

Words have the power to give life and to kill. Words can be crafted to edify or can be used to tear down people. Many a time we are not aware of the power of the tongue. A word spoken cannot be taken back. In our daily conversations we are so free with our words that we don't even think before we speak. We rattle off words from the morning till night not being aware of the impact that it creates on other people's lives. When we draw water from a deep well in a bucket we know what kind of water is available in the well only when it reaches the top. Likewise the words that we speak reveal to us what is in the innermost recesses of our hearts. They surface to the top when we are not even thinking about what we say. Most of the times we utter words without thinking and then later on regret what we had said. Many a time we are told on the phone, 'This conversation may be recorded for quality control purposes'. What kind of character do we reveal to the world through our words?

In the passage from Matthew we are told that every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. Blasphemy is usually the disrespectful use of the name of any god. It may include using sacred names as stress expletives without intention to pray or speak of sacred matters. However, when we talk about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit we are talking about a deliberate and consistent rejection of the truth in spite of all the evidence placed before a person. Jesus warns us that if we go on deliberately rejecting the offer that God is making to us through Christ then we will only face judgment.

Jesus then reminds them that whatever is in the heart will be revealed by the words they speak. Just like a tree reveals what tree it is by its fruits so also will our words reveal what kind of a character we are. The heart is like a reservoir – whatever is in it will come out in our speech – just as a bucket of water comes out of a well. The good person brings good things out of the treasure house that he has and the evil person brings out from his evil treasure. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. Jesus makes it clear that it is not what goes into a person that makes one unclean but rather what comes out from the heart. So again it is a question of the heart.

From the NT reading James writes about what hellish damage the tiny tongue can do. The tongue is small but its effect is great. James compares our tongues with three other small-but-great things. First, a tiny bit in a horse's mouth makes the whole horse obey the rider (3:3). When a rider pulls firmly on the right rein, the bit presses into the soft flesh of the horse's mouth, pulling its mouth to the right. Then the head, neck, shoulders and whole body follow right along.

Second, a very small rudder controls the direction of an entire ship (3:4). The ship itself is large, and the winds that drive it are strong, but the rudder is tiny. When the pilot steers left, the tiny rudder moves and the whole ship comes about. Small, but great. Just as our small tongues make great boasts. The first two analogies are positive: bits and rudders help riders and pilots control horses and ships. But this third analogy is devastating. A small spark sets a great forest on fire (3:5). A tiny, smouldering match, a careless mistake, and a whole wood is ablaze. The tongue also is a fire. It is set on fire by hell with its anger, moral filth and evil (1:20-21). Its evil spreads like wildfire among the parts of the body, 'corrupts the whole person' and 'sets the whole course of one's life on fire'. Small but great, tiny but terrible.

Humans have been able to tame all kinds of wild animals, 'but no one can tame the tongue'. The tongue is a restless evil, always ready to speak and so to poison and kill. With these words we understand why James said so clearly 'be slow to speak' (1:19). But how do we control our tongues if 'no one can tame the tongue'? A psalmist shows us an example of faith. He asks Yahweh, 'Set a guard over my mouth ... keep watch over the door of my lips' (Psalm 141:3). We cannot tame our tongues, but God can. So *by faithful faith* in God's strong help—faith that believes and works—we can tame our tongues.

How then do we respond, if we cannot control our tongues but we must? James will tell his scattered brothers and sisters to ask God for wisdom from above. This wisdom will change them from the inside out and help them keep their bodies and tongues in check. May we truly ask God to give us this wisdom so that our hearts would be transformed and our words will build up people rather than tear them down.