

Small but Unruly
James 3:1-12
September 15, 2024

James is writing to those outside of the land of Israel. There would be challenges out there, challenges that might be common but challenges that may have to do with cultural differences that may take different emphases to deal with those different challenges. Maybe that is why this text is kind of a crazy text. James starts out with a warning for those we have so much regard for, teachers. The teacher of that day would be the apostles and prophets but today it would be pastors. Yes, pastors are charged with teaching and especially the teaching of the Word of God, the Word that saves and condemns. The Word needs to be rightly handled so that those the pastor teaches will not be given advice that might cause a person to fall into sin, thinking they are doing nothing wrong but are being led to do a wrong that could eventually keep them out of heaven.

One of the things a pastor does is speak. But what does he speak? He should speak law and gospel. The law to remind his hearers that they are sinners. As sinners those who will listen, should be convicted of their sin and look to the Lord to help them to change their ways, their thoughts and actions. As they look to do that, they should hear of Jesus and His forgiveness for sins. They should understand that the payment for their sin that separates them from God has been paid for in full.

As a pastor, I would never want to lead anyone down the path to hell. I want to be controlled by the bit of God's Word. I pledged to do that as I was ordained into the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. In some ways it is pretty scary that I am in the position I am in. I want people to look to the Word and to their lives and see where the two are not in sync and look to Jesus to help them by the power of the Holy Spirit to change, to evaluate and make a course correction aided by the sacraments to get back on the path laid out for them by God.

Now some would say the path is some certain job or career but it is more like a way of life where the Lord works in your life to direct it to be the you He has made you to be but live it in a way where you take a back seat to others who need what you have. It is as Simon Peter responded to Jesus when Jesus asked the disciples if they too wanted to abandon Him after He told of the need to feed on Him the living bread from heaven, *Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words*

of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” John 6:68-69

Jesus has the words of eternal life. Words, words Jesus spoke that Peter heard and believed and had come to know. Jesus was true to His words. He wants all to come to the knowledge of the truth. We wonder today about truth. There seems to be so many who think there so many truths out there and that the truth depends on the person, the problem is they aren't thinking that Jesus is the truth, they think they, themselves have some authority when it come to the truth as if what they think and say is synonymous with the truth. Most of the time they have no idea that if it doesn't agree with Jesus and His Word, then it can't be THE truth.

The text wants the truth to come out of a person's mouth. The thing of it is, James wants that as well but he sees a small, unruly appendage that seems to get in the way. This appendage needs to be controlled so he uses the example of a horse and a bit. That bit may only weigh a pound or maybe even less but it can control an animal that could weigh hundreds or even thousands of times more.

He then goes to the example of ships, mighty ships that are controlled as well. Their control is a little thing called a rudder. Two very different examples for people to see. The horse would be known by those who have livestock or maybe use them to travel over dry ground. The horse example would make sense to one group of people. Others that sail the seas would hear the example of the ship and would understand that little thing called the rudder and would understand that it wouldn't need to be very large but would cause a great ship to turn in the direction of the one controlling it.

He switches gears to another completely different example and that is of fire. Everyone who had ever had to start a fire knew that it only would take a little spark and the right conditions and that spark could cause all sorts of havoc. He pointed out that a fire can be started by a spark but he also notes that not all fire involves wood or twigs but there is that match, that fire starter, the tongue and can set fires that involve the body so much it might not be able to be put out, in fact that fire may lead to the eternal fires of hell.

Everyone knew of horses, ships and tongues. Crazy, three such different examples and yet a way to put together different words so that the people he is writing to will be set up to believe and come to know the Words of eternal life.

He could have gone into intricacies of horse training or ship navigation but that was not the point. The point was that it took only something small to make a great

difference. With the tongue, even though small, it was originally meant for only good, it now was being used not just for good, but too many times for evil.

You have probably heard or even used the phrase “putting out fires as work.” What does that mean? If you are not a fire fighter it could mean a whole lot of things. But what is usually the common cause? It is the tongue.

James talks of control and how mankind has sought to control all sorts of animals, some great some small, some which fly and others which scurry on the ground and even those we might find at Sea World. So it would be logical with all man’s ability to tame so many creatures, that something as small as a tongue with an average weight of 2.25 ounces should take nothing to control and yet can have such deleterious effects on a body, that body as it lives out its life on this earth and beyond.

He equates the tongue inside the mouth that forms words, which is amazing that it can form words in all sorts of languages, that tongue can speak the greatest speeches, can encourage someone and lift up but so quickly it can spew out the vilest things even say things to the one you love that you wouldn’t want anyone else to know that it actually came out of your mouth.

James uses nature again with fresh water and salt water, figs, olives and grapevines. These are common things to the people he is writing to so they can transfer the inference to their own tongues which they know they don’t always use in the best way for themselves or for others.

He talks of the tongue being a fire, a restless evil full of deadly poison. He didn’t bring up a snake but a poisonous snake is ready to strike out at a moments notice, many times when the objects of that strike may not know that it is in the line of fire.

James doesn’t treat the tongue as some little distraction. No, he understands that the little thing that resides in the mouth can be deadly, deadly for the possessor as well as anyone that it chooses to set its sight on.

The tongue was designed by God for good and yet how did the tongue of the serpent use his tongue? He used it to convince Adam and Eve that the Lord who had given them so much had ulterior motives and that was to keep them for all that He had created. Yes, God had kept them from harm and warned of the harm that would be theirs if they ate from that tree but the serpents words tempted them to take from that tree and that start the downward spiral of the misuse of the tongue to blame others, even to cut down a person so far that those words lead them to take their own lives.

The tongue can come up with all sorts of stories, truths. Those truths may be the truth but maybe only contain a portion of truth. It is then that things can go awry. It is then the fire gets started and depending on the fuel used, it can get out of control, spewing out flames that touch so many, many who just happened to be near.

We all have tongues. As a pastor, I am to use it to help you in your Christian walk, to encourage you and to point out your sin. You come here each week, confessing your sins, taking that little time in silence to remember how that tongue was used the past week with the promise of a clean start again for the week ahead. It is those words of the pastor that you hear with another part of the body, the ear that you hear with words of the tongue of the pastor that your sins have, once again, have been forgiven.

Yes, there is the shame when you take time to think of your tongue and what it has been saying the past week. Has it had time of unruliness, of restless evil, full of poison? Has that same tongue yielded fresh water for a thirsty soul, thirsty for something to make their day?

Peter was wanting to follow Jesus and he did, even to his eventual torture and death. He gave it all because he knew that Jesus' words meant eternal life for him. You too have been given the words of Jesus. You have His Word in this collection of 66 books known as the Holy Bible.

You can have all the words in the world but what is the best way to use them? They should be used to let others know the words of Jesus, those words of eternal life that Peter and James took to their deaths.

I know we are very much alive and our chances at the present time of having to die for our God given faith are small, but have you ever thought that even though your future is secure in Christ, there are so many you know and meet who are not so fortunate. They are going to die in their sins and suffer the eternal fires of hell.

Are you going to ask yourself, why didn't I use that 2.25 source of fire to bring the light of the gospel to shine in their life, in their ears? That is a question we all need to answer and take steps to correct. It should be used as a blessing to those we come in contact. It should point out the need of Jesus because of sin, their sin and ours knowing that Jesus, who went the cross for all mankind paid the price with His own blood. Today, will get to feed on Him to strengthen us to go into the dark world of sin and sinners and bring hope, the sure hope of eternal live. Small but so many times unruly. May it be used to rule our words so that others will be blessed.