

“*Not many of you should become teachers (didaskaloi in the original Greek),*” James writes in this Sunday’s Scripture reading. Fact is, many teachers today might agree with him. Just a few weeks into the new school year and even the most dedicated and experienced teachers could be considering perhaps an easier job, like brain surgeon. I stand in awe of teachers—in particular the one I’m married to. Since many have found teaching to be rewarding but challenging, I suspect many of my wife’s colleagues would agree with James’ assertion, “*Not many of you should become teachers.*”

One of my favorite stories about the strain of teaching involves two college professors who are married to each other. They always felt the pressures of their jobs begin to mount as their weekend came to an end. So, this husband and wife agreed not to hold against the other anything that was said to them on a Sunday night. Sunday night forgiveness rule! Sounds like a good idea.

School teachers are sometimes caught in the middle of a sometimes-painful three-sided game of dodge ball between students, administrators, and parents. So, after beginning another school year, it is appropriate for our church to encourage the teachers in our midst. After all, we may sometimes wonder why anyone would even want to do such important but extremely stressful work.

Yet scholars suggest that the position of “teacher” was an honorable and coveted one in James’ day. We might even compare the work of teaching to that of a doctor or a judge. The apostle at least implies that many early Christians were eager for such a prestigious job, inside or outside the church, perhaps as much for the status it conferred as anything else.

To prospective preachers and teachers, however, James says, “*Don’t be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends*” (MSG). Teaching, after all, requires people to use their tongues a lot. And while it may be difficult to control any part of us, our tongues are, as James suggests in verse 7, notoriously hard to control. Some of our homes and backyards testify to our ability to “control” our pets like dogs and cats. A few bold people have even tried to tame wild animals

like tigers and wolverines. James reminds us that controlling our tongues is humanly impossible, somewhat like trying to tame a great white shark instead of taming a hamster. It's impossible for mere humans to do.

As Pastor Bob Downs has famously said, "This is where James stops preaching and starts meddling!" How does James do this? James 3 reminds us that controlling our tongues is humanly impossible, somewhat like trying to tame a great white shark instead of taming a hamster. It's impossible for humans to do. The tongue is not only naturally wild, but dangerous and powerful. James compares it to a small spark that sets off a huge forest fire (v. 5). Our tongues can figuratively cause the kind of firestorms that continue to chase numerous families from their homes in the western states here in the U.S. In his letter James is trying to prevent forest fires—fires that were started by our tongues.

I was so desperate to have friends at the beginning of ninth grade that I wandered close to a group of guys that I was in eighth grade with. A classmate that I'll call Mike crushed my fragile adolescent psyche with one flash of his tongue. He took one look at my pants that were a bit too short for my ninth grade legs and sneered, "I guess McDonald's getting ready for a flood."

James says tongues are so powerful that they're like a little rudder than can steer a massive ship or a small bit that can control a mighty horse. While both are relatively tiny, they can control far bigger things. In a similar way, writes James, while our tongues are among our smallest muscles, they can direct our whole lives. While I'm not entirely sure what the apostle means by that, he at least seems to mean that our tongues have power over every part of us. In light of James 2, might we think of it this way? If I were to use my tongue to brag that I could run a marathon, I might begin to think that if I'm to back up my boast, I should actually run a marathon. So I'd have to change my whole life as I spent extra time training and changing my eating habits and so forth.

Or consider how the encouraging use of our tongues can build a friendship. Or how a word of forgiveness can re-direct whole lives through reconciliation with people who have hurt us. Or how the gentle use of our tongues has the power to

bolster sagging and broken spirits. Whenever I read James 3, I think of a former colleague and mentor. He was such a wonderful preacher. A few people called him a “golden-tongued pulpiteer.” Yet he was also one of the most encouraging people I’ve ever known. He always found a way to use his tongue to build up people. By contrast, think of how our tongues can cut people down. Consider how an irritated word, for instance, can ruin a friendship. Or how a critical word can put down vulnerable people. Or how a word of gossip can destroy a reputation.

James goes on in this chapter to suggest that we probably don’t understand how our tongues can set our lives on fire because we are unaware of the repercussions. By that he seems to mean that our tongues have immense power to cause disasters. They can incinerate friendships and families. They may even have the power, if we allow it, to pull us perilously close to the fires of hell. Well then, who can tame the restless beast that is our wild and powerful tongue? James plainly says in verse 7, “*no human being can tame the tongue.*” Augustine once commented on that by saying the apostle is implying that only God can tame the wild and mighty animal that is our tongue.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Where did that bit of wisdom come from if it should even be called *wisdom*? Not from James, I assure you. He holds the opposite view. “*The tongue also is a fire,*” (v. 6) writes James. “*It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison*” (v. 8). So dangerous is this appendage that everyone should think seriously before becoming a person of authority, before aspiring to teach or to train or to lead other people. You almost get the idea that it would be better for us not to say anything at all. That’s sort of a tough position for a preacher to be in!

We could imaginatively psychoanalyze James and determine that someone said some terrible things to him and now he’s taking it out on us. But if that causes us to dismiss his argument as a personal problem, we’re reading this passage wrong. Neither is this simply “political correctness” run amok, over attention to minor details of social discourse. No. James elevates our words and the power

of those words to an ultimate level, implying that it may well be a life and death issue, a salvation issue.

In our normal catalog of sins, gossip is somewhere near the bottom of the list, wouldn't you say? We are much more concerned about other kinds of destructive behavior. James would have us reconsider our hierarchy and raise our awareness of the power of words to bring harm to the body of Christ. Oftentimes, in our weakness we are naturally drawn to serve the evil one. In fact, even those whom God has redeemed will still want to serve both the evil one and the Lord. Christians must fight the temptation to, for example, use our tongues to gossip about other people and then to praise God in the same breath. While fig trees don't grow olives, our tongues sometimes produce a bittersweet fruit that can be both lies about a neighbor and prayers to the Lord.

To hear the message of James plainly spoken, listen to *The Message* Bible version which says, “*Don't be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends. Teaching is highly responsible work. Teachers are held to the strictest standards. And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths... 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!*” (3:1-2 & 9-10).

Because there has been only one perfect person, James 3 is a warning, but it's also intended to encourage us. *All of us* need to confess that we don't consistently use our tongues to praise God and bless others. We all need the Spirit's work of transforming us into people who consistently use our tongues for good. Jesus' followers must intentionally use our tongues *less* to criticize one another and *more* to build up each other. And please pray for those whom God has called to use their tongues a lot. We preachers, teachers and leaders desperately need your prayers—perhaps more than anyone.

Lord have mercy on me, a sinner, a servant and a preacher! Amen.

(Thanks to Doug Bratt for sermon help)