

In a Midsummers nights dream Helena says of Hermia “Though she be but little she is fierce.” Small is fierce, Small is powerful, small is mighty. Tiny things can have huge impacts on the world around us. One tiny mosquito can be carriers of a vicious disease, one little pill can make someone feel so much better. In our passage today James gives us some examples of the power of small things. A rider can control a horse, with only a small bit, a rudder has the capacity to control a whole ship, a tiny spark can ignite a large fire.

Today, most of us carry in our pockets a tiny device that carries more power than it took for the launch of Apollo 11. Small is powerful, small is mighty.

And then we get to the tongue. The tongue is small. 3.3 inches on average for a man, 3.1 inches on average for a woman, it’s made up of 8 different muscles and like a fingerprint has its own unique impression. The tongue may be little but it is fierce. Not so much on its own, but combined with our thoughts, our words, our tongue has the power to transform, the power to build up, but it also has power to tear down and destroy.

I am sure we can all think of moments when we have heard words come from someone’s tongue that have built us up, gave us the pep talk we needed, gave us that much needed encouragement when we felt low. I am sure we have all used our tongues to do the same. We will all also have moments we remember where someone has used their words to tear us down, to make us feel small, we will all know that person whose words have more power than others in our lives and can bring us down with one simple criticism. We too will have used our tongue in that way. Though it be but little, it is fierce.

In our passage today James warns us of the power of this small part of our body and reminds us of the important call to tame our tongue. James tells us in verse 6 **“it corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of their life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”** Our tongues can wreak havoc in our lives and the lives of those around us. We are seeing this a lot today. Cancel culture is more prevalent that ever as journalists scour through people’s social media, finding things they said in the past to use against them and like that, their careers are ruined, sometimes rightfully but all sometimes without any regard for change and growth that happens with age. Past words which were naive and wrong come back to haunt people. We also see how people are using their tongues to hound and harass others, on social media, people feel they have the right to say the most

horrendous things to people they have never met leading to increasingly devastating consequences like we saw recently with Caroline Flack. Though our tongues be little they are fierce.

For James, one of the problems with our tongues are the contradictions we make with them, James says in vs 9-10

"By it we bless the Lord and father; and by it we curse humans who are made in God's likeness! ¹⁰ Blessing and curses come out of the same mouth! My dear family, it isn't right that it should be like that."

The problem James has is we worship God, we praise the Lord, we go around proclaiming the goodness of God and then with our same tongue we tear down those made in the image of God. We criticise our co-workers, we make our family members feel small, we speak about people as if they are not loved by God and created by God. And James is right, it shouldn't be like that.

And so we are faced with the question? Why is this important to James and why is it important to us in our Christian discipleship journey?

I like how Tom Wright puts it "What James is after is consistency. He wants people to follow Jesus through and through, to be blessing-only people rather than blessing-and-cursing people. It's a high standard, but we should expect no less if the **gospel** is indeed the **message** of **salvation**."

Now, please hear me, we are all going to get this wrong at times, we are all going to say things we shouldn't, we are all going to occasionally snap and regret it, we need to be alert to when this becomes more than a slip up, we need to watch out for when this becomes our habit and our norm. When we can worship God easily and then just as easily criticise and condemn others.

Jesus says in Luke 6:25 "The mouth speaks what the heart it full of". I think this is key, our tongues reflect our hearts. What we say reflects how we feel, our priorities, our passions. I find that uncomfortable because actually sometimes I say not very nice things

about people - often with a self righteous tone, often feeling I am completely justified with doing so, sometimes to make me feel better about myself. Sometimes I moan and criticise all day long...what is that saying about my heart? And so before we get onto practical things we need to think about with our words/ our tongues. I think we need to take a step back and give ourselves a heart-check up. So I encourage you to close your eyes for a moment as I ask the following questions:

How is your heart? What is the focus of your attention? Where are you angry? Where is the source of joy for your heart right now? Are you filling your heart with good and godly things? What are you thankful for? How is Jesus a priority in your heart?

So we work on our heart but I think there are also some really practical things we can choose to do to help to tame our tongues. I want to suggest three ways that we can work to be people who speak blessing and not curses as James encourages.

1. Firstly we **speak not**. One of the greatest ways we can tame our tongue is training it to stay silent. Don't be like me, who tries not to speak but lets everything I am thinking be shown on my overly expressive face!!!! We need to learn when to stay silent. When to keep that comment that is on the tip of our tongue inside. This is especially important, when we are angry and when we are hurt. In those moments we are much more likely to say things we regret, things that will cause more damage to those around us than we could ever imagine. There are things people have said to me in anger, many years ago that I still hold in to today. The things we say and wish we could take back but they have been said.

But how do we hold our tongue? I think this involves us being alert and aware of the presence of God in our lives. I'd encourage you, if you are someone who gets angry, to pause before you speak, to pray in that moment that God would give you words that you won't regret. Again, when we have been hurt, it is easy to want to retaliate, we need to learn to do similar.

This applies too when we are talking about other people. If you are someone who struggles with confrontation, often your outlet because letting your frustration with someone else become a source of gossip and moaning. So, we need to learn when it is right to talk to someone wisely about our frustration with someone else and when to stay silent.

Benjamin Zander, the long-time conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra told this story in a Ted Talk:

I learned this from a woman who survived Auschwitz, one of the rare survivors. She went to Auschwitz when she was fifteen years old, her brother was eight, and the parents were lost. And she told me this. She said “We were on the train going to Auschwitz and I look down and saw my brother’s shoes were missing. I said, “Why are you so stupid, can’t you keep your things together for goodness’ sake?” The way an elder sister might speak to a younger brother. Unfortunately, it was the last thing she ever said to him because she never saw him again. He did not survive. And so, when she came out of Auschwitz, she made a vow. She told me this. She said, “I walked out of Auschwitz into life and I made a vow. And the vow was, I will never say anything that couldn’t stand as the last thing I ever say.”

2. So we speak not, **we also speak up**. We can tame our tongues by learning to speak truth to power. To speak up against the injustices and inequalities we see in the world around us. When we come to know Jesus, we discover Jesus’ heart for justice and we can learn to use our tongues well by choosing to speak truth when we see lies. This is not easy, this requires courage but it is bringing the message of salvation to our world.

We need to ask ourselves. How are we using our words to protect those who are ostracised and marginalised? For example, We are living in a time where xenophobia and fear of ‘the other’ is more rife than I have seen in my lifetime. Currently, as Coronavirus spreads, those from the south-east Asian community are being targeted, how are we speaking up and defending? Racist rhetorics are still prevalent in our world, how are we calling out people’s unconscious bias, how are we speaking up against people’s racist and xenophobic undertones. It is hard, it requires courage but we can use our tongues to speak up and speak out.

3. So we speak not, we also speak up and finally we **speak well**. Though our tongue be little, it can be fierce, in the most excellent way. We as followers of Jesus need to make a commitment to speaking well of other people. This is something we need to be intentional about. For those of us that are British, we can find this even harder. We are not used to large public affirmation, receiving or giving praise but I think as followers of Jesus this is a really simple and effective way for us to start taming our tongues. I think we do this in two ways.

Firstly, we honour the people we are thankful for. When we see someone doing something great, let's tell them so. When you see that unseen thing someone has done that no one notices, tell them. When your spouse does that thing for you that they have done every day, to the point where it has become part of your routine, thank them, acknowledge it. Honouring people for what they do and who they are is powerful. We need to be intentional with our words of encouragement and we also need to do it regularly. The more and more intentional we are, the more we can set culture in our workplace, in our homes, in our churches. My friend Will. At his wedding last year, he had me sobbing as he went round during his speech, personally, and powerfully and internationally honouring the people who had made a difference to his life.

Secondly, we find good in the people we struggle with. We are not going to have the perfect relationship with everyone we come into contact with. There are going to be people we find really irritating but we can choose to try and find good in those people and speak well of them publicly. I used to be in a choir, I was working for a church and it was a great way to meet people who weren't in church and there were some people in that choir I found quite difficult. I remember once a friend from a choir said to me, "you always try and see the best in people." That wasn't necessarily true in my mind but I chose to be really careful with that I said about the people I struggled with publicly, I intentionally tried to speak about the good things I saw in that person and for me this was a) a witness to the good news of Jesus and b) it helped changed my attitude towards that person, it reminded me they were created in the image of God. I don't always get that right, there are many times, I join in with the frustration but I think we can be real witnesses to the gospel, when we choose to speak well of the people we struggle with and honour them to those around us.

Though it be little, our tongue is fierce, We can use our tongues to bring good news to those around us, we can use them to speak affirmation and truth to power, we can use our tongues to be a blessing to the people in our lives and I encourage us as we go through this week to be people that speak blessing, that recognise the power we hold in our tongues and use it to bring hope and joy and peace to those around us.