OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

The Power of Words (2)

David Anguish

In his study of James 3.1–12, R. Wayne Stacy reports that in her novel, *St. Maybe*,

> Anne Tyler tells the story of Ian, a young man who's eaten up with guilt because he wrongly suspected his sister-in-law of having an affair and of being unfaithful to his brother. She hadn't. But he told his brother anyway. His brother, believing Ian, became so despondent at the news that he took his own life. Ian is haunted by the guilt of what he's done that cannot be undone. He can't sleep; he can't eat. "Oh God," he pleads, "how long will I have to pay for a handful of tossed-off words? … Can't we just back up and start over? Couldn't I have one more chance?" (Stacy 2000, 231).

As we think more about that passage, we note first the sins of Ian. Based only on the suspicion of an affair, he misled his brother. Worse, his actions ruined three lives: his brother's; his sister-in-law's, whose grief was added to the hurt and anger she surely felt after being accused of infidelity; and Ian himself, whose own grief was compounded by the misery brought on by his guilt.

Upon further reflection, we also realize that actions like Ian's and the consequences that resulted are not unique. Doubtless, we all know of cases where poorly chosen words, some intentional, but many that were not, wreaked havoc on the lives of both speakers and victims. Just think about the news reports we hear.

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Or think about George Stulac's comments about what often occurs in our churches:

> Consider the habitual verbal abuse that occurs in our churches—how commonplace it is for us to speak of others with ridicule or with cutting remarks, how quickly we accuse others of evil motives when they do things we don't like and how easily we can have angry fights in our churches. Where is our biblical sense of shock at all of this? (Stulac 1993, 128–129)

Let's bring it closer to home. We may be the ones who have been hurt by careless or cruel words directed at us. Or maybe we were the ones who spoke those words. We knew better; why then didn't we do better?

James's answer is realistic. Our words often get the best of us because our tongues are so difficult to reign in. In fact, that's the first image James used when he began to describe the tongue's disproportionate power. Like the control of a horse's bridle or a ship's rudder, our tongues can yield to hell's influence and send us in directions we know we should never go. It ignites the flames that burn down the forest, stains the whole body, and sets fire to the entire course of our lives. That is the essence of James 3.3–6. Verses 7–12 continue the discussion, expose the real problem, and call us to repent.

The Magnitude of the Problem

Verses 7–8 show the enormity of the problem: "For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

The list of kinds (φύσις, *physis*) here is comprehensive and correlates to the four groupings enumerated in Genesis 1.26 (cf. 9.2) where God gave man dominion over "the fish of the sea, … birds of the heavens, … the livestock, … and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." All "are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind" (Jas 3.7 NIV; this translation brings out the present and perfect tenses used in James's repetition of the verb δαμάζω, *damazō*, to subdue, tame, control [Bauer 2000, 211]). That all the kinds of animals had been tamed despite their variety of size, strength, and ferocity was something of which the ancients were proud and was commonly referred to in the Greek-speaking world (Davids 1982, 144). But ironically, when it comes to the small body member that is the tongue (v. 5), no human being is able (present tense of δύναμαι**,** *dynamai*) to tame (*damazō* again) it. Instead, it is "restless" or more precisely, "uncontrollable" (ἀκατάστατον, *akatastaton;* see Louw & Nida 1989, § 37.32; Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 160).[1] This word was used previously in 1.8 to refer to the restlessness of the waves as an

[1] Note the textual variant, as discussed in NET Notes: "Most MSS (C Ψ 1611 1739^{c} 1244 𝔐 as well as a few versions and fathers) read 'uncontrollable' (ἀκατασχετόν, *akatascheton*), while most of the more significant witnesses (א A B K P 1175 1243 1735 1739✱ latt co) have 'restless' (ἀκατάστατον, *akatastaton*). Externally, the latter reading should be preferred. Internally, however, things get a bit more complex. The notion of being uncontrollable

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illustration of the instability of the double-minded man. The tongue is uncontrollable because it is full of death-dealing poison or venom (ἰοῦ θανατηφόρου; *iou thanatēphorou*) (3.8). This is a graphic image given the fact that "tongues normally are used to taste life-giving food and drink. The metaphor suggests the image of a serpent, poised to strike" (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 160).

The War Within

The descriptions in verses 7–8 set the stage for James's identification of "the major problem that makes the tongue so evil —its duplicity" (Blomberg & Kamell 2009, 160). On the one hand, we use it to "bless (εὐλογέω, *eulogeō*) our Lord and Father" (v.9). "Bless" is the key word used in the Eighteen Benedictions of Jewish worship ritual, suggesting that James may have had formal worship in mind. But on the other hand, we also use it to "curse [καταράομαι, *kataraomai*] people who are made in the likeness of God" (v. 9), a thought reminiscent of Jesus's teaching about devaluing people in Matthew 5.21–26. Verse 10 calls such duplicity to account: "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so."

The real problem is illuminated by the illustrations in verses 11–12. Using figs, olive oil, and wine, the three chief products of Israel's horticulture (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 162), James shows that the ultimate problem is not with the tongue, but with the condition of the inner self that nurtures its use. If the spring's source contains salt (bitter) water, then the water flowing from it will be bitter; if the source contains fresh (sweet) water, the flow will be sweet or pleasant. Used in light of the word "unstable" in verse 8, these figures point to the real problem. If we are single-mindedly devoted to God, our speech will indicate as much; but if, on the other hand, we are double-minded and thus friends with the world, our speech will reflect its priorities.

The images are appropriately graphic. James wants to grab his readers' attention to help us see that when we treat speech casually, we are playing with fire. As verse 2's theme statement shows, it's about being "perfect" (τέλειος, *teleios*), complete in our pursuit of single-minded devotion to God. And as he will go on to show in 3.13–18, the solution to the problem is found in submitting to God's wisdom.

is well suited to the context, especially as a counterbalance to v. 8a, though for this very reason scribes may have been tempted to replace ἀκατάστατον with ἀκατασχετόν. In a semantically parallel early Christian text, ἀκατάστατος (*akatastatos*) was considered strong enough of a term to denounce slander as "a restless demon" (Herm. 27:3). On the other hand, ἀκατάστατον may have been substituted for ἀκατασχετόν by way of assimilation to 1:8 (especially since both words were relatively rare, scribes may have replaced the less familiar with one that was already used in this letter). On internal evidence, it is difficult to decide, though ἀκατασχετόν is slightly preferred. However, in light of the strong support for ἀκατάστατον, and the less-than-decisive internal evidence, ἀκατάστατον is deemed more likely to be the initial reading."

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Self-Examination

Like the fictional Ian, many of us have probably had times when we found ourselves wishing, if not praying, "How long will I have to pay for a handful of tossed-off words? … Can't we just back up and start over?"

No. We cannot change the past. But we can be forgiven for the sins we committed then. We can also start fresh, in a single-minded devotion to God that relies on and submits to his wisdom.

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