

“Fuel - Open Wide and Say Ahhh”

May 4, 2008

We're in a message series called, “Fuel”. It seems like everyone is looking for some kind of fuel for their life, something to keep them going like all these high energy drinks. Where we are taking this, however, is to find out what kind of fuel we need to experience that abundant life that Jesus talks about. So we've been looking at the very practical and hard-hitting spiritual issues found in the book of James.

You all got one of these tongue depressors when you came in. All of us have had the experience, haven't we, of going to the doctor for a checkup and he or she has asked us to open wide and say 'ahhh.' Just a few weeks ago I took our son, Andrew, into to see the doctor. The nurse tried to look into his throat, but like the rest of us, he just hates having this little stick stuck into his mouth. Why? Because of the gag thing, right! So eventually the nurse kind of peered around the best that she could and said, “It doesn't look too bad.” Andrew won round one.

The doctor came in and said, “Open wide and say ahhh.” Andrew did not win round two. When the doctor saw back there, she said that it didn't look right. “It looks like strep! Let's get a culture.” Round 3 went to the doctor with the swab on the end of the long stick! Test results confirmed strep. Doctor said, “It's strep, and this should not be, so let's fix it!”

Today the key verse that we're focusing is James 3:10. Read it out loud with me: *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.*

Like a skillful physician, James tries to help diagnose the dichotomy of words that come out of the same mouth. Out of the same mouth come words of praise and cursing; good words and damaging words; words that bless and words that bite; words that build up and words that tear down - All from the same mouth.

Our words are powerful. It's been estimated that the average person says 18,000 words per day. That would be like writing a 54-page book every day with your words. And looking around, I'm sure we have some high achievers in the room who might hit the 30,000 mark. Show of hands—how many of you know someone who talks a lot? Keep your hand up if you're sitting next to that person.

Granted, when you say 18,000 words in a day, it can be hard to control all of them, and we all have mistakes. What really amazes me, however, is that there are some who can say 18,000+ words in a day, and not control any of them!

Isn't it true that some words take just seconds to say, but the pain or the damage of those words can take years to heal? You know of the words I speak!

Evidently the people that James was writing to had some serious problems controlling damaging words that were coming out of their mouths, because it's a repeated theme all throughout this letter. He pleads in James 1:19, *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...* He warns in James 1:26, *Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.*

He asks in James 4:1, *What causes fights and quarrels among you?*

He urges them in James 4:11, *Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it.*

And here in our text in James 3, it's as if James says, “Open wide and say, 'ahhh,' and let's see what your tongue tells us about you. Let's see what it tells us about your character, about the condition of your soul.” Why? Because words matter. Because the words that come out of our mouths tell more about the spiritual condition of our hearts and tell more about our character than most of us realize.

So let's start walking through James 3 bit by bit and see what he says to us today. We're going to start with verse 3, where it's like James is peering in and taking a quick look at the potential of the tongue, both for good and for evil.

James 3:3, *When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.* You can take a little 4- or 5-inch piece of metal and put it in the mouth of a great, big strong horse; and with that little tiny bit, you can steer that horse where you want it to go.

James 3:4, *Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.* You can have this big, huge ship out on the open sea and it can be fighting the winds and the waves; but with a little rudder, the pilot can maneuver that giant ship wherever it needs to go.

The third example: *Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.*

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark (James 3:5). Smokey Bear's been telling us that all of our lives. Just a spark can devastate thousands of acres.

I think the point James is making with the bit, with the rudder, with the spark, is how something so small like the tongue has such astonishingly great power, power to do great amounts of good or great amounts of soul damage to the very people that Jesus gave his life for.

Let's take a few moments to think about some of the damaging words that might show up in an examination of our tongues. What we're doing now is looking for symptoms of disease in us. How do our tongues tell us and others if there is something wrong deeper inside of us?

Well, I wonder how many of us might have words of gossip or slander show up. There's something magnetic about gossip, and there's something kind of seductive about slander. That's why people have this insatiable desire for tabloids and tabloid TV. Slander sells.

When delectable, juicy pieces of information come our way, we are fascinated. We just have to share it. And those damaging words say something about what is inside of us. Those damaging words say something about our innermost parts, the nature of our hearts. Proverbs 26:22 says, *The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts.*

You understand this proverb, right? You get a tasty little bit of info on someone and you can't wait to call a friend to tell them. But we're good at this, right. We're good at justifying gossip, of putting a good spin on it, especially within the church. You know, we get more sophisticated and sly about how we slander and gossip in the church. We say things like, "Hey, you better add Ken and Ruby's 17-year-old daughter to your prayer list."

"Ken and Ruby's daughter? What's up?"

"Oh, you haven't heard?"

"No."

"Well, just pray for her."

"Well, I'd kind of like to be able to pray more specifically for her."

"All right, I guess you're going to find out sooner or later. I heard she's on meth."

"No. How did that happen?"

"Well, I don't know for sure, but there's talk it's the Johnson boy she's been dating."

"That snake. I knew he was no good. I'll pray for them."

Slander is a bit different. Slander is connected to put-downs and running someone down to others. In any form that it takes, slander is just a pure, unadulterated attempt to destroy somebody's name, somebody's character, somebody's reputation, for the sheer, perverse pleasure of tearing someone down. And maybe by tearing them down, we feel like we build ourselves up. Have you ever caught yourself running someone down after they have left the room? That's a symptom that indicates slander.

Another symptom that indicates disease related to our tongues is broken confidences. You ever told something of significance to a friend in confidence, only to have them repeat it to others; and before long it seems like everybody knows? That hurts, doesn't it? Some people think a secret is something you tell one person at a time. Proverbs 21:19 says, *A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid anyone who talks too much.* Over the course of time, you just kind of learn who you can trust and who you can't. There are some people in my life that I love very much, but I've learned they can't handle confidential information. And it makes me sad because I would like to be closer to them; I would like to have a closer relationship than I have. And I know they're not going to have the kind of

relationships that they could have in their lives if they could handle confidences more confidentially, because everybody has to be careful what they say around them.

Another symptom that indicates deeper issues is grumbling. Right now, some of you are may be saying, “Oh, get real, Mark; come on, that’s no big deal, is it? Please don’t make me give up my favorite pastime! You’re killing me!”

I’ve caught myself grumbling about something in particular lately. It’s related to a league one of my kids is involved in. In one night, I ran into 3 different people from this church and they all heard me complain about this league. And they weren’t the only ones I’ve grumbled to, they were just the people I know from Saint Paul’s. No telling how many others have endured it! And as I was preparing for this message it hit me like a ton of bricks. I was grumbling, but I wasn’t willing to get on the solution side of the issues and so I was all worked up over it and I was letting it steal away the opportunities for fun for me and my kid. Grumbling steals gratitude. It ignores blessings and blinds us from opportunities. And it attempts to exempt us from taking any responsibility for finding better solutions.

So have you identified any of these symptoms related to your tongue? There are lots more to add to gossip, slander, broken confidences and grumbling! How about exaggeration? Dishonesty and Deceit? Or Profanity? Maybe words of rage and anger: or our favorite four-letter words; maybe it’s expressed in the jokes that we tell. Maybe it’s in the careless use of the holy name of our God or the holy name of Jesus Christ. Maybe you’ve developed a bilingual tongue, and you have one set of words that you use when you’re around one group of people and a whole different set of words that you use when you’re around a different set of people. Do any of these symptoms fit?

Now I know the temptation for all of us is to say, “But they’re just words. Come on, Mark. It’s just benign. It’s no big deal.”

I think James knew we would be tempted to react that way; and so he says in the next few verses, “Let’s take a biopsy of your tongue and let’s just see how benign those words really are.” Look at the images James uses to describe our tongues.

James 3:6-8, The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by human beings, but no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

His language is not mild; it’s not restrained. With the rapid fire of a machine gun, James says the uncontrolled tongue is a world of evil. It corrupts the whole person. It sets the course of one’s life on fire. It is itself set on fire by hell. It’s a restless evil. It’s full of deadly poison. Does that sound like a benign little cyst that can easily be cut out? James says we’re dealing with a pervasive malignancy inside of us and it is potentially fatal.

Proverbs 18:21 says *The tongue has the power of life and death ...* It has the power of life and death in marriage. It has the power of life and death in a family. It has the power of life and death in a friendship. It has the power of life and death among professional colleagues. It has the power of life and death in a church.

James says no one can tame the tongue. You can’t tame it; I can’t tame it. Nobody can tame the tongue in their own strength, in their own power. Apart from the power of God, we can’t tame it.

(Mosaic Service Only: Toothpaste Illustration...race to see who can get it out of the tube fastest. “Now, another race...to see who can put it back the quickest!” - Words can have very destructive power, and once they are out, they cannot be taken back!)

So we see the symptoms in us...what is the fix. What is really wrong. What’s the diagnosis?

Diagnosis: James 3:10-12, James says, *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.* James 3:11, *Can both fresh water and salt water flow*

from the same spring? Can you go to a spring and draw fresh water and salt water from it? No. What happens if you mix salt water and fresh water together? Does it become fresh? No. It becomes salty. James 3:12, *My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?* That's never going to happen, is it? There's no way. *Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*

What James is talking about is that the source determines the outcome! And the tongue is not the source for the words, it is just where they come out! It's what's inside of you? And what is James' diagnosis of a tongue that can praise God one minute and curse others the next? James' diagnosis for you and for me is that the heart of the problem is a problem of the heart.

If you have a problem with your tongue, it's more serious than you think. It's a problem with your heart. Jesus put it this way in Matthew 12:34, *For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.*

This means that we can no longer say something and then use the excuse, "That is out of character for me to say that". The real truth is that your tongue finally betrayed your innermost thoughts and let someone else know the truth you've been masking or hiding from them.

Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The heart of the problem is a problem of the heart. We're not talking about a speech problem; we're talking about a spiritual problem.

As a way for us to do something with this diagnosis and take an opportunity for healing, I'd like you to take that tongue depressor you got when you came in and hold it in your hand while we recite our memory verse for today, James 3:10. Let's say it together. *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.*

One more time: *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.*

It should not be, friends. We know it should not be. Here's what I'm going to ask you to do right now with your tongue depressor. I'd like you to take a pen or a pencil, and I'd like you to write on one side of it one of the ways you think you sometimes damage people with your words: slander, grumbling, dishonesty, gossip, rumor, harsh words, hurtful words, the absence of encouraging or life-giving words. Just write down one of the ways you think your words are damaging on one side.

Say theme verse one more time: *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.*

It should not be that both of these things come out of our mouths...but James only asks us to fix the cursing side of this. He wants to encourage us to live out the blessing side of this. So on the other side of this tongue depressor, I want you to write the name of one person you could bless this week with your words. Maybe there's a note or an e-mail that you could write that would take you only three minutes, but that would be a gift that keeps on giving to them for a lifetime. Is there maybe a child whose soul you could fuel up? Is there a spouse whose whole week you could make? Is there a colleague whose confidence you could build? Is there a teacher you could thank for making class fun and interesting and for really caring about you? Write the name of one person you could bless this week.

Now the words of James are a bit invasive, aren't they? He's not dealing with surface stuff. He comes along and he says, "Open wide and say 'ahhh,'" and let me look inside. When you take the time to look inside, what do you see? What do your words say about you? What do they say about your heart? What do they say about the condition of your soul? God wants to forgive you and fill your hearts with the fullness of his love and help you use the amazing power of your tongue for good. And for today, that is the good news...