

The Cone of Silence
James 3:1-12
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Perhaps you've never heard of "The Cone of Silence." Or perhaps you've just never seen it actually work! Although now a relic in technological museums, the Cone of Silence was once a powerful technological gadget used to prevent top-secret conversations from being overheard, and their information from falling into the wrong hands. It made sure that the tongue's damage could be limited. Or so it was thought. Take a look at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1eUIK9CihA>

There is another kind of cone of silence I've seen in some churches. It looks like this:



What you are seeing, of course, is the pulpit of a church, with a little roof placed over it, very common in Europe. At first you might think it is there to keep the preacher's head free from bat droppings, but in fact, it's called the cone of silence

because it is designed to prevent careless words from being issued forth from beneath it. It is mostly a deterrent device, you see, because pastors who preach from beneath it have been warned that if anyone preaches heresy, the roof will fall down and crush them, ensuring their silence. Whether the button that unhinges the little roof is held by God or some little old lady of the church, no one really knows. But churches that have these have never been accused of having heretic preachers. Of course, I'm kidding.

In the first century, Dionysius the Elder wrote: "Let thy speech be better than silence, or be silent." This is wisdom Ronald Reagan might have heeded before his now-famous verbal gaffe that almost started World War Three. In 1984, during a sound check before a news conference Reagan made the following joke to the radio technicians: "My fellow Americans, I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes." The Russians were not amused. Yes, even when we think we are *not* being listened to, the tongue is, as James reminds us in tonight's passage, a "restless evil, full of deadly poison."

Absolute silence would, of course, solve our problem, although we'd probably find a way to let our silence speak volumes and hurt one another with our facial expressions. But, as silence really isn't much of an option except for Trappist monks, we need to think in creative ways how to keep our tongues from doing the devil's work. James isn't really telling us anything new here; we've probably all

been on either the giving or the receiving end of a hurtful word, or some juicy gossip, or a scandal. At its most benign, that stray word might cause us to rethink whether we'll be friends with someone. At its worst, that biting criticism shared over the internet will cause a teenager to take her life, as it did recently when a mother mounted an internet slur campaign against her daughter's friend, and that friend committed suicide as a result. (If James were writing these days, he'd have to include the fingers as instruments of destruction, as they are the ones who type in cyberspace what we used only to be able at most to shout with the tongue.) The tongue's damage is done in private, as when an ex-girlfriend's name is whispered in the wrong ear, and in public when the combined rhetoric of a ruling class convinces their subjects of their inferiority. No, James is only describing what we already know and have experienced.

However, James is also telling us something that perhaps we easily overlook, something that might help us tame the untamable tongue, or at least limit its damage. At the end of that long list of metaphors for our hurtful words is the reminder that our words also carry the possibility for good, and blessing. "With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing." Yes, we can encourage, and uplift, and admire, and advocate with the same tongues that can do a lot of evil. Think how impoverished would be our worship of God without words, not impossible mind you, but much more severely limited.

Imagine our songs only hummed, our prayers only silent or with gestures, our calls to worship only instrumental. No comments about the preaching, please. It would be a great mistake to simply cut out our tongues when they betray our innermost thoughts, because those thoughts are not all evil all the time. Many of us are who we are today precisely because others did not hold their tongues when they had thoughts about us, but rather shared with us their honest assessments, and their praise, and their ideas, and helped us see ourselves in a different light, perhaps even a divine light, that has made all the difference. The tongue is truly a mixed blessing.

Thanks be to James for reminding us of these positive uses of the tongue, and also of what our tongues represent as we make our way through our handful of years on this planet with one another. James begins this section of wisdom by reminding us that all of us make mistakes, no great revelation, but also by reminding us that we are supposed to be on the road to perfection. “Anyone,” he says, “Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.” This is not, of course, perfect in the sense of sinless, or being without flaw or blemish. It is perfect in the sense of the Greek word “teleios,” which has as its meaning coming to completeness, and to James’ way of thinking, to Christian completeness or wholeness. When Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect,” he is, of course, suggesting we should do a little less sinning but, more faithfully to the

word telios, what he means is model yourself after God and you can't go wrong.

Be united with God, and you will become like God, not God, but like God, and that is a good thing. Our journey should be toward God, not toward wickedness. And so, in a backhanded sort of way, I think James is commenting on that kind of perfection, reminding us that our tongues give us a sort of gut check on our Christian maturity, and our willingness to turn that "member" over to God. Is there evidence in our speech, in our words, that we are becoming more like God, more like Christ? Do our words reflect the Spirit's presence in our lives, or that Spirit's absence. Somehow I think Jesus would never have called for the Cone of Silence. Should we?

"No one can tame the tongue," James says, and that sounds pretty final, doesn't it? Well, it's true that no one of us can do it, but the good news is that God can. No, I don't mean that God will rip it out of our mouths, or drop the top of a pulpit down on us to prevent us from speaking evil. But rather, that as God transforms us on the inside, our tongue is less likely to betray us on the outside. We are powerless over the effects of our tongues as long as God is powerless in our lives. When I say as long as God is powerless in our lives, I do not mean that God is powerless, but rather, as long as we keep that power at a distance, as long as we reject its transformative power over our hearts, and ultimately our tongues. It is not that God clamps on our tongues some kind of censoring device, that bleeps out whatever offensive words we might use. It is that God takes the restless evil, the

deadly poison, to use James's words, God takes the restless evil and the deadly poison of our hearts and transforms them into a restlessness for good and sweet nectar to share with the world. Words are not independent free agents trying to escape past the security fence of our lips to do their damage in the world. They are indicators of what lies within, either transformed by God, or awaiting that transformation. This is what Jesus was telling the Scribes and Pharisees who complained that his disciples had not washed their hands before eating: "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

If we want our tongues to be tamed, we must let our hearts be tamed, and this is the process of perfection. But we will go on lighting forest fires with our tongues if we but sit around waiting for God to tame our hearts. But since the Cone of Silence has proved ineffective, and since we rarely speak while under a covered pulpit, what means do we have to limit the damage our words do? Well, let me suggest that James's reminder of the tongue's power to bless is the key to limiting its power to curse. It is not in saying less that we will limit the tongue's damage, but rather in saying something different. It means changing our vocabulary, our subject matter, our focus in life. What do you spend the majority of your time

talking about? Whom do you quote? Whom are you trying to impress? What are you reading? With what are you filling yourself? The answers to these questions reflect the condition of your heart, and your path towards wholeness in God. It is futile to try to control the tongue, to keep it from being used, but fruitful to give the tongue something different to say. “Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?” The trick is having a greater supply of fresh water and to spend more time, or so much time, blessing so there is less time, or no time, for cursing. Replace the brackish water of your soul with the fresh and living water of Jesus Christ, and see what comes out. And if that doesn’t work, take that great old wisdom of Dionysius the Elder wrote: “Let thy speech be better than silence, or be silent.” And with that, let me say Amen.