

Blunt Wisdom of James Power of the Tongue

The letter of James in the New Testament has a unique place among the various letters to the earliest generation of Christians. It reads something like a “wisdom” book from the Old Testament, (The Book of Wisdom, The Book of Sirach, etc.)

Another thing that can be said about this book is that it is very down-to-earth and practical. James is a “meat and potatoes” kind of teacher. He is, you might say, “allergic to baloney.” His observations of human behavior and our tendency to be self-deceptive are quite keen.

In the midst of the letter, at chapter 3, James attacks this self-deception by impressing upon his readers the immense power of the tongue. The tongue is likened to the ‘bit’ in a horse’s mouth, the rudder of a great ship, or a tiny flame which can light a whole forest on fire. In other words, it’s power is disproportionate to its size: A tiny bit controls the whole body of a horse, a tiny rudder steers a whole ship, and a tiny flame consumes a whole forest.

This sense of the tongue’s power is further enhanced by James’ comparison our ability to tame animals: *“For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature can be tamed, and has been tamed by the human species, but no human being can tame the tongue,”* (James 3:7). Wow! That is quite the comparison and quite concerning since that little wild thing resides squarely inside our head, just behind our teeth!

We are often naïve about power and powerful things. We think that we have control and that we can handle anything, but it often gets us in trouble. Examples of this abound in life: We think we can handle our booze, the powers of sexual seduction, the lure of money, power and other things. And this is often our undoing. This is a form of pride and James’ answer to it is *“God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble,”* (4:6). The tongue is one such powerful force before which we must be humble and vigilant.

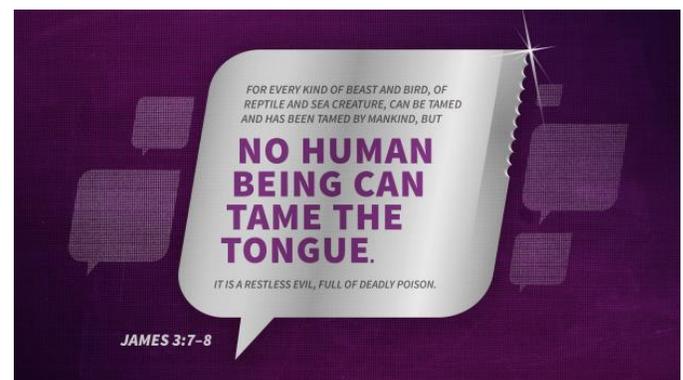
Consider the misinformation which can disrupt a community like our parish: One person can proffer some wild speculation about a relationship, a

program, a change or some other matter and it can be taken up by others as factual information. Thereafter a distorted narrative is formed which leaves people upset or questioning or furious.

Gossip is, as we all know, corrosive to love and community. And yet, consider the overwhelming power it can have in the context of a group of people. What begins as an observation or a constructive criticism quickly devolves into a ravaging attack on one’s brother or sister, devoid of any and all compassion.

Then there are those passive aggressive behaviors wherein the tongue has the power to provide crucial information for cooperation in some matter or other, but nothing is said. Herein is the tongue’s version of sin-by-omission. Passive aggression is borne of jealousy, insecurity and vindictiveness. That which the tongue withholds can be as damaging as that which it speaks.

James directs us toward a consideration of something very basic in the living out of our Christianity. Our speech is powerful and, like any great power, there need to be checks on it to ensure harmony in the community and integrity in the self. Without prayerful reflection and conscious effort, we can throw spears and hurl hand-grenades at one another in the form of speech. We can do this without really appreciating the power at our disposal.



Hence, the wisdom of James on this point is captured in the recommendation that ***“Everyone should be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, for the wrath of a man does not accomplish the righteousness of God!”***