

Good Gossip!

September 13, 2009

Pastor Mark Nieting

James 3: 1-12

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ to the people of God at Hope, gathered today in ONE service to celebrate the start of a new year!

Continuing what we started last week, today's topic is taken straight from this morning's Epistle Lesson, James 3: 1-2. In most Bibles I looked it, this section is subtitled, "*Taming the Tongue.*" On the surface it may not seem like it, but it is a difficult topic to deal with because the tongue is almost impossible to TAME!

Somebody else once calculated that if we wrote down every single word we spoke in a day, on average 25 to 30 THOUSAND words, which would add up to over 50 pages if we wrote them all down.....each and every day. A normal person, which all of us are, will spend one-fifth of his or her life simply *talking*, and each word that leaves our lips enters someone else's ears!

When we go to the doctor's office, one of the first things the doctor says is, "Let me see your tongue." The nurse puts a thermometer under our tongues and takes our temperature. In today's epistle lesson, James says the same thing, "Let me see your tongue, and I will know your spiritual temperature.."

It's not easy to do, but think for just a moment of all the times you have been hurt or you have hurt someone else through a good case of "Foot In Mouth" disease. I would guess that when it comes to the hurt caused either BY our tongues or to us through the tongues of others, the pain across this group would be unanimous. The rabbis of ancient Judaism knew the tongue was a weapon, but they went so far as to call it not just a "sword," but "an arrow," because it can hurt someone else even from a great distance....and that was before telephones, email, and internet! Nothing is more revealing of who we are than our tongues.

Here's the question of the day, straight from the brother of Jesus Christ in the 3rd chapter of his epistle. How easy is it for you to control your tongue? Easy? Or tough? Are you quick to criticize? Quick to gossip? Quick to praise? Do you speak before you think or the other way around? Do words leave your mouth that you wish you could catch before they reach the ears of someone else?

Before we go in depth on this one, let's look at the 3 examples that James uses about our tongues. First James talks about horses. I'm not a very experienced rider and usually, if a horse goes the way I want it to go, it's because I guessed right. Years ago I did ride a bit. It was a simple process: no saddle, no blanket, no stirrups....there was only one tool that was necessary....a bit in the horses mouth and the reins in my hand. If I had that, it was generally successful in steering the beast. But if there was no bit? No way!

Let's ask it this way: if you have a field that needs to be plowed or a racetrack that needs to be run, can you simply ASK the horse to do it? Can you have a little "chat" with the horse and expect him to get the task right? Obviously NOT! So it is, James says, with our tongues. They are far too prone to run off in the wrong direction and the results are rarely good.

James continues with a NAVAL illustration, that of ships and rudders. I've seen the "wheels" of plenty of ships and even been down in the steering gear on a few, where it can be turned in an emergency. But what if the rudder is missing? That can't be good! I've been on some newer ships that don't even have rudders or wheels....they have joysticks. But if you don't use them correctly, the word JOY will *not* end up in the vocabulary used by your commanding officer!

Finally James takes an illustration from the hills of Los Angeles: a great fire can easily be set by a single spark.....and once that fire starts, it's hard to put it out.

That's what gossip does, whether we participate by doing the talking or even by doing the listening. Either way....it's gossip and it's not good! And the definition of a gossip? I heard this one once and it fits quite well: *a gossip is someone who can give you all the details without knowing any of the facts.*

Ever set a fire with your tongue? Ever said some words you wished you could "sweep back" with a net before they touch the ears of your intended "victim?" Or push "send" on an email or a text message that you just KNEW would bring hurt to someone else? Ever pass on a juicy story about someone else before checking to see if it was true....or even caring?

The old expression "loose lips sink ships" is certainly true, and it's just as true with our tongues. People are being torpedoed around us and by us all the time, and so, at times are we! Knowing all that to be true, what is the root of this addiction to this sin?

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve had been warned NOT to partake of the fruit of the one particular tree....the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Remember the details of the devils dalliance? *He whispered through his long, forked tongue, "Did God REALLY say 'you must not eat?' You've got to be kidding....ssss."*

Why is the spoken word is so important? Let's ask this question: how much written information did Jesus leave us? Do we have any examples of Jesus' correspondence to anyone?? Any "letters to Zacchaeus" surface lately? The obvious answer is none. Jesus was the finest instructor ever in the fine tradition of ORAL teachers. He taught by sermons, by parables, by illustrations, and by dialog. His words were passed on from person to person until, finally, years later, people finally wrote them down. Still today, the vast majority of teaching the Christian faith is done orally.

The same goes for communication between people. MOST of that is done orally....even if we use some modern invention like texting, tweeting, or emailing to carry our message. And in those cases it's even EASIER to do damage with our tongues because it's FAR EASIER to say something nasty about someone or to someone when we aren't looking into their eyes!

IF we are successful at the toughest challenge of human behavior, keeping our tongues in check, we've already mastered the rest of it. In fact, James goes so far as to call such an individual a "perfect man!" If gossip tears down and destroys, it is the GOSPEL that brings forgiveness and life!

THAT, James says, is the positive use for the tongue.... It can be a conduit for God's love and for the message of salvation. If we are filled with the love of Jesus Christ, it is the tongue that first reflects that inner joy and shares it with those around us. It is with our tongues that we praise God. It is with our tongues that we reach out to Him in prayer. It is with our tongues that we teach his love to others. It is with our tongues that we build up the body of Christ.

What that means is that our tongues can be used for GOOD....and for BAD, and that, James says, is like a spring that produces fresh water and salty water at the same time ... and we all know that's not right!

So how DO we “tame the un-tamable tongue?” How do we continue to BUILD one another up in Christ? How do we put the best construction on everything? How do we ‘nip gossip in the bud?’

When Pam and I started looking for houses we were told that the City of Chesapeake used to have really bad water. So we were a little worried. We would go into a house and turn on the tap and smell the water. After a while we figured out that they had fixed the entire city system with some very effective filters.....which made the water really decent to drink. Our lawn sprinkler system, however, has its own well and has no filters....and that water just plain smells!

The filter that we as Christians apply to all we say and all we do goes back to the second chapter of James....to the “royal law” we spoke of last week, where he summarizes the entire law of God in two simple phrases: *love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.*

With these two statements as the FILTER for our tongues and our ears, there truly CAN be such a thing as “good gossip” inside the kingdom of God and the congregation of Hope....the never-ending task of taking care of each other within the church and bringing others to know Christ for their own salvation. How else, I ask you, can we “make disciples of all nations, teaching them everything I have commanded you?” It’s GOOD NEWS....spread by GOOD GOSSIP... the kind that shares with everyone around us the love of Jesus!