

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

TO SPEAK OR NOT TO SPEAK

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19)

James 3:1-12

Analysis by Paige G. Evers

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.

DIAGNOSIS: Talking Our Way into the Fire

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Tongue-tied*

Our tongue is our own worst enemy. In this week's diatribe, James lists a few sins of the tongue: making mistakes in speaking (v. 2), boasting (v. 5), and hypocritical double-speak (vv. 9-12). The tongue is untamed, and even worse, no one can tame it (v. 8). Even when we bless God with our tongue, we undo our blessing by cursing our neighbor in the same breath (v. 9). Hearing James, it's easy to think that we'd be better off saying nothing at all.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Tyranny*

But even if we didn't speak, we still wouldn't be free from the tyranny of our tongues. According to James, a tongue isn't just a tongue: it's a "world of iniquity; it stains the whole body" (v. 6). The heart is not immune from the tongue's "deadly poison" (v. 8). The tongue is restless and it is evil (v. 8), and when it speaks it exposes the evil in our hearts. The tongue boasts of "great exploits" (v. 5) because we have succumbed to the lie that our achievements will save us. If we don't boast about them, who will? The tongue curses those made in the likeness of God (v. 9) because we believe that bringing others down is the only way we can get ahead.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Untamable*

James doesn't leave much to the imagination when it comes to the eternal future created for us by our tongues. Anyone who takes the Great Commission seriously and tries to follow Jesus' call to make disciples, "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20) falls under James' directive here

to teachers. He warns against even trying to teach, because those “who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (v. 1). Then James issues a more dire warning that makes his strictness seem like a walk in the park. James writes that the tongue “is itself set on fire by hell” (v. 6). What can we do? We can’t tame the tongue (v. 8) and we can’t put out the fire it sets or the fire it is condemned to suffer (v. 6). James himself writes with what seems like resignation, “this ought not to be so” (v. 10). But it is.

PROGNOSIS: Transformed to Go and Tell

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Don’t talk, but listen*

In the Gospel lesson assigned for this Sunday, Mark 8:27-38, we hear the sweet words of Jesus that redirect our eternal future away from James’ fire. After Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah (Mark 8:29), Jesus began to teach them what would happen to him: suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection (v. 31). Mark writes that Jesus “said all this quite openly” (v. 32). Our own tongues may get us into trouble, like James says, but the words that flow from Jesus’ tongue promise that we don’t have the final say. God does. With the cross of Christ and the empty tomb, God has spoken definitively. God has declared that our sins are forgiven, even the sins of our tongues. Our future is made new, because God says so.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *A New Master*

Jesus’ words in Mark 8 also tell how the heart is radically changed. It is no longer under the tongues’ tyranny now that God has spoken for us. The envy, selfishness, and competitiveness that led to the boasting referred to in James’ letter is replaced by Christ’s generosity, selflessness, and mercy. Jesus says, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the

gospel, will save it" (8:35). The tongue is no longer the heart's only outlet and means of expression. Denying the self, taking up a cross, and following Jesus (8:34) speak far more powerfully than the tongue ever could.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Something to Say*

Given James' dire outlook for the tongue, is it worth taking the risk to speak? It is if we have something important to say. As followers of Christ, bearing our cross, we have something to say that the world desperately needs to hear. Jesus invites us to put our tongues, like our hearts, our minds, and our entire lives, into his service. So cheer up, James: the tongue no longer has to be restless. It now has a purpose! The tongue no longer has to be full of deadly poison. It now is full of the sweet words of the gospel! It now has something to boast about other than itself! It can proclaim Christ and him crucified and show others the way to follow him.