

THE TONGUE IS NOT VERY TAME

JAMES 3 v 7-12

Human beings can tame and have tamed all other creatures – wild animals and birds, reptiles and fish. But no one has ever been able to tame the tongue. It is evil and uncontrollable, full of deadly poison. We use it to give thanks to our Lord and Father and also to curse other people, who are created in the likeness of God. Words of thanksgiving and cursing pour out from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, this should not happen! No spring of water pours out sweet water and bitter water from the same opening. A fig tree, my brothers and sisters, cannot bear olives; a grapevine cannot bear figs, nor can a salty spring produce sweet water.

Those of you who are familiar with Melbourne in Australia will know that it is obsessed with Aussie Rules footy. This is a code of football that is unique to Australians. Some people say that to survive in Melbourne you have to barrack for an Aussie Rules team. In Australia this means to support the team. Each club has a nickname. Most of the clubs have a nickname associated with an animal or bird. One of the teams, Richmond, has a nickname 'The Tigers'. I remember once getting on a packed Melbourne tram near the famous Melbourne Cricket Ground and standing next to a man who was carrying a rucksack on his back with the Richmond colours and logo. The colours were yellow and black, and the logo was a tiger. It was obvious the man was a keen Richmond supporter. Richmond was near the bottom of the league ladder at the time. I asked the man how the tigers were doing, knowing full well they were struggling. He replied; "The tigers are very tame at the moment".

In our last study we considered what James has to say about the tongue. In this study we discover he has more to say about the tongue; James 3 v 7-12. The essence of what James says is in v 8a. This is pretty strong language. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* paraphrases the text; **"This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue – it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer"**. James stresses the untameable nature of the tongue. By way of contrast James makes reference to the Genesis creation story; v 7. The fourfold division of the animal kingdom picks up the similar classification in Gen 1 v 26. The peculiar repetition of the Greek verb 'dedamastai' translated 'tame' in the perfect tense may well reflect the dominion over creation which man was given at the beginning. Humankind, the 'species' of man, was given the power to subdue every 'species' of the lower creation, and that power has been continually exercised. Human beings may subdue animals, but no one can tame the tongue; v 8a. James uses two descriptions of the tongue; v 8b.

Firstly, it is a restless evil. The word 'restless' translates the same Greek word 'akatastatos' that James uses in 1 v 8 to describe the 'double-minded man, unstable in all his ways'. The word may suggest that the 'evil' is difficult to control i.e. 'always liable to break out' as J B Phillips paraphrases it.

Secondly, it is full of deadly poison. This reflects Old Testament teaching; Ps 140 v 3 *“They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent’s; the poison of vipers is on their lips”*. The poison produced by the tongue according to Proverbs destroys the neighbour and brings the one who sins to ruin.

We have to take James’ teaching on the tongue seriously. It is scary what enormous damage the tongue can do. We sometimes talk about a tongue lashing. If you have ever been subjected to one you will know from experience how damaging it is. Or have you given someone a tongue lashing? You get out of all control.

It is incredible how the same tongue can be used in such inconsistent ways; v 9. The same tongues which can frequently and piously praise God can curse people; v 10. We use our tongues to curse the crown of God’s creation. The word ‘curse’ includes all the bitter, callous, unkind, critical, spiteful, angry, harsh words we use when communicating with people. To James there was something unnatural about this; v 11 & 12. It was unnatural for a spring to gush out fresh and salt water, or for a fig tree to bear olives, or for a vine to bear figs. It doesn’t happen in the world of nature, but sadly it is all too common with the use of the tongue. A minister preached a sermon with the title ‘Ten minutes after the benediction’. It was about those people in the congregation who moved in a few minutes from the gloria to gossip, from creed to criticism, from worshipping God to wounding people. Can we honestly say that we have never been guilty of this? I can think of occasions throughout my ministry when some of the harshest words spoken to people were shortly after a service in church.

“The tigers are very tame”, said the Richmond fan on the Melbourne tram. You can tame a tiger, but you can’t tame the tongue.