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James 3:1-12
FaithWorks: The Book of James
Tongue Twisters

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Today we continue the series we're in called, "FaithWorks" as we go through the book of James. James is all about living out our faith – taking what we believe and putting it into action. And today we come to a passage that's all about tongue twisters. You remember those from your younger years, I'm sure: Sally sells seashells down by the seashore...Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. Or how about: I slit the sheet, the sheet I slit, and on the slitted sheet I sit. Gotta be careful with that one. 😊 Well James writes about a different kind of tongue twister in today's passage. So let's dive into James chapter 3. We're reading the first 12 verses today. This is God's word to you and me today (**Just James 3:1 to start with**).

Ok...let's pause right here after the first verse. We'll get to the tongue twister stuff in a moment. First I want to talk about teachers. It's uncanny that we have this verse while in the midst of the pandemic because of all the teaching happening in our homes. And it's really too bad we can't be in church together to see a show of hands (though if we could this whole teaching thing wouldn't be nearly as timely), so maybe leave a comment in the FB or YouTube comments or some other kind of response to this question: **How many of you parents would agree with this first verse that not many of us should presume to be teachers?** 😊 So many of us have been thrust into this teaching role with our kids that we just didn't have before. And that's not to say that most of us weren't involved in our kids' schooling. I mean, Gwen and I are as tuned into our kids' academic progress as anyone when school is running in its normal mode. But this is a whole new ball game.

But James isn't talking about teaching your kids math or grammar or P.E. in the midst of a pandemic, though I think there are some applicable things here. **He's talking about teaching the faith.** He's talking about teaching people about the Bible and about Jesus and what it means to be His disciple, and teaching the theology of the Christian faith. Not everyone is cut out to be a teacher in that sense.

And so James is saying here that not many should be teachers. In other

words, God hasn't called many to be teachers. And that's ok. We want to use the gifts that God has given us, and not the ones he hasn't. This is illustrated in a story about a sea captain and his chief engineer who were having an argument as to which one of them was more important to the ship. Failing to agree, they resorted to the unique idea of swapping places. The chief engineer ascended to the bridge (the room with the steering wheel), and the captain descended into the engine room.

After a couple of hours, the captain suddenly appeared on the bridge covered with oil and soot. "Chief!" he yelled, while wildly waving a monkey wrench. "You'll have to come down to the engine room; I can't make her go!" "Of course you can't," replied the chief engineer. "I ran the ship aground!"ⁱ

So it takes all different types of people with the breadth of the spiritual gifts that God has dispersed among the Church. And it takes everyone stepping up and using the gifts that they have to help the Church flourish. One quick caveat: even if you don't have the spiritual gift of teaching, you still want look for opportunities to pass the faith on to others. Right now in the midst of the pandemic, we parents have a great opportunity to disciple our kids...to teach them. There are resources from Gwen at our website for you to use in doing that, so you're not on your own. Others of you have written devotionals that help encourage us in our faith – so there's teaching there. So just because you don't have a particular spiritual gift – such as teaching – that doesn't mean you never engage in it.

James talks about judgment for teachers. We might wonder who will judge us. **First, the people who are taught will judge the teachers.** You parents who are teaching your kids have probably experienced that. You feeling judged by your students? It happens with spiritual teaching, too. And that's a good thing. Not the "holier than thou" kind of judgment that's born out of arrogance, or judging whether a person is a dynamic of a teacher as someone else. That's not what Biblical judging is about. This kind of judgment is about spiritual discernment: discerning whether someone is teaching Biblical and spiritual truth or not; it's a judgment that often takes shape as honest discussion and sharing of Scriptural understanding in order to have clarity about spiritual matters. We need that. There's accountability there, there's

refinement, there's edification and building up of believers and building up of the church. We want to make sure our spiritual teachers are teaching spiritual truth.

Second, teachers are judged by God. And that's not just true of teachers, but of all of us. He does say teachers will be judged more strictly, however. Why? Because of the influence teachers have. When someone teaches on matters of faith, they essentially replicate themselves and their scriptural understanding in others. So if a teacher is teaching bad theology or a wrong interpretation of Scripture or something else that doesn't square up with Scripture, then there's going to be a bunch of people then spreading that around. It's like a virus. We don't want to spread a virus through our teaching; we want to point people to the Good Doctor who can cure us of what ails us. And so teachers need to teach knowing that they are held to a high standard by God.

And by the way – and this gets back to the first of these two points, really – this is all the more reason why all of us in the church ought to judge those who seek to teach us – whether that's your pastor or other church leaders or anyone you watch online, or authors you read, or whatever. **If you're going to let someone teach you, make sure that they're squared away with Scripture.** I know someone who one time was reading a particular author and she was really taken with what he was writing and it was having a substantial influence on her. She shared with me what she was reading. And I realized that this guy was completely misquoting Scripture and turning Scripture on its head – he was inverting things to essentially put us above God. It was *very* seductive and sneaky, and claimed to be Christian. It clearly was not, however. I gently pointed that out to the gal – I think we got out a Bible and compared some of the things he was supposedly quoting, even – and she had her eyes opened to the false teaching she had opened herself up to. So judgment is important – God judges our teachers, and we should, too.

Ok...let's read the rest of this passage and get on with the rest of this message... **(James 3:2-12).**

So: What we see is that James is calling out teachers of the Christian

faith for a moment, but this is all in the context of what we say and how it lines up with our faith. This is essentially a continuation of the theme of the letter so far, which should come as no surprise. He was previously primarily focused on what we *do*. What we do often has greater influence over people than what we say.

But words are important. Words are not worthless. If words were worthless, we'd be in a whole heap of trouble because our words are the primary way that we communicate. If words are worthless, I should stop preaching right now, and we should go home. Wait, you are home! ☺ There's a story that helps remind us of the importance of words: Three boys were once in the school playground bragging about their fathers. The first boy says, 'My dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a poem, and they give him \$50.' The second boy says, 'That's nothing. My dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a song, they give him \$100.' The third boy says, 'I got you both beat. My dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a sermon, and it takes eight people to collect all the money!'ⁱⁱⁱ So, words matter.

Now, there are three main points that James is communicating here. **First, the tongue may be small compared to the rest of the body, but it has incredible influence.** James compares it to a bit in a horse's mouth, the rudder of a ship, and a spark that starts a wildfire. Small things can have a big influence. At a conference I attended nearly 15 years ago a Children's Ministry leader gave a seminar on how to speak to kids and keep their attention. One of her points was about using creative props in our teaching. And she shared an illustration that she once used when teaching kids at her church. And she was teaching her kids this very point: that small things can have a big influence. And she wanted to communicate that in a way that the kids would remember. So brought in a big jar filled with insects. I don't remember if she bought it at the store or what. But there were like a couple hundred or more insects in this jar. And these insects were all pretty small. And to demonstrate to the kids that small things can impact us in a big way, she released all the insects in the middle of her talk. The kids went bonkers. Small thing, big impact. They're probably still getting the bugs out of that room.

The tongue is like that that...our words are like that. We can really stir people up with our words. Our words can have a big influence on others – and their words can influence us. And in this day in age, this not only applies to what we speak and hear verbally, but to what we read and write on social media, email, or other places, too. Words impact people, for better or for worse, and they can do so in a huge way.

Second, James says that the tongue is tough to tame. In fact, in verse 2 he is essentially saying that it is humanly impossible to tame it. He writes, “Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.” This is a tongue in cheek statement. Sorry...I couldn’t resist. That is dad humor at its worst. But it’s true. No one is “never at fault” in what they say. There is no such thing as the perfect person. James knows it, his readers know it, we know it, and he doesn’t seriously mean that the possibility exists. He confirms it for us in verse 8: “No human being can tame the tongue.”

James gives some pretty strong language about the evils that the tongue can cause. In fact, he says that the tongue “is a world of evil among the other parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.” I don’t know about you, but I just want to step back in time and say to James: “Tell me how you *really* feel about this!” The whole point is that we’d better watch *what* we say and *how* we say it, because words can get us in a whole heap of trouble and have incredible power and influence in our lives and in the lives of others.

And then the third point in this whole taming of the tongue thing is a reminder that: **Third, the tongue – our words – should be used for good, so let’s eliminate the tongue-twisters.** This is the place where we go to get some control over what we say. And that is through speaking words of praise for God. Praising God is a good way to use our words, and when we do that, the words that we speak to others will also be better. As James writes: Can fresh water and salt water come up from the same spring? No, of course not. Can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs? No. That would be all twisted. And we don’t want this in our lives, either: No tongue twisters. No

praising God one minute and curing people the next. We want to have our words line up with our beliefs. And when we use our words to bring praise to God, it helps lead us in holy and God-honoring speaking elsewhere.

And it's not that praising God just automatically helps you to speak with grace and kindness toward everyone – like some kind of magic trick. But over time, if you're spending time in prayer, if you're spending time in worship...if you're also letting the words of other people influence you in your journey of faith, if you're conscientious about how you speak to others and what you say to them in light of your words of faith, then it is much more difficult to say something bad about others or to others or to use language that is unbecoming of calling yourself a Christian. For instance, if you're praising God and using His name reverentially on a frequent basis, it's much more difficult to turn around and use the name of Jesus in an unholy way or even to utter an inappropriate OMG. There becomes a bit of a personal conviction that happens when we first saturate our language with holy uses of God's name. I experienced that kind of transformation in my own speaking in my early to mid-20's when I got serious about my faith.

Now, I think it's worth noting that James has this one verse about teachers and how not everyone has the gift of teaching...but we do *all* use our words. There's a connection between verse 1 and what follows. And: **Whenever we speak, we are in a sense, teaching others.** We may not have the title of "theology teacher" or "Bible scholar" but pretty much whenever we speak, we're teaching people what we value, we're teaching them about our character, we're teaching about what is important, we're teaching about whether or not we really believe what we say we believe.

Your co-workers and your classmates listen and learn. Your neighbors listen and learn. Every parent knows that their kids listen and learn. I remember one time talking with a school teacher who taught kindergarten or 1st grade or somewhere around that age – and I cannot for the life of me remember who told me this – but he or she told me how there was this student – age 6 or 7 or whatever – who cursed left and right like it was just the commonly accepted way to talk, even in the classroom. Well, where do you think that was learned? At home, without a doubt, probably by observing the parents. So we

all teach with our words.

What are you teaching? **Even if you're not one who's in a formal discipleship role teaching kids or adults in a class or a small group...you are teaching others. What are your words teaching?** How are your words, how is your tongue, being used? One Biblical principal to keep in mind with this is "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). In other words, speak to others with empathy...see things from their perspective, talk to them in a way that conveys care and concern for them, rather than condemnation and judgment. Asking questions to understand where they're coming from is always a good way to get at the heart of the matter.

So let the Lord help you tame your tongue. And may your words first be used to bring glory and honor to God, and to reflect the work of the Lord in our lives so our words would be a refreshing stream that would encourage and bless others, and praise His holy name.

ⁱ I can't remember where I came across this one.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.saintstephenscheneectady.org/Jokes/Jokes14.html>