

Taming Mr. T

“Mr. T.” some of you know is the legal name of a 1980’s actor known particularly for his portrayal of Sgt. B.A. Baracus in the television drama called “The A-Team.” Mr. T made a name for himself through his mohawk hairdo and the rather scary scowl often his face. He is also remembered for his words and witticisms. For example, “I believe in the Golden Rule. The Man with the Gold rules.” Or, “I got no time for the jibba-jabba.” And there was his characteristic three-word phrase, “Pity the fool!” You were never quite sure who he was talking about; but it might be you! And he would expound and expand. “I pity the fool that don’t be cool.” “You pity the fool because you don’t want to beat up a fool!” “I pity the fool that fights me.” “Fools, you gotta give another chance because they don’t know better.”

Mr. T didn’t mince words. Sometimes his words were wise. But sometimes they were cruel. Mr. T needed to be tamed.

T., it turns out, can also stand for “Teacher.” And at the beginning of James’ little lecture on the power of speech, he says that teachers (and he includes himself) are particularly prone to misusing speech. Simply because they tend to do a lot of talking. Their job requires it. We’ve got a lot of teachers in this church! Let’s ask them. Is that fair? Are teachers particularly prone to misusing speech?

Of course, T could stand for “Theologian.” Those who are theologians also tend to talk a lot. Especially about God. And sometimes they talk about God as if they have Him all figured out. As if they have all the answers that everyone else needs. We could say that sometimes theologians need to be tamed.

And then, T could stand for Tom. As a pastor, I’m both a teacher and a theologian. I tend to do a lot of talking. And sometimes I need to be tamed.

T could stand more generally for “talking,” or “talker.” The writer James firmly believes that we all tend to talk too much. Which is why he says, very early in the letter,

¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. ²¹ And then he goes on, Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But let’s agree, for now at least, that T stands for “tongue.” We all have one. And our tongues can get us into all manner of trouble. You could say they are the root source of our sordidness. Trust me, Mr. Tom is speaking from experience.

The words we say with our tongues have tremendous power. Think, for example, of the contrasts between the following words or word phrases: “Yes”; and “no.” I/You. Love/hate. “I love you”/ “I hate you.” I will/ I won’t. I do/I don’t. Forgive/condemn. May you be well; May you go to [blank]. Pity the fool/love the fool. I’m sure you can think of other examples of or contrasts between the powerful words we say. But let’s face it. The words we say have tremendous power . . . for good, or for evil.

James says that “*the tongue is a fire . . . placed among our members as a world of iniquity . . . and is itself set on fire by hell.*” And he concludes that the tongue is “*a restless evil,*

full of deadly poison.” Really?! Is it that bad? Are our tongues controlled by Satan himself? Sounds pretty hopeless. Sounds as if we would be better off tearing them out altogether. Like when Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.” He also said the same thing about our right hand. And he didn’t quite include the same injunction about our tongues. But according to James, we can assume Jesus had it in mind.

But unless or until we take such drastic measures, we’re stuck with our tongues. Alright, what can we do with them? Are we trapped by what he calls “this deadly poison,” this “world of iniquity?”

As we saw, James himself is pretty pessimistic. Make that very pessimistic. He argues that “*Every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue.*” He points out the cruel irony that with the same tongue we “*bless the Lord and Father*”—which we’ve been doing this morning—and then we can turn around and *curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.*”

But very early in this essay, he is slightly more optimistic. Or at least hopeful. He says, Look, “*all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect.*” Clearly implying that there is no such thing.

And then he introduces two metaphors or illustrations: the first, of a horse’s bridle. The second, of a ship’s rudder. Both of them are tiny components of much larger creatures. But both, by making just a small adjustment or change, can make a huge difference in where that horse or that ship goes.

Maybe that’s the answer! Maybe that’s what it takes to finally tame the tongue. Just small, seemingly insignificant or merely minor adjustments.

Which begs the question, who is responsible for making those tiny adjustments? In the case of the horse, it is the rider who tugs on the bridle. And with the ship, it is the “will of the pilot” that controls the rudder.

So are we the rider, or are we the horse? Are we the pilot, or are we the ship? Or to ask it differently, who is in charge of our tongue? Are we? Is it up to us to slowly tame our own tongues, one slight change at a time? As we already heard, James is resolutely pessimistic about that possibility.

But what if . . . What if we were not the ones in control? What if we turn that control over to a high power? What if we allow our own Creator to ride us and guide us, like a compliant, patiently trained horse? What if we allow our own Captain to skillfully manage the rudder, according to his will, not ours? What if it’s not up to us to “Tame Mr. T” (because after all we can’t do it)? What if we have to ask God to tame our tongues? Every day? Many times a day?

And what if, bit by bit, we start using even small words having great power for good rather than evil? Words like: love; forgive; grace; listen; understand; appreciate, thank you? Before long we might just find ourselves going in a completely new direction!

C’mon. Let’s give it a try! Please pray with me.

Lord God, we ask you to control our tongues. Because we can’t. We ask you to gently but firmly tug on the bridle, shift the rudder, according to your will, not ours. So that bit by bit (pun fully intended, God), the words we say will serve and produce good, rather than evil. Amen!

Questions for Pondering and Discussion

- 1) Who are some famous people notorious for their “untamed” tongues?
- 2) What are some ways in which the tongues of teachers need to be tamed?
- 3) What kinds of teachers did James have in mind in 3:1?
- 4) What would it mean for the tongues of theologians to be tamed?
- 5) How would you paraphrase 1:19-21? What is its central point?
- 6) What are other examples of words having tremendous power?
- 7) What might it mean to say that Satan controls our tongues?
- 8) Would Jesus tell us to tear out our tongues? Why or why not?
- 9) Why might James have been so pessimistic about the possibility of taming our tongues?
- 10) Of the two metaphors James uses (a horse, and a ship) is more convincing? Where are we in those metaphors?
- 11) How pessimistic or optimistic are you about the possibility of turning the control of our tongues over to a higher power?
- 12) What are some examples of tiny changes or adjustments we might make in the use of our tongues?