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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

## “TRANSFORMED TONGUES”

James 3:1-12

☼ Words create worlds. They have from the start.

○ Genesis 1 {1:3, 6-7a):

**And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.**

**And God said, “Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water.” So God made the expanse...**

And so forth. God’s words create worlds.

So do ours. Having been made in the image and likeness of God, we too have power to speak worlds into existence. Not material ones, of course; but emotional and intellectual and social and spiritual worlds.

☑ One man bumps into another. “I’m sorry,” he apologizes. “No harm done,” answers the other. A conversation ensues and a lifelong friendship is born. It becomes a source of joy, strength, encouragement, and benefit for them, their families, and even the community. A better world is born from the words exchanged.

☑ One man bumps into another. “Watch it!” he snarls at the guy he hit, who utters a vile curse. A knife is pulled, a man dies – and with him his gifts, skills, and potential descendants. The killer goes to prison, his wife files for divorce, and his children are left fatherless. A worse world is spawned by the words that were exchanged.

○ **“The tongue has the power of life and death”** (Proverbs 18:21). What we say and leave unsaid alters reality, transforms lives, and changes history.

*What kinds of worlds are we creating with our words?*

☐ Please turn with me to James 3:1-12. James makes at least five points about the tongue.

✈ First, the tongue is powerful.

■ Verses 3-5a compare the tongue to the tiny bit with which a rider directs a horse and the small rudder by which a pilot steers a large ship. Our tongues are small, yet the words they speak are mighty to enlighten or darken the soul, to edify or corrode the heart, and to inspire good works or evil deeds.

Ask the man who is either a workaholic or unemployable because his father battered him with words like, “worthless” and “lazy.” By way of contrast, ask the balanced man who succeeds at work, at home and in the community, in part because Dad said, “I’m proud of you!” “You can do it!”

Ask the woman who bankrupts herself for beauty or works hard to be unattractive because her mother assaulted her with words like, “Fatso!” and “Troll!” By way of contrast, ask the one is beautiful inside and out, in part because Mom said, “You are lovely!” “You have a wonderful mind and heart!”

Ask the spiritual seeker who will never set foot in a church again because the last time they dared attend the regulars whispered harsh words about them. By way of contrast, ask the one who is starting to trust God and love Jesus, in part because the members spoke kindly.

The tongue is powerful.

✎ Second, the tongue is difficult to control.

■ In v.v. 7-8a James states that we have tamed many living creatures, **“but no one can tame the tongue.”** That is an exaggeration. With some effort, nearly anyone can exercise a significant degree of control much of the time. With the help of God’s Holy Spirit, we can do even better. If not every friendship would turn ugly, every marriage would end badly, every parent-child union would fracture, and every human community would become a war zone.

■ Still, no mere mortal is able to take absolute command of their tongue all the time. Even the most careful speakers catches foot-in-mouth disease. Verse 2, **“We all stumble in many ways. If any anyone is never at fault in what they say they are perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.”** Who is been perfect, aside from Jesus?

The tongue is difficult to control.

✎ Third, the tongue is capable of inflicting terrible – even lethal – damage.

■ Verses 5b-9: **“Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”**

Hear an otherwise good woman ruin an acquaintance’s reputation by passing on baseless rumors and unflattering facts.

Hear the man who has never repeated a racial slur in his life consistently use the pronouns “us” and “them” to affirm his own superiority.

Hear supposedly objective commentators use provocative labels like “Right Wing Nut-job” or “Radical Socialist” to enflame fear and anger.

Hear candidates of every persuasion wield innuendo, exaggeration, misquotation, and partial truths as weapons to win votes.

Hear preachers use broad generalizations, derogatory nicknames, and outright hate-speech in order to make a point about some hot-button issue.

The tongue is capable of inflicting terrible damage.

✎ Fourth, the tongue reveals our identity.

■ Verses 9-12:

**With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. ...this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ...can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.**

Does what we say to and about all others affirm their dignity as human beings created in the image of God? Even when they are wrong? Even when they are unlikeable? Even if they cannot hear us?

Scripture forbids us from cursing others. Cursing is not limited to profanity: it includes every expression of hatred.

I once heard a Christian say about a notorious pornographer, “I wish he would die.” He is right to hate moral filth, right not to use it, right to speak against it. Yet God does not want {2 Pe 3:9} **“anyone to perish.”** The Lord himself says, {Ezek 33:11} **“I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked.”** When that man cursed the pornographer he was not thinking or speaking as a believer. In that moment that part of his heart did not belong to Jesus.

The tongue reveals our identity.

✈ Fifth, God holds us accountable for how we use our tongues.

■ Verse 1 {TNIV}: **“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”**

We who preach, teach TGIS, or lead Bible study must {2 Ti 2:15, TNIV} **“present [ourselves] to God as... approved... [workers] who [do] not need to be ashamed... who correctly [handle God’s] word.”**

○ But though leaders are especially responsible for their handling of Scripture, everyone is accountable for their words. As Jesus warns in Matthew 12:36-37 {TNIV}, **“people will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”**

God holds us accountable for how we use our tongues.

This has been a challenging message for all of us. But it is ending with some excellent news.

Christ Jesus is {Jn 1:2-3} **“the Word”** made flesh, and **“Through him all things were made”** in the beginning. Now he is making us new, {Ro 8:29, TNIV} conforming us to his image **“that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.”**

One aspect of conformity to Christ’s likeness is the transformation of our tongues. They used to be **“set on fire by hell”** but now, for those of us who are alive in Christ, they are quickened by heaven.

God is empowering us to say the kinds of things Jesus did. Wonderful things like:

- {Mk 1:15} **“The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”**
- {Lk 4:18} **“The...Lord...has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind.”** Jesus came **“to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”**
- {Mt 9:5} **“Your sins are forgiven”** by God;
- {Jn 3:16} **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”**
- {Lk 6:20-22} **“Blessed are you who are poor... Blessed are you who hunger ... Blessed are you who weep, blessed are you when [people] hate you... because of the Son of Man.**
- {Lk 6:27} **“Love your enemies.”**

- {Lk 9:23} **If you want to be Jesus' disciple “deny [yourself] and take up [your] cross daily and follow” him.**
- {Jn 6:35, TNIV} Jesus is **“the bread of life. Whoever comes to [him] will never go hungry, and whoever believes in [him] will never be thirsty.”**
- {Jn 10:10} Jesus has come so that we **“may have life, and have it to the full.”**
- {Mt 14:27} **“Take courage! .... Don't be afraid.”**

God is giving us these great words, and many others. As we say them we help to create new emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual worlds in the lives of ourselves and others.

A transformed tongue is part of the substance and evidence of a faith that is real and alive and powerful to save.