

Taming the Tongue

BY TODD D. STILL

The things that we say or fail to say serve as a barometer of our Christian character, according to the letter of James. The (in)ability to master our words is both a metric for and a mark of spiritual maturity.

When former Utah governor Jon Huntsman announced that he was “suspending” his campaign for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, he called upon the remaining Grand Old Party contenders vying for the chance to challenge the sitting President to abandon their “current toxic form of political discourse,” maintaining that it “does not help our cause.”¹ Truth be told, contemporary presidential hopefuls do not have a corner on the market of “rancorous rhetoric.” If careless, unsavory, slanderous, and hostile speech all too frequently typifies political campaigns, it also weasels its way into Christian conversations and congregations.

Richard J. Bauckham reckons that in the letter of James “control of the tongue” is a pivotal ethical and spiritual concern, rivaled only by the call to be in “solidarity with the poor.”² Careful reading of and reflection upon the epistle lend support to Bauckham’s contention. The purpose of this essay is to explore what “Just James” has to say to “the twelve tribes of the Diaspora” (1:1) regarding speech and the ethics thereof.³ An overview of the letter with regard to this matter will give way to a more thorough examination of James 3:1-12, the passage within the epistle which deals most expansively with our subject. By way of conclusion, I will consider how contemporary Christians might best appropriate James’s instruction regarding the (mis)use of words.

WHAT IS THAT YOU SAY?

Although instruction regarding speech is present elsewhere in the New Testament,⁴ it is ever-present in the letter of James. Were one to go through the letter line-by-line, one would discover that “speech matters” permeate

the epistle. In fact, some forty-six of the letter's one hundred and eight verses – an arresting forty-three percent of them! – touch upon “speech matters” in one fashion or another. Put otherwise, two out of every five verses in James have something to do with speaking.⁵

James 1:19 is the first passage in the letter that directly addresses speech ethics. There, James enjoins his audience to be “quick to hear” and “slow to speak.” Furthermore, at the close of the first chapter, James describes the “religion” (*thrēseia*) of people who do not bridle their tongues (that is, control their speech; cf. James 3:2-3) as “worthless” (*mataios*).

Turning to chapter 2, James calls his recipients to conjoin faith and works, for “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17; cf. 2:26).⁶ Those who “hear the word,” James insists, must “do the word” (1:22-25). Words alone will not suffice; one must put words to work. James asks, “What good is it...if you *say* you have faith but have not works?” (2:14, italics added). It is altogether likely that James intentionally addresses the topic of the tongue (3:1-12) on the heels of his instruction regarding faith and works (2:14-26) in order to underscore the necessary congruence between one's words and works. Believers are to “so speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty” (2:12).

Passing over James 3:1-12 for now (see further below), we note in 3:14 the admonition not to be boastful and (thereby be) false to the truth. James denounces boasting more forcefully still in chapter 4. In chiding prideful profiteers for presuming upon God and the gift of life, James asserts that they are boasting in their arrogance. Moreover, he maintains, “All such boasting is evil” (4:15-16). Instead of boasting before God, James commends humble, faithful prayer, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (4:6; cf. Proverbs 3:34; Job 22:29; see, too, James 1:9; 4:10). Thus, those who lack wisdom should ask of God in unwavering faith (James 1:5-6; note also 5:15). Not only does God give to all people “generously and ungrudgingly” (1:5; cf. 1:17) as a “compassionate and merciful” Lord (5:11), but also, James reminds by offering an example from the life of the prophet Elijah, “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (5:16-18).

Apart from James 3:1-12, there are two other extended passages in James where speech features. The first 4:11-12, where James instructs believers not to “speak evil against one another” or to “judge” another sister or brother. To do so, James reckons, is tantamount to speaking evil against and judging the law, which in turn places one in the tenuous and untenable position of judging the law as opposed to doing it. Given that there is but one lawgiver and judge – God – and that God, who is one (2:19), is the only one “who is able to save and to destroy” (4:12), believers should resist the temptation to judge their neighbor (cf. 4:7). On the contrary, they are to love their neighbor (2:8; cf. Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14) and to be marked by mercy, since “mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:13; cf. Matthew 5:7; 9:13; 12:7).

The other verse to consider here is James 5:12. In language strikingly similar to Jesus' teaching (Matthew 5:34-37),⁷ the letter's auditors are told not to swear "by heaven or by earth or with any other oath." Their "yes" is meant to mean "yes," and their "no" is meant to mean "no" (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:17). Straightforward truth-telling renders unnecessary verbal props and additional assurances. What is more, it safeguards believers from incurring divine (eschatological) judgment (cf. James 3:1). In another probative parallel, Jesus declares, "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36-37).

THE PROSPECTS AND PERILS OF SPEECH

The most protracted and arresting section of instruction regarding speech in James (or, for that matter, elsewhere in Scripture) appears in 3:1-12. At first glance, it is not entirely clear how James's contention that not many recipients of the letter should become teachers (3:1) coheres with his tightly woven, highly rhetorical "attack on the tongue" that follows (3:2-12). Upon further reflection, however, the link is logical. Whatever else teachers do, they talk. Would that they used their words and influence wisely!

Given that they do not always do so, teachers can lead others astray through that which they say. Therefore, people should not receive the mantle of teacher precipitously or take the responsibility lightly, "for [those] who teach will be judged with a greater strictness" (3:1). Indeed, those who would presume to teach others need to teach themselves (note Romans 2:21) and to bear in mind that "to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (Luke 12:48). Furthermore, those disciples who serve as teachers do well to remember that there is truly only one teacher and instructor, namely, the Christ (Matthew 23:8, 10) and that they must take every necessary precaution not to place a stumbling block in the path of other believers, especially the so-called "little ones." As it happens, millstones are rather heavy and seas rather deep (note Matthew 18:6-7; cf. Mark 9:42; Luke 17:1-2).

Instead of wagging their tongues, believers (including teachers!) are meant to bridle them. People, James maintains, stumble in many ways (James 3:2). That being said, those who do not stumble in what they say are said to be *teleios* ("perfect, whole, complete").⁸ In fact, James reckons that those who are able to control their speech will be able to bridle the entire body or whole self. If a person is capable of taming one's tongue, which is depicted in this passage none too favorably as "an unrighteous world among our [bodies'] members" (3:6, RSV)⁹ and "a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (3:8), then it stands to reason in James's moral vision that such an individual will not succumb to other sins and temptations either. For James, what one

says or fails to say serves as a barometer of one's Christian character. The (in)ability to master one's words is both a metric for and a mark of spiritual maturity.

This programmatic passage regarding speech continues with three analogies in James 3:3-5. These comparisons borne of observation demonstrate that smaller things like the tongue can in fact control bigger things like the

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body. In the first example James notes that riders of horses place a bit, a relatively small instrument, into the horse's mouth in order to control the whole horse (3:3). In another apropos metaphor, James invites his listeners to consider something even larger than a horse — a ship. Despite its size, indeed so big that it requires strong winds to move it along the water, a comparatively little rudder guides the ship as the pilot

wills (3:4). What is true of a horse's bit and a ship's rudder is no less true of the tongue: albeit a "small member" of the human body, "it boasts of great exploits" (3:5). This correlation between the tongue and the bit and rudder (3:5a) gives way to another illustration in form of an exclamation: "How small a fire sets ablaze how large a forest!" (3:5b). Once again James observes that what is minute (a flame) can control and, in this case, consume what is massive (a great forest). By now James's point is acutely clear and amply reinforced: relative to its size the tongue wields disproportionate power. One must be circumspect in speech, therefore, lest it range out of control like an unbridled horse, a wayward ship, or raging fire.

The tongue (i.e. one's words), James figures, is an extension of one's person, a microcosm of one's character. Herein lies the problem: pure lips require pure lives, but we — like the prophet Isaiah of old — are of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5). James pulls no punches. His evaluation of the human condition is decidedly pessimistic (or, one might maintain, realistic); indeed, it is no more positive than the Apostle Paul's.¹⁰ This much is made crystal clear by James's incriminating depiction of the tongue and his bleak conclusion that no human is able to tame the tongue (James 3:8).

Having noted an entire forest can be destroyed by a small fire, James declares "The tongue is a fire" (James 3:6). By employing this analogy, James has none of the valuable effects of fire in mind (for example, providing

warmth, light, or beauty), as the remainder of the verse reveals. As a fire, the tongue is “placed among our [bodily] members as a world of iniquity.” It, we are told, stains the entire body. What is more, it sets on fire the course of one’s life and is set on fire by Gehenna.¹¹ James’ scathing, relentless attack on the tongue resurfaces in 3:8, where he decries the tongue as “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (cf. Job 20:16).

The ostensible fact that “no human being is able to tame the tongue” (James 3:8a) takes James aback. People, he notes, can tame and have tamed all sorts of animals. Humanity has managed to tame beasts that roam the earth, birds that fly above the earth, reptiles that crawl upon the earth, and sea creatures that swim “under” the earth. If people have tamed “lions and tigers and bears, oh my,” then why on earth do they seem impotent when it comes to taming the tongue? This question exercises James and should also animate us.

James regards duplicity in general (note his critique of being “double-minded,” or literally “two-souled” [*dipsychos*], in James 1:8 and 4:8) and duplicitous speech in particular to be deplorable. That believers would use their tongues to “eulogize (*eulogeō*) the Lord and Father” on the one hand and to “curse those who are made in the likeness of God” on the other (3:9) scandalizes him. His incredulity arises from the incongruity of such speech acts. By denouncing the incompatibility of blessing the Creator and cursing those fashioned in the *imago Dei*, James is saying more than “Stop speaking out of both sides of your mouth!” Rather, his instruction that “blessing and cursing” (3:10) ought not come forth from the same mouth of those who are believers in the “glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (2:1) is predicated upon an ethical, biblical principle that those made by God and for God ought to be treated with dignity and respect (see, for example, Genesis 9:6).

Thus, for James, speech ethics is not simply a facet of do-goodery propped up by syrupy sentimentality like that expressed by Thumper in the movie “Bambi.” (Recall, “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say nothin’ at all.”¹²) Far more than a peripheral, external accouterment meant to adorn ethical life, James sees speech to be a decidedly moral matter that is integral to the good life. Indeed, he regards unbridled, duplicitous speech as sinful and unnatural. Even as a single spring cannot produce both sweet and bitter water, nor salt water become fresh, and even as a fig tree cannot yield olives, nor a grapevine grow figs (3:11-12), neither should those who have received the “implanted word” (1:21) and who hold to the “faith of our Lord” (2:1, RSV) seek to bless God and curse others.

HOW, THEN, SHALL WE SPEAK?

Throughout his letter James instructs believers to eschew hurtful words that tear down. He considers speech characterized by partiality (2:3-4), hostility (2:7; 3:9; 4:11), false piety (2:16), egocentricity (3:14; 4:13, 16), duplicity (3:10), and dishonesty (5:12) as sinful and harmful. On the contrary, he

encourages the letter's recipients to speak helpful words that heal, words of intercession (1:5-6), liberation (2:12), submission (4:15), confession (5:16), and restoration (5:19-20). Unwise words, like false wisdom, are to be avoided (note 3:14-16); wise words, like true wisdom, are to be articulated (see 3:17-18).

According to Ecclesiastes 3:7, there is "a time to keep silence and a time to speak." James implores his listeners to be "quick to hear" and "slow to speak" (1:19). Wisdom is required to discern when and when not to speak. James assures that God will give wisdom to those who ask (1:5). Those who seek to speak wisely do well to ask for wisdom and to allow their speech to be directed by the following question: Is that which I am about to say truthful, charitable, profitable, necessary, and timely?

In order to become wise, and not simply in our own eyes (Proverbs 26:12), so that we might speak wisely and ethically, James would insist, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:8). Turning to God for wisdom through intercession (1:5) and for exaltation through humiliation (4:10; cf. 1:9) is a necessary first step for those who would serve God and speak in God-honoring ways.

Communion with and faith-filled deeds offered to God do not (only, or even primarily) occur in isolation. According to James, interaction with other believers, not to mention outsiders, should shape one's sensibilities and commitments. Chaste speech is a gift to the community and a mark of spiritual maturity.

In addition to fostering fervent prayer and congregational commitment, Scripture can shape our cognitions and help to transform our speech proclivities and patterns. Citations, allusions, and illustrations drawn from Scripture are woven throughout the letter of James (for instance, 1:1; 2:8, 11, 23, 25; 4:6; 5:11; 17-18). We would do well to be steeped in Scripture and to hear and heed what James (which is Scripture, despite Luther) says: "Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls" (1:21).

All too frequently we sin with the tongue (and I include myself in this indictment). But let us hear James's invitation to consider anew how our words can woo or wound, help or harm. Then, having done so and having redoubled our commitment to use speech wisely and ethically, let us set out to undo one conversation at a time the mistaken notion that "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." In carrying out this "speech revolution," may these words of promise echo in our ears: "Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle" (James 3:2). And, more pointedly still, let us hear James's warning: "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless" (1:26).

NOTES

1 "Jon Huntsman Quits GOP Race," *Associated Press* (January 16, 2012), www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/01/16/jon-huntsman-quits-gop-race (accessed February 24, 2010).

2 Richard J. Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 204. Cf. William R. Baker, *Personal Speech-Ethics in the Epistle of James* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr [Siebeck], 1995): "James has made control of speech the premier ethical and spiritual task of [hu]man[ity]" (99).

3 On the figure of James, see John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition*, Studies on Personalities of the New Testament (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999). Regarding authorship of the letter of James, see especially Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Anchor Bible Commentary 37A (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 89-123.

4 See, for example, Matthew 5:21-26; 12:36; Luke 6:28; Romans 12:14; Galatians 5:15; Ephesians 4:29, 31; 5:4; Colossians 3:8-9, 14, 16-17; 4:6; and 1 Peter 3:9-12, 15-16; 4:11. For further biblical and roughly contemporaneous non-canonical parallels, see Baker, *Speech-Ethics in James*.

5 These verses in the epistle treat speech: James 1:5, 6, 9-10, 13, 26; 2:3, 7, 11, 12, 14, 16, 18, 23; 3:1-12, 14; 4:2-5, 11, 13, 15, 16; 5:4, 9, 11, 12, 13-18.

6 On this oft-debated topic, see for example Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 37-43.

7 For additional correlations between James and what we call the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, see Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 734-735.

8 Bauckham (*James*, 177) notes that the adjective *teleios* and its cognate verb *teleioun* occur seven times in the letter (1:4 [twice], 17, 25; 2:8, 22; 3:2) and reminds that seven signifies "completeness." Furthermore, Bauckham maintains that wholeness "is not just one important theme [in James], but the overarching theme of the whole letter, encompassing all the other major concerns." Cf. Jesus' admonition in the Sermon on the Mount: "Therefore, you yourselves be perfect [*teleioi*] as your Father in heaven is perfect [*teleios*]" (Matthew 5:48). Patrick J. Hartin explores James's focus on perfection in "Faith-in-Action: An Ethic of 'Perfection'" on pp. 20-28 in this issue.

9 Scripture quotations marked (RSV) are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 (2nd edition, 1971) by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

10 See further James 4:4, 8. Cf. especially Romans 1:18-32 and 3:9-20.

11 The phrase translated "cycle of nature" (NRSV) suggests the entire course of one's life. Gehenna is the Jewish term for "hell" (cf. Matthew 5:30; Mark 9:45; and Luke 12:5).

12 As it happens, if Thumper's motto were the measure of things, then James might not pass the test! See, for example, 2:20 ("senseless person"); 4:4 ("adulteresses"); and 4:8 ("sinners").



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