**Speech which builds Community. James 3:1-12 September 12 2021.**

*Aesop has a fable of three bulls that fed in a field together in the ﻿greatest peace and safety. A lion had long watched them in the hope ﻿of making prey of them, but found little chance so long as they kept ﻿together. He therefore began secretly to spread evil and slanderous ﻿reports of one against another till he fomented jealousy and distrust ﻿among them. Soon they began to avoid one another and each took ﻿to feeding alone. This gave the lion the opportunity it had been ﻿wanting. He fell on them singly and made an easy prey of them all.[[1]](#footnote-1)* Whilst they stayed together they were safe and thriving, but slander drove them apart.   
We all know that words are powerful. The old saying *“sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me”* always has and always would be ludicrous. Words hurt us at a level that far exceed physical pain. Words linger with us, long after we have any clear recollection of physical pain. Words divide nations, communities, families, couples and friends.

James is writing to fellow believers concerned that they function together well as a community. He is keen for them to understand the crucial role that their communication will play in their community.

The letters which we read in the New Testament were usually written to Christian communities, to help them to live as followers of Jesus in their specific circumstances. James wanted this community to become fully developed followers of Jesus, people whose love for God and one another shaped what they said and how they said it.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is what he means by being “perfect”, mature, exemplary.[[3]](#footnote-3)

James was concerned that people had developed some speech practices which were harmful to the church community. They were “saying the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong persons or about another person and so [could] lead to the destruction of delicate relationships that characterize the Christian community.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The community could become “fractured and fractious” “a community at odds with itself”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Defining the problem**

James carefully defines the communication problems in this community. He uses powerful images that highlight human ability to tame a many animals, and yet be unable to tame the tongues of humans. He describes the tongue’s poisonous, destabilising effects on the community. James has already reprimanded them for showing partiality to the rich and powerful in their speech. Now he expresses his concern regarding arrogant, bitter, angry, slanderous, judgemental and grumbling speech within the community.[[6]](#footnote-6) The book of Sirach in the apocrypha describes it well: Sirach 28:13-18, “Curse the gossips and the double-tongued, for they destroy the peace of many. Slander[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Sirach+28+&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-33015c)] has shaken many, and scattered them from nation to nation; it has destroyed strong cities, and overturned the houses of the great. Many have fallen by the edge of the sword, but not as many as have fallen because of the tongue.”

James encourages the people to recognise the significance of this issue. Though the tongue is small it can generate far reaching effects. He uses various images to illustrate this, and particularly the bit, which is small, but when placed in a horse’s mouth can guide the horse. Scot McKnight describes it this way, “When the tongue is unleashed from its hinges, it destabilizes and deals death to the community.”[[7]](#footnote-7) It can create a “world of injustice that can stand opposed to God’s designs.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Their speech may have given rise to the injustices towards the poor in their community. Earlier in the letter James said, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” [[9]](#footnote-9) James also stresses the incongruity between the community’s allegiance to Jesus and the ways in which they have been speaking to each other. He reflects that with the same tongue people bless God and curse other people, who are made in God’s image. James’ response is “this should not happen!” As they share life with God, so God’s influence should be seen in how they speak. Their speech must be consistent with their allegiance to Jesus, and what Jesus calls them to. “There is a larger battle here larger than that of an individual’s struggle for self-control; it is a battle involving spiritual allegiances.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Addressing the Problem**

So, when James says, “No-one has been able to tame the tongue” what does he mean?[[11]](#footnote-11) In a more literal translation this should be “no-one is able to tame the tongue of *humans.”*[[12]](#footnote-12)They need God’s help. James points them to the wisdom that God alone can give, and how that manifests itself in good relationships. He seeks that they develop communication that is empowering, creative, speech that nourishes their community. They need to be filled with God’s love. James has set before them that they need to be living out the royal law, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”[[13]](#footnote-13) Love for one another and love for God needs to guide their speech.

The illustrations of the bit and the rudder show that something physically small like the tongue can direct or misdirect a much larger entity. Extending James simile, an external force guides the bit and the rudder, and drives the fire, by extrapolation God is the external force to which we need to guide our tongues. The psalmists acknowledged this: Psalm 141:3 “*Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips”.* Psalm 19:14 *“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”* When Moses was debating with God his perception of his lack of eloquence we read God saying, *“Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.”[[14]](#footnote-14)* As did our hymn writers: “Take my lips and let them be filled with messages from Thee” As Frank Beck stated, “A bit of love is the only bit that will bridle the tongue.”[[15]](#footnote-15) If you control the tongue you control far more than just words. This will have a powerful effect on whole Christian communities.

James also suggests some proactive ways in which they can use their words to build themselves up as a community. He encourages them to speak plainly with one another, (5:12) and to exercise humility in how they speak to each other (3:17; 5:16). James recognises that “most people prefer secret slander to open and candid correction of one another in love.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Rather than grumbling with one another he suggests that they practice patient endurance, trusting in God to bless them in time. In these ways he encourages them rather than being defensive in their speech, to be willing to make themselves vulnerable to one another. In this era, sickness led to social isolation, James breaks this down, with a greater emphasis on being a loving community. He empowers the sick by encouraging them to speak, to take the initiative to summon the elders, to pray for them and anoint them. He encourages the people to direct much of their speech towards God, to pray when they are troubled and to sing praise to God when they are happy. He encourages them to watch out for each other, to use their words to help one another to follow Jesus. These are all practices from which our church communities today can also benefit. We continue to be called to love God and one another in practical ways. To allow our speech to be guided by God’s love, and to be prepared to make ourselves vulnerable to one another as a community that we may grow as followers of Jesus.

1. Tony Castle, *Complete Quotes and Anecdotes,* (Suffolk, England: Kevin Mayhew Ltd, 2011) 466 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James: The New international Commentary on the New Testament,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2011) 275 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James 3:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. McKnight, *The Letter of James,* 271 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McKnight, *The Letter of James,* 271 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. James 1:19; 2:3-6; 3:5, 14; 4:1-2, 11, 13,; 5:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. McKnight, *The Letter of James,* 290 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. McKnight, *The Letter of James,* 283 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. James 1:26-27 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Letter of James: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck et al. (Ed) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1998) 204 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. James 3:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. McKnight, *The Letter of James,* 289 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. James 2:8 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Exodus 4:11b-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Fred Beck, in Eleanor Doan (Ed) *The Complete Speakers Sourcebook,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1996) 270 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Johnson, “The Letter of James, 224 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)