

## **“Tongues of Fire”**

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*<sup>1</sup>Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. <sup>2</sup>For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. <sup>3</sup>If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. <sup>4</sup>Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. <sup>5</sup>So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! <sup>6</sup>And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup>For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, <sup>8</sup>but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup>With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup>From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup>Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? <sup>12</sup>Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. (James 3:1-12)*

Can you remember a time when you said something, and then instantly regretted saying it? I expect all of us can. Maybe we thought of something to say that we thought was really funny, but we didn't realize why the person we were talking to would not think it was funny at all. Or maybe that person had said something to us that hurt our feelings, and our knee-jerk reaction was to throw some painful words right back at them. Or maybe we just blurted out something without thinking, and in the awkwardness that followed we wished we could rewind the clock and take them back.

The comedian Mike Birbiglia likes to tell a story about a time when, as a young man, he was moving a new bed into his apartment. A woman who lived down the hall saw him struggling in the hall and offered to help him. As she backed into his apartment carrying the front end of the frame, she told him “I'm not worried, because a creepy, dangerous guy wouldn't have a bed like this.” Pausing for a moment, he says reflectively, “And what I should have said... was nothing.” What he did say was, “You'd be surprised.”

He immediately wanted to take that one back. “I think there is something wrong with my brain,” Birbiglia observed, “where I don't have an on-deck circle for ideas. It's just “Batter Up!” A lot of the initial thoughts or ideas we have are just bad. But something in my brain is like an unhinged Little League dad. “Don't think, kid. Just get in there and take some cuts!”

That's a pretty good baseball metaphor for what happens when we say something we regret. The evangelist James uses a number of others, but the gist is the same. The epistle of James is a book that contains a great deal of practical wisdom for people of faith, and he focuses a great deal on the damage that an untamed tongue can do.

The first metaphor he uses is a bridle on a horse. Just as we put bits into the mouths of horses and pull on the reins to get them to move to the left or the right, to slow a horse



down or stop it altogether, so do we need to have the same kind of control over what we say and how we say it. A wild horse is a scary combination, because it is a very strong beast, and we have no idea what it will do. When we say “Wild horses couldn’t make me do that,” we acknowledge that a wild and untamed horse has a dangerous capacity to drag us to places we do not want to go.

James sees the human tongue in the same way. If we do not find a way to tame it, steer it, and control it, the tongue can lead us wildly astray. That is a perilous and unpredictable way to live, James says. It is also a way of living that is incompatible with faith. If we think we are faithful to God but we cannot control our tongues, James says, we deceive ourselves and our faith, to use his word, is “worthless.”<sup>1</sup> These passages form the basis for our common English phrase “bridle the tongue.” That idiom is based completely on the writing of James, who warns us that if we do not put reins and controls on our tongues, we are playing a wild and reckless game.

The second metaphor James uses for controlling the tongue is that of a rudder on a boat. “*Look at ships,*” James writes. “*They are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small [part of us], yet it boasts of great exploits.*” With this metaphor, James makes the positive observation that, if we keep a firm grip on our tongues and use them wisely, with fair winds and calm seas we can go wherever we want to go. The negative side of the metaphor suggests that even a slight miscalculation -- even the tiniest unfortunate slip of our tongue -- can throw us off course.

To illustrate the point, one of the basic lessons of navigation is known as the “1 in 60 Rule.” It states that, if a vessel’s heading is off by one degree, then for each 60 nautical miles of travel, that vessel will be one mile off course. Given that a Boeing 737 cruises at an average of 540 miles per hour, if that plane’s heading is off by just one degree, then after just one hour of flying it will already be nine miles off course. That may not sound like much, but if your destination is Denver, which is surrounded by 12-to-14 thousand foot mountains, you could have a very serious problem. The tongue, James says, has the power to steer us to great ends, and also to disastrous ones.

The last and most ominous metaphor James uses is the spark that sets a forest ablaze. It is a powerful and timely image, given that, even as we speak, there are 6,126 wildfires burning in California that have burned more than 992,000 acres and given rise to more than 427,000 emergency response calls.<sup>2</sup> Quoting from Eugene Peterson’s translation of James’ letter, “*Remember, it only takes a spark to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell.*”<sup>3</sup> We might be tempted to dismiss this as exaggeration, but I doubt the Californians whose houses are in the path of one of those fires would do that.

I’ve already preached about one memorable stop on our summer trip, but another one was Dubrovnik, Croatia. Fans of the HBO series “Game of Thrones” might know that some of the most epic scenes from that show were filmed in Dubrovnik, and when we came back

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<sup>1</sup> James 1:26.

<sup>2</sup> “Current Emergency Incidents,” <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/>, accessed September 14, 2024,

<sup>3</sup> “The Message,” James 3:6

I rewatched some of those episodes to see how the filmmakers used the sights we saw to tell the story. As I did, I was reminded of the role that dragons played in that story. Spoiler alert for those who have not seen it, one of the most important characters in “Game of Thrones” was Queen Daenerys, whose most potent weapons were three massive dragons. Whenever she needed them, she needed only to utter the word “dracarys,” which meant dragon fire, and her terrifying pets would breathe deadly fire that destroyed whatever it touched.

It all comes from the world of fantasy television, except that, in a way, it is not fantasy at all. So much of the language we hear today in the public sphere is caustic, vicious, fear-mongering. Harsh and careless words spread lies, demonize neighbors, and put innocent people in danger. Conspiracy theorists, relying on scorched-earth campaigns of disinformation, are not at all concerned about the damage they cause or the harm they do to others. Their only concern is victory and advancement of the self. It seems as if these voices are prepared, as James would say, to “*send the whole world up in smoke.*” Such is the destructive power of unhinged tongues breathing fire.

All three of these metaphors – unbridled wild horses running rampant, a mishandled rudder setting a dangerous course... and a blazing fire leaving destruction in its wake -- are meant to leave no doubt about the dangers of a loose or hostile tongue. But just in case, James drops the metaphorical language and says it plainly. The tongue, he concludes, is “a world of iniquity.” It is “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” that can stain and pollute every part of us. Though human beings have figured out ways to tame almost every savage beast on earth, “no one” James warns, “can tame the tongue.”

I think it is good and healthy for us to remember those times when we said something, and then immediately wished we could take it back. It is good and healthy to remember the times when our words went a little wild... when we lost a hold of the rudder... or when our words were so hostile or thoughtless that it actually set a situation ablaze or left burn marks on a valued relationship. No one can fully tame their tongue, but a wise person learns from every mistake. I think that is why I’ve never forgotten that Mike Birbiglia joke, because there was real ethical wisdom in that lesson he learned: “What I should have said, was nothing.” **Amen.**