

## "Soul Resonance"

Reading: Proverbs 8:1-13; James 3:1-12

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I don't know about you, but when I think back to some of my most mortifying moments in life, I'm usually thinking about something I've said. I'm sure I've tripped in front of people before, or dribbled food on myself at a fancy dinner or something, but the memories that can still make me blush with shame even years later are the times I've used my words foolishly, ignorantly, or hurtfully. It's just life, really; we all have those moments. But even so, words are powerful, and I know that, and I feel I ought to have better control over my tongue.

You've probably got a pretty good idea of what I'm talking about. Our passage from the book of James for today is likely something we all know to be true. In general, there is a sense in which wisdom is often only telling us what we already know. That runs counter to what we've been seeing about wisdom in recent weeks as we've been studying the wisdom book of James, since we've seen that wisdom in the Bible is something that must either be deliberately searched for or specially granted directly from God. Certainly that's true, but part of what makes wisdom *wisdom* is that once you come across something wise you instantly know it to be true. It more often requires simplicity of heart than it does brilliance of mind. You find a piece of wisdom and it automatically settles something within you because your soul recognizes it, even though you may never have heard it before. You hear a proverb as though it were the chord of a song, and part of you resonates at that same chord, because it's wisdom. Sometimes -- not always, but often -- wisdom is like that. The very first time you hear it, you accept it implicitly because you've always known it to be true, even if you didn't *know* you knew it. Maybe God created us with some inner organ that can recognize wisdom instantly, or maybe each of us just has to come to the point of realizing that all that wisdom actually applies to *me*, too, not just to everyone else.

Our passage for today is like that, one of those pieces of wisdom that all of us already know and have heard a dozen times before, but because we so easily lose that simplicity of heart we need to hear it again and let our souls resonate with it once more. Or maybe I should say that we need to let our souls flinch at it once more, because this is wisdom that hits close to home for all of us, and if it doesn't hit home for you, you're probably not paying attention. I like the rather tongue-in-cheek way James puts it: if you can master this bit of wisdom then you must have reached perfection, because anyone who is anything less than perfect needs to hear this message.

And he lets us have it. "The tongue...is a fire, a world of evil among the 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." No question where he stands on *this* issue. And each and every one of us knows he is right. You know he's speaking directly to you, and I know he's speaking directly to me. Every one of us should be resonating with this warning, this reminder, of how dangerous the tongue can be because every one of us has used our God-given voice to say something we know we shouldn't, and that tongue spits out those words before we can stop it. How many families have been fractured by angry words? How many friends have parted ways because one person couldn't keep a secret? How many marriages have been damaged by arguments that have gone where they shouldn't? How many of our leaders have found themselves under the hot glare of public dishonor because of something stupid that slipped out?

The tongue is indeed a fire. You know perfectly well how much damage you can do to someone you care about just by speaking the wrong words at the wrong time. You know perfectly well how much trouble you can get yourself into with what you say. You know perfectly well how much hard work can be undone in a matter of seconds by letting the wrong words come out. Many times when preachers handle this passage from James they focus on how damaging our words can be. Many churches get a stern talking-to about gossip when it comes time to read these verses. And that's entirely appropriate; far too many inflammatory, hurtful, thoughtless things have been said by otherwise good, churchgoing Christians who normally claim to be loving, generous people. Far too many people have come to know the church as the place where so-called holy people will look down on you through their painted smiles, then turn and whisper judgments about you while your back is turned. We need to be hit with the blunt side of James's words because we've earned it. We have to accept the damage we have done with our words, and repent.

There is often some discussion as to where that line is between gossip and words spoken appropriately. Sometimes preachers come down so firmly against gossip that we're left wondering if we can ever say anything about anybody to anyone, and it reinforces the idea that we're a bunch of individuals who go about separate, private lives outside of church. In reality, we're a family, and we should know and love one another well enough to be concerned for each other when something isn't right in our brother or sister's life. We need to be in one another's business enough that we can start meddling if something goes wrong; that's what families do because they care about one another. But so long as we're being honest with ourselves and with God, usually we know when we've said something out of genuine concern for someone else or when we've said something out of spite or pettiness or smugness or false piety. And James reminds us that words are so powerful that it is worth stopping to examine ourselves before we open our mouths.

Our words are one way for our souls to resonate with the heart of God, and to encourage the souls of others to resonate with the heart of God. Two other Bible verses that come to mind related to speech are Hebrews 4:12 and Matthew 15:18. The first says that "the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." It's a reminder to us that words are powerful. God uses words to create, redeem, heal, judge, promise, and fulfill. We are not God, but our words are still powerful. The second comes from Jesus, when He says, "The things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them." He was in the middle of a debate about ceremonially clean and unclean foods at the time, but part of the implication is that our words reveal the truth about our souls, and so words can make or break holiness.

Even though James puts his case against the tongue very strongly and leaves us wondering whether we would be better just to glue our mouths shut, he does not leave us in the negative, but he points us toward the positive. Holiness, wisdom, life in Christ: these are not just passive negatives, lists of things to refrain from and shun and avoid doing, they are also invitations to go forward to active positives. We do not just stop sinning, we also go forth and do good. We do not just give up our old lives, we also receive new lives in Christ. James does not just tell us not to speak evil, though that is his main focus, he also points us in the direction of what we should say.

No one can deny the potential for good we can do with our voices. After all, James does not only compare the tongue to evil, destructive things; his intent is to point out the disproportionate power of the human tongue. Like a bit in a horse's mouth or a rudder of a ship, the tongue can have far more power than one might think when looking at such a small, shapeless organ. It's like a fire, something that can either be used to cook your dinner or burn down your house. Or to compare it to modern things, we might think of it like uranium, which can be harnessed either to power a city or annihilate it. Or a rifle, which can be used to hunt a meal for your family or commit murder. Or water: fresh water can save your life, but salt water can kill you.

As one who was undoubtedly familiar with the grand story of the Bible, James would certainly have recognized the role voices had played in salvation history. How did God choose to create the universe? By calling it into existence and order and beauty. How did John describe the incarnate Christ? As the Word of God made flesh. What did God choose as one of the foremost ways of spreading the light of Christ? Through the proclamation of the good news; through preaching and witnessing to one another of what God has done. Yes, the tongue is able to do much more damage than one might think of such a small organ, but it was with a voice that the entire world was created! It was with the Word of God that you and I are saved!

Yes, we can use our tongues for gossip and abuse and lies and half-truths, and we can destroy relationships and marriages and families and careers, but we can also use our tongues to participate in the re-creation of the world. What Christ has not abolished he can redeem, and he can redeem our faltering, uncertain voices for the construction of his kingdom. He can take your tongue, which you have used to gossip about your brother or sister in Christ, and he can transform that tongue into something that can proclaim salvation to the lost. He can take your tongue, which you have used to say spiteful words to your spouse or your parents, and he can redeem it into something that can encourage the brokenhearted. He can take your tongue, which you have used to curse another creation of God who cut you off in traffic, and he can remake it into something that can give godly instruction to one who is wandering in darkness.

I see it in our public discourse these days, when a political candidate or a celebrity gains fame and following by "telling it like it is," being "politically incorrect," or "saying what everyone else is afraid to say." They use their tongue as a fire to destroy, rather than as a song to praise or a balm to heal. I see it in social settings, even in the church, when we get a little thrill from telling a joke that finds its humor in mean-spiritedness or dehumanizing others. I see it in myself, when I give voice to my lowest impulses, my pettiness, and my critical spirit. Instead, our words can resonate with the words of God, words that save and redeem and bring light to dark places. Our words can encourage other souls to resonate with God's wisdom, too: just as Christ the Word of God saves, our words can be agents of God's salvation, as well. Our words can be testimony of what God has done, as we do during baptism. Our words can give voice to holiness, and can then move us further into God's holiness, and so can display for others the beauty of holiness.

Our Wisdom Challenge in recent weeks has called us not only to read the wisdom books of James and Proverbs, not only to learn about wisdom for our own edification, but also to use that wisdom to learn a new vocabulary for engaging the world. This is one area in particular where the church has an opportunity to be a powerful witness for God: by choosing our words carefully in a world full of babble and bombast.

One of the most basic things we learn from the wisdom of the Bible and especially the wisdom of James is that a wise person is one who has integrity and consistency. The whole person, physically, mentally, spiritually, relationally, and everything in between, is a unified whole. Thoughts and beliefs and actions are in sync. Spiritual reality equals physical reality. If we claim to be those who praise God, then, let us praise God! Let us not only not curse our brothers and sisters, let us use our voices to be active redeeming agents of God's grace. Let us never be those who stay silent in the face of injustice or suffering. Let us speak forgiveness when no one else will. Let us proclaim righteousness when others want only selfishness. Let us call evil *evil* when others want only comfort. Let us preach peace when all around us want only war. Let us be willing to be the only voice that is faithful to God, if necessary, speaking bold, fearless faith in our redeemer, heedless of what it will cost us. Let us use our tongues to build the kingdom of God.



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