20/9/20 sermon for St James Bolton. James 3 ‘Tame it‘ by Jennifer Medley

Today we are continuing our series of sermons on the book of James, which was written probably by the half-brother of Jesus and leader of the early church in Jerusalem. After the death of Stephen, and the persecution of Christians began, the church in Jerusalem scattered so James is writing as pastor to his dispersed congregation to instruct and encourage them in the face of great difficulties.

In chapter one, James said v19 “My dear brothers take note of this, everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” so, in chapter 3 he concentrates on what comes out of our mouths and it’s headed taming the tongue

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Have you ever said something you regret?

I have, many times and each one is branded into my memory with red hot embarrassment, insults I threw at my parents when I couldn’t get my own way. Words used and employed to give maximum pain and effect I think we’ve all done it, well I hope its not just me. But what if your last words to someone really, were the last words they would ever hear from you, would that help you to control your tongue?

I don’t know about you but the hardest thing, I have found in **our** difficulties, the pandemic lockdown, is not being able to speak to people face to face. Living alone I am used to silence, but in normal life if it got too much for me, I would go out, usually with my sister or visit my friends, but we’re not allowed to visit friends and as you know my sister died last Christmas. So, its been a very lonely 7 months.

I was in Newcastle when Val was taken into intensive care, so I couldn’t be with her children at her bedside, but I am glad to say I was able to talk to her on face time and before she died, I had the opportunity to tell her I loved her.

So many people don’t have that chance and regret words said in the heat of the moment which they can never take back. So many people during the lockdown have had to die alone without the comforting words of their family around them. You never know what’s around the corner so we need to control our tongue. James knew the importance of words and gives us this whole chapter on controlling the tongue.

He begins by comparing the tongue to other small things that make a great difference. A rider can control a horse using only a small piece of metal that fits in the horse’s mouth. A ship’s rudder is only small but it can cause a large ship to change direction. A small spark can start a fire that destroys everything in its path. In the same way, let slip the wrong word at the wrong time and a precious relationship can be spoilt for ever, a promise can be broken, a bad impression can be given which can never be repaired. A loved one may die before you have had chance to say I didn’t mean it, I’m sorry. No wonder the psalmist in psalm 141 prays that God should place a sentry in front of his mouth to check everything that was coming out.

If James had written his letter today, he probably would have added the mobile phone to his list.

a device small in size but which can carry great power. Did you know that the mobile phone in your pocket has greater processing power than the computer used to land Apollo 11 on the moon almost 50 years ago?

But it’s not the technical power of our phones that is so dangerous, it is how we choose to use it. With one phone call. One tweet, one inappropriate selfie, one unkind video, one Instagram image, or one Facebook post we can have immediate worldwide impact. James talks about controlling the tongue but we must also control our pen, our computer keyboard or our texting fingers.

With today’s technology we can be overwhelmed with the spoken word. We are saturated with it, from the moment we wake up and turn on the radio, words inundate us. In newsprint, email, texts, Twitter, snapchat, face book, the telephone, the internet, television or even books and letters. words surround us. But don’t get me wrong words are a gift from God. We talk to our children as soon as they are born, we read them stories, as soon as possible we teach them to read. Words are important, words are precious, they are gifts to be used carefully to communicate information, meaning, truth and love.

Words are supple, fluent, fragile, but can also be degraded and used as weapons, harsh biting, brutal. They’re wonderful and dangerous, beautiful and terrible. Words are powerful and can do much damage especially to a young person. This is probably why James starts by saying teachers will be judged with greater severity than anyone else. he knew that the words of the teacher could influence other people. It could direct decisions that they may make, it could affect their belief systems. It could affect how they lived their lives. It could either lead them closer to God or further away and this damage could all be done by the words of an influential teacher.one hint in the wrong direction and a child can be sent down a wrong path; one criticism at the wrong time can scar a child for life; one preacher pouring scorn on a cherished doctrine or advocating something that’s not quite right and a whole congregation may set off in the wrong direction; One word out of place in a pastoral conversation can destroy someone’s confidence.

Words are powerful and James knew that, so after scaring all the teachers with his declaration that a more severe judgement than anyone else awaits them. He modifies his words by saying we all makes mistakes, and warns that taming the tongue in general, for anyone, is so difficult as to be almost impossible.

But nothing is impossible for God. As determined Christians how can we train ourselves to be wise with the words we speak and when we choose to speak them? If we look at Jesus, both the Old Testament prophets and the gospel writers talked about the way he would choose his words carefully Isaiah 53:7 says “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth, he was led like a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before its shearer is silent so he did not open his mouth”

Jesus often chose to stay silent, but he also knew the right moment to speak out. Learning when to speak and when to keep our mouths closed is a discipline, we all have to learn. Jesus also said that what comes out of our mouths is an indication of what is in our hearts. Matthew 15,18. James takes this further when he speaks of a fig tree bearing olives or a vine bearing figs, this does not happen. So, if a person declares himself a Christian yet still swears and gossips, or is always carping and criticizing then we might question what is in their heart, do you remember as a child going to the doctors and he would ask you to stick out your tongue. They could tell by looking at the condition of the tongue what was ailing you. I don’t know if they do that anymore. But the tongue is still a diagnostic tool when it comes to our faith.

Verse 13 “Who is wise and discerning among you? Such a person should by their upright behaviour, display their works in the humility of wisdom”

We are living through strange times and many people throughout the world are fed up with the way their country is run, with the way the police force behaves, with the lockdown and the testing regime and so on. Often these criticisms are justified, But the challenge for God’s people is to be able to speak the truth about the way people are behaving without turning into a perpetual grouch. There is still a vast amount of beauty, love generosity and sheer goodness in the world that followers of Jesus should be celebrating and contributing to. As the saying goes it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

Jesus himself declared a special blessing on peace makers. But allowing our opinions to spill out into fault-finding and backbiting is not only, not making peace. It is allowing the build-up of a climate of fear, anger and suspicion in which wars and fighting can all too easily occur. What we need is wisdom, but not the wisdom of the world, its not a matter of knowing a large number of facts or skills in negotiating or leadership it is wisdom from above.

Verse 17” But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere”

That’s the kind of wisdom we need and that’s the wisdom God will give to anyone who asks. But like most things it’s easier to say then it is to do. If we want to change what comes out of our mouth the change must begin in our hearts. We must learn to Improve our hidden attitudes in order to change how we communicate with those around us. And we are more likely to learn through looking back at our experience. In chapter 1 we considered how James uses the metaphor of looking in a mirror and then forgetting what he looks like. In the same way, in our busy world, many of us never truly stop and reflect on the day we have just had, on what we could have done better. How many times do, we wish we had said nothing and just listened. If only I had paused and thought for a few more seconds.

Reflection is the opportunity to rewind the day and go through conversations and moments when we have blurted things out without really thinking and hopefully as long as we don’t forget what we look like we should begin to improve. Godly wisdom is responding to the challenges of our life with his perspective and his timing. We can only learn this as we spend time in his presence, listening to what God has to say as we review the day allowing him to change us from deep within.

There is no easy fix, there is no six-week training course we can down load from utube. If we want to shape our hearts to be more like God’s heart then we must commit to becoming determined disciples and in spending time with him allowing his wisdom and love to infiltrate our thinking. Our words create the culture we want to inhabit they are the clothes that our thoughts wear, they are the wardrobe of our inner life, the outer evidence of our inner reality. So, if our words come from the heart, then its worth spending time investing in the contents of our hearts so that our words reflect more accurately the pure wisdom that comes from God above.

Let us Pray

Lord we are sorry for the times we have spoken without thinking, when we have spoken instead of listening. Help us to control our tongues, to improve our hidden attitudes and give us your wisdom, oh Lord and change our hearts to be more like yours. In Jesus’s name amen