

Before I start to take a look with you at this passage I think it really appropriate to quote from Psalm 19 – May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord.

As you may realise I like to dig into the context of the scripture I've been given to talk about and I hope you will be interested too.

So - James is Jesus' half brother, the eldest of the natural children of Mary and Joseph – the first born after Jesus.

It appears that James may well have not come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah until after the resurrection as John notes in chapter 7 that “even his own brothers did not believe him” and Mark chapter 3 records his family saying publicly that “he is out of his mind”.

However it is recorded in Acts chapter 1 that he and Jesus' other brothers were present with the disciples in constant prayer and would have been with them when the Holy Spirit descended as tongues of fire at Pentecost.

James never left Jerusalem and became one of the leaders of the Christian church until his martyrdom in AD 62 when he was thrown from the top of the temple and then beaten and clubbed to death.

James wrote his Epistle or letters only 16 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus around AD 49 and it is therefore considered one of the earliest apostolic writings.

He addresses his letters to the Jews who already believed and accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

So that's the setting for this passage where James gives us a graphic description of the tongues power.

Interestingly he doesn't give us any advice on how to control the tongue. Why not?perhaps it is because the most important thing is to acknowledge and identify the problem?

Our tongue has great powers to persuade, encourage and build up others.

What comes out of our mouths is the greatest indicator of what's really in our hearts. And conversely, we can do great damage with unguarded words.

The rhyme we used to recite at school “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never harm me” is actually so very wrong. Words hurt and a casual sarcastic or critical remark can inflict lasting injury on someone.

Those names and labels we were given as children or young adults stay with us and can be so difficult to rise above or shake off and echo back into our lives all too easily.

Are we positive or negative? Optimistic or pessimistic in our speech? What jokes do we tell or repeat, do we repeat gossip about people we know, make sarcastic put downs, tell half truths.

A person of faith should be self controlled.

It's really easy for us to justify ourselves by comparing ourselves to others who are notoriously bad, saying in comparison to so and so, I'm really OK.

But James gives us some vivid illustrations to open our eyes to just how serious the problem is.

We need to tame the tongue and recognise that we will be held accountable for everything we say. In Matthew 12 {verses 36 & 37} – Jesus says “But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

To tame the tongue we need to recognise its power for good or for evil.

James uses two very graphic analogies to illustrate that although the tongue is small it has a mighty influence. He compares it to a bit in a horse's mouth with which the whole horse can be controlled and to a rudder which can steer even the largest ship.

But for both the bit and the rudder to work effectively they need to be under the control of a strong trained hand that knows how to use them properly. And both have extraordinary power out of all proportion to their size.

He uses another illustration comparing the tongue to a forest fire.

We all saw last year how a small spark on the golf course soon turned into an uncontrollable devastating fire covering acres and acres of the common and coming nearer and nearer to the houses in Shrubbs Hill. Our tongues too can carelessly set a small spark which can spread and cause widespread destruction.

James does not say that the tongue is untamable but he does say that no one can tame it – it is humanly untamable. Only God can tame it. When we allow the Holy Spirit to control our hearts, the fruit of the spirit.....love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – are all involved in the control of the tongue.

James points out that when the same mouth praises God but curses humans - who God himself has created in his own likeness - it is like a spring flowing with fresh water one minute and salt water the next or a fig tree producing olives or a vine bearing figs. All impossible contradictions.

To tame the tongue we need to start deep in our hearts. Working daily to be obedient to Christ and walking daily under the control of the Holy Spirit. We should follow the advice in Ephesians 4 {verse 29} "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

Control involves the ability to restrain the tongue when necessary and also to control it with gracious speech when appropriate.

It needs to be daily, hourly, incessantly.

As our hearts hear with open ears the Word of God again and again we are renewed and transformed and our tongues tamed. What comes out of our mouths is more and more determined by what we are putting in.

Going back to verse 2 – James says we all stumble – this isn't a fatal fall resulting in broken bones, this is a little trip and we can pick ourselves up, start again and carry on with the intention of being better – to walk better with God.

James isn't telling us to never speak or take a vow of silence, the bit, the rudder and the fire can all be used for good if controlled properly.

Proverbs 16:24 Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

True faith changes how we talk.

So let us pray

Dear Lord

You've shown us the power that words can have - help us always to use them like you to speak light into darkness.

We want to speak with gentleness. We want to speak kindness. We want to speak hope. We want to speak truth. But our tongues are hard to tame and sometimes our emotions get the better of us.

We ask today for your words to be always on our lips.

In Jesus name

Amen

Carol Elsasser, 12/9/21