, "*Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*" - Matthew 12:34

When you speak, will others recognize the accent of someone with an abundant heart?

Because when Jesus Christ is the Lord of your heart, then He's Lord of your lips too, and it's as noticeable as a British or Jersey accent.

The New Year is a time many make resolutions. So I'll end my message with a New Year's challenge that can change your life and who knows, maybe change the lives of many others.

I challenge you to go three days without uttering a negative or critical comment. At work, at school, at home...just three days. It's harder than you imagine, but give it a try.

You might be thinking, "But there are times when I have to give corrective instruction to my child." Okay, see if you can re-state your constructive criticism in a positive manner.

If you mess up, start the three days over again.

Once you get to three days, try it for a week. Then two weeks, three, and then a whole month. I promise you...it will change your outlook on life, and for most of us, how people see you.

For most, it will be so noticeable that people will ask, "What's happened?"

Just tell them they've you've picked up the accent of a person who follows Christ.

Amen? Amen.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting:

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