

James: The Spiritual Discipline of Biting One's Tongue

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Prayer of Illumination

Lord God,
help us turn our hearts to you
and hear what you will speak,
for you speak peace to your people
through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Background

Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken* is probably the most famous American poem: two roads diverged in a yellow wood... Jesus had a similar message: the well-trodden path leads to destruction, while the more difficult path leads to life.

And then the wise 20th century philosopher Yogi Bera quipped, "If you come to a fork in the road—TAKE IT!"

The book of James is similar in that it presents Christianity as choosing between two ways of life. You can't be worldly and you can't be godly at the same time. Don't be double-minded or double-tongued. Be single-minded in your devotion to Christ.

So James is a very practical book—a lot of "do's and don'ts" are found in it—in fact there are 59 commands in just 108 verses! Like Proverbs, James is a wisdom writing that trains us how to faithfully follow along the path of life and avoid the path of destruction.

Choose this day... which path you will take.

Church tradition says that James was the younger brother of Jesus. James and Jesus grew up together—eating together, wrestling together, and learning carpentry together in the small town of Nazareth. Big brother Jesus rubbed off on his little brother James. And James' book reflects that—it reads a lot like Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*.

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So let's hear now the word of the Lord from James 3.

Scripture: James 3:1-12 (NRSV)

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 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. 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! 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. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can saltwater yield fresh.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – James: The Spiritual Discipline of Biting One's Tongue

Jay Heinrichs is the author of the thoroughly enjoyable New York Times Bestseller *Thank You for Arguing*. He's the professor of rhetoric and oratory at Middlebury College. In it, Heinrichs tells a funny story about how he made a mistake with his words, as James talks about in our reading.

It was his first job as a journalist and in his first article he wrote a piece about Mt. St. Helens. But he put the volcano in the wrong state—Oregon, not Washington. The story went to press. Heinrichs learned about his mistake when he found a snail mail envelope in his work mailbox. Inside the envelope was a signed letter by Governor Dixy Lee Ray, requesting her volcano back. Heinrichs was mortified. He had two options—update his resume or get creative. He chose the latter.

He ran his plan by the boss. "What if I bought a volcano and brought it back to the governor?" "You want to take her a volcano?" "Well not a *real one*. What about a bronze or plaster one? It will be good publicity for her and for us." His boss gave Heinrichs a thumbs up to give it a try.

He found a little plastic volcano and mailed it with a nice note thanking the governor for letting him borrow Mt. St. Helens for a little bit and now he was giving her volcano back.

A few days later Heinrichs received another letter from the governor, containing a signed photograph. The picture showed the governor smiling and holding up the volcano along with a copy of the offending magazine. They published the picture with the correction in the next issue.

His boss was so happy that when the volcano exploded some months later, Heinrichs was sent to do a cover story—in Oregon, I mean **Washington**.☺ Everyone was happy.

The volcano may have erupted, but all involved in the mishap didn't blow their tops. Words have power—to heal or to hurt. The governor and the journalist chose to use words that heal. And they didn't take themselves so seriously.

James has strong words to say about—words.

Teachers, preachers, leaders, and social media posters—
Speak the truth in love and thoughtfully.
Avoid flippant words and selfish motives in speech.
There's a time to speak...and a time to zip it.

But really, this is best practice for all of us:

Be reverent and judicious with our words.

This doesn't just happen. Because if we're really honest with ourselves, all of us have to admit that we're:

part ape and part angel,
part villain and part hero,
part sinner and part saint.

To be human is to be a mixed bag, of some degree of good and bad. And so all of us need grace and we need to work at it. We all need to watch our tongues—the tongue has a mind of its own. A careless slip of the tongue or slip of the thumb, can cause a world of hurt.

We've heard the nursery rhyme:

Sticks and stones may break my bones,
but names will never hurt me.

But the Bible disagrees:

Reckless words pierce like a sword,
But the tongue of the wise brings healing.

We all need to practice the spiritual discipline of biting our tongues. Of keeping our tongue firmly planted in cheek. Sometimes maybe it's not so bad if the cat's got your tongue.

Think of it this way, for good spiritual oral hygiene, we Christians ought not only to brush our teeth, but brush our *tongues*. We've got to open wide our mouths to the Great Physician, saying, "Ahhhhhhh" with the tongue depressor in our mouths. Put your words under God's scrutiny and care. For it's the tongue that reveals our true heart condition.

James tells us, if you can bridle your tongue, you can bridle your body. Do the impossible with God—and tame the tongue. This is one of the truest indicators of spiritual maturity and completeness. Proverbs tells us, if you guard your lips, you guard your life.

Shameless cute kitty cat internet pic alert:

*So I'm going to let the cat out of the bag here:
Guarding your lips...is guarding your life.*

Back to horses. If you can bridle a horse, you can guide the horse. Horses have much to teach us. Horses have an almost supernatural ability to use their limbic nervous systems to discern truth and equanimity. When they choose their leader among a band of horses, they base their choice not on the horse with the most muscle, brains, or speed. Instead, they choose the horse who best senses the pulse of the group and who cares the most. They choose the horse who is most capable of gently caring for the group in a way that soothes them. They choose the horse most distinguished by their attunement to the inner and outer needs of their group.

Except for Mr. Ed—horses can't speak. But they have much to teach us about how we treat one another. One of the fastest growing areas of counseling is horse therapy. Horses are people whisperers. They teach us to bridle our emotions and our tongues.

James breezes on to another analogy to teach us about the power of the tongue. Big ships are steered by a tiny rudder. So too, the tongue is small, yet it directs the course of our lives. Just as the rudder or the bridle is used to express the will of the pilot or the rider, so too the tongue expresses our will and desires.

Let the Divine Helmsman, Jesus, take the rudder of your life. Because if you can control your tongue—the rest is smooth sailing.

James fires off yet another tongue analogy:

The smallest of fires will eventually ravage a forest. Like a lone match, the tongue with a scorched earth policy can torch a forest of friendships and family ties.

In the second half of our reading, James goes apocalyptic and psychedelic on us—talking about the wheel of life being set on fire by the tongue.

Listen to the wisdom of Smokey the Bear, who turned 75 years-old this year.

Prevent forest fires—and use Christ's living water to douse those hellish tongues of fire that spread hatred and prejudice and slander like wildfire.

James is still fired up—he's not ready to stop. But the tongues of fire have now been transformed into the forked tongue of a snake, calling it a restless evil full of lethal venom.

The dog wags its tail when it's happy. But we humans wag our tongues when we're haughty. We give others a tongue lashing when we're angry.

With our tongues we bless the Lord and curse others. *This should not be*, admonishes James. As believers, we can't be both blessers and cursers. Lovers and haters. James calls this being double-minded. Double-tongued. To curse a human being is like cursing God, because we're made in God's likeness. Use your words and choose your words *wisely*.

Songwriter Rich Mullins once spoke to Protestants saying maybe the issue for Catholics isn't that they revere Mary too much. Maybe we Protestants just don't revere *one another* enough.

Words can heal or words can destroy—*what will we choose?*

Proverbs chapter 15 says, "a gentle tongue is a tree of life." We need to memorize our parts and enact the play on the stage of our lives entitled not *The Taming of the Shrew*, but *The Taming of the Tongue*.

James *still* isn't done about the tongue—Now switching analogies from fire to water:

*Can water be both sweet and bitter?
Can purified water be drawn from the sewer?
Can fresh water be salty?*

*If you water a fig tree, will it produce olives?
If you irrigate a grapevine, do figs grow from it?*

No. We need a spiritual spicket to control the flow of our words.

There's an old Japanese tale about a belligerent samurai who once challenged a Zen master to explain the concept of heaven and hell.

The monk replied scornfully,
"You're nothing but a lout—
I can't waste my time with the likes of you!"

His very honor attacked, the samurai flew into a rage and, pulling his sword from its scabbard, yelled, "I could kill you for your impertinence."
"That," the monk calmly replied, "is hell."

At seeing the truth in what the master pointed out about the fury that had him in its grip, the samurai calmed down, sheathed his sword, and bowed, thanking the monk for the insight.
"And that," said the monk, "is heaven."

James would say that isn't just heaven, but *heavenly* wisdom.
Be slow to speak. Slow to anger. Quick to listen.

James said earlier in his book,
"If anyone thinks they are religious,
but don't bridle their tongue,
they're deceiving themselves,
and their religion is futile."

Words are spiritual, Immanuel. There are a lot of social media samurais running rampant these days. And they too need an encounter with the Tongue Whisperer.

So here are Seven Laws of the Samurai for Bridling Your Tongue and Bridling Your Thumb on Social Media:

1. Don't post when you're angry.
2. Ask yourself, will your post drive people away or bring people together?
3. Argue the facts and ideas, don't make it personal.
4. Ignore personal attacks. If that happens, refocus the issue in a respectful manner.
5. State your thoughts clearly and concisely--then learn from others.
6. Represent people's positions fairly, in a way they would agree with your description of them. Don't create a straw man or straw woman.
7. Don't overshare—we don't need to know everything! Some mystery is a good thing.

On our own, learning to train your tongue is harder than learning to train a dragon. However, controlled by the Spirit, we will temper our words with mercy, speaking in a measured and thoughtful manner. We will control our words. They won't control us.

Instead of being two-faced, we'll be true-faced. By God's grace we'll live good lives. Our good words and good deeds will come from a gentleness born of wisdom. Our homes, our churches, our online presence, the workplace, our schools, our public places. Wherever we find ourselves—will be gracious places.

James says that we're friends of God.

Friends, let us be friends of God and friends of one another. Friends--not fiends or foes, but friends who are friendly to all we encounter, building one another up, extending Christ's kindness and compassion, and honoring the likeness and image of God in all of us.

Amen.

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