



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### **Faith Brought to Life**

### **Dragon Breath**

*by Matt Hook*

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*Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. 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 his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. James 3:1-13.*

When I was young, my family had a running joke based on an article my dad brought home from a guns and weapons magazine. Over 100 years ago, it seems there was a Chinese Tribe that would overpower their enemies with their horribly bad breath. Now this wasn't just morning breath. On purpose, these men would eat a terrible combination of peppers and spices such that their breath could knock out their enemies. And on top of that, they exercised their lungs and practiced breath control so that they could impact someone over 10 feet away. "HHHehhhh. (Breathe on the congregation). You're dead." It seems pretty funny, unless you're on the receiving end.

You and I may not eat onions, garlic, and peppers enough to physically harm anyone, but you can bet the words that fire off of our tongues can be just as deadly. I think of when I've lost my temper and spewed my dragon breath all over Leigh. I think of times when the kids are just being kids and I'm the one who loses it. Venom shoots out and I spew vile words and hate. We like to go easy on ourselves, though. Sometimes we even call it "venting," or "blowing off steam," or "just getting my point across." But it can be vicious. And even though we know it can do damage we still dance with the dragon. We don't quit. We can't quit.

Actually for me, there's a more common way of spreading my dragon breath around. And it's even more socially acceptable. And that way's usually *under my breath*. We become masters of it, especially the passive aggressive types among us. We engage in gossip, but we call it "being a good listener," simply making conversation. You know fully well what I'm talking about. I think of when I've let just enough of my opinion out about someone that I might as well have knocked them out. And then there's when I use my words to direct attention to myself; and usually the more subtle the better. The poison is most potent when it comes out just one waft at a time. Even a glance can release the toxin. I think of when I've used the power of my words to cover my tail and cover my sins, with more sin.

A well placed word can knock someone out or even knock someone off God's path for their lives. And think of the power of our words when we starve people from them! Sometimes we withhold our words of forgiveness. We ignore people. We avoid speaking to them, because it feels so good to fuel our bellies with hate and frustration to really get them good. And it's usually against the people we care most about. We're like dragons. Talk about second-hand smoke! The power within our mouths can rule our households, words or no words. We can withhold blessing or friendship. Our words are often the dragon we don't slay, because we can't.

Sociologists have statistical evidence that there are twice as many put downs in marriages that end in divorce than those whose marriages survive. When death row inmates were asked what would have been the best time for prevention to take place, their number one answer was "If they'd have stopped me when I started swearing." **Bad breath leads to bad things.**

And think about the inferno power you get when you line up a bunch of fire-breathers and all go for the same target! Prejudice and judgment come in full force, and one of the best places to gather and aim is in church. Think about what some churches say about their more needy members. "Everybody knows about her... Don't you know he's...? Have you ever seen their house?... They just don't fit in with the rest of us... We don't want people like that here." Yes, the breath that our words ride on today is just as powerful, just as potent, and just as poisonous as the dragon breath of that ancient Chinese tribe.

James knew this. **Words are important to James.** In all of his practical advice to those early Christians about acting out their faith, he spends as many verses on speech and the sins of the tongue as he does on any other topic he writes. The main point of his entire letter is that Christians need to be doers of the Word, not just hearers only – Faith brought to life. Those early Jewish Christians were being persecuted. And because of that, they were scattered. They had lost their jobs, families, and inheritances. They lost all status. They probably thought they had done enough. I'm sure they had plenty to complain about. Yet James challenges them throughout his letter to *prove* that they are living out their faith, especially in what they say. He says in verse 1:26 "*If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.*" Your faith is priceless. But James says all it takes to make the priceless treasure of faith worthless is your tongue. Actually just a few words could do it. Martha just had to say "Sell." Bin Laudin just had to say "Go.

Why are spoken words so powerful? Because God's chosen method of communication is not in symbols, nor signs, nor silent pictures, but by speech, by Word, *logos*. **Because God speaks, words are important.** "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*" (John 1:1). "*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made*" (Ps. 33:6). John would write "*The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us*" (John 1:14). The eternal truth of God is by his Word. It is by the word of God that God makes himself known. "*Then God said, 'Let there be light...'*" Gen. 1:3. By the word of God he brought about creation, the flood, judgment (Ex 9:20-21), God's blessing, and the 10 Commandments. You and I can know God personally through his word. Do you see? **Words are primordial.** They are the basic fabric by which the God of the universe has created, maintained, and entered history. Thus, **our speech is important not only because we use it all the time, but more importantly because God has spoken to us. James is upset with the church, not because words are so bad, but because they are so good! Because God's Word is good!**

**And that's why James cautions the people to beware of being a teacher.** James outlines this in chapter 3. Why are teachers judged more strictly? Because of how important our words and tongues are. Did you ever think that the Gospel is proclaimed by the most out of control member of our bodies? It only makes sense that Satan tries to abuse that power. Remember Jesus' words "*To whom much is given, from that one much is required*" Luke 12:48. James knows that we all stumble in many things. The word James uses for stumble does not mean "fall," but something that trips us up and hinders our progress. James gives a way to measure the spiritual maturity of the believers. That is, the mature one makes no mistakes in speaking. **Mature Christians know our words are powerful.** We believers must think through and practice speaking, so we make no mistakes in our words.

**Our words literally guide our lives.** Why is that a good guide for Christian maturity? Because “*Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is...able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.*” (3:2) James uses some great illustrations here. The bit goes in the horse’s mouth and you can turn the whole animal! Ships also have huge and powerful engines, but it’s a relatively small rudder by which the pilot steers it in the direction he or she desires. And the tongue is no different. It’s a small part of our body (.2% of our body weight), but our tongue makes huge, unsupported claims! Learn the lesson of Smokey the Bear: “it only takes a spark...” to get a massive forest fire going.

Each of the last two summers we witnessed the damage that can be done to millions of acres of good land by careless people with matches and campfires. It starts so small, so discreetly: a little word here, an implication there. In New Mexico, Arizona, and Denver some of the forest fires actually merged to do even more damage. And the California fires of last summer actually caused mudslides. Towns there are still trying to recover. So it is with our tongue. It is positioned in the body in such a way that it adversely affects everything, because the whole body follows along. Let me ask this: How many towns across America are still trying to recover from the destruction caused by rumors and lies?

Think about it: You know when people are yelling at each other, even if you can’t hear them. Why? Because it’s ugly. It’s the way they stand. It’s the look in their eyes. Their posture follows right along. Their words contort their faces and their bodies tense and shake in violent ways. I’ve seen it from my car, it’s frightening. And that’s just on the outside. What’s really frightening is the damage that must be happening beneath the surface, on the inside of the person. We can’t begin to visualize the volcanoes of destruction inside of those persons: charring emotions, destroying relationships, self-esteem, and hope. It’s sheer dragon breath.

We know just what James is talking about, because not only is it those early Christians struggling; it’s us. We Christians have made no headway in 20 centuries. In the church, out of the church, at home, work, or just about anywhere, something happens and we start breathing fire, biting people’s heads off, and the rest of us falls right in line. Another apostle, Paul, who brought Christianity to much of the ancient Greek world, also wrote about this inherent evil in his letter to the Christians in Rome. (*Rom. 3:9,13*) “*There is none righteous, not even one;...Their throat is an open grave. With their tongues they keep deceiving. The poison of vipers is under their lips whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.*” For some reason our tongues are directly linked to the worst part of ourselves.

**Our words are impossible for us to control.** Do you see that now? And here’s the clincher: James says we can’t even try to control our tongues. In verse 3:6 James writes “*In the realm of nature, we have learned to control every kind of creature discovered, but we have not managed to tame the tongue – it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.*” A woman came to John Wesley (the founder of Methodism) and said she knew what her talent was. “I think my talent from God is to speak my mind.” Wesley replied, “I don’t think God would mind if you buried that talent.” We mustn’t let our tongue have it so easy.

**Our words contradict.** Look at the beginning of verse 9: “*With the tongue we bless God our Father.*” We can’t do anything better than with our tongues than use them to call Jesus Lord. Nor can we do worse than curse other people. My wife, Leigh, has an affinity for junior high boys. When we did youth ministry and she would hear the way they talk, she would always say “And you kiss your mother with that mouth?” We are so loosey-goosey on how we watch our mouths, we slip into all kinds of trouble, with big ramifications. Some of us break the third commandment every day when we take God’s name in vain. That’s a bad habit! Remember one word can destroy a person, or a ministry, or a witness. Whoever said that about “words can never harm me” had it wrong. Sticks and stones ain’t nothin’ compared to dragon breath! As I was writing my message I accidentally typed an s to “words” and read on my screen “swords.” That’s what they can be.

**Conclusion:** So, words are powerful. Words guide our lives. Our words are impossible for us to control. Our words contradict. So what is the solution to the problem of the tongue?

**Realize it is a heart-problem.** Jesus said “*Words flow from an overflow of the heart*” (Mt 12:34) and so it requires heart-medicine: the Gospel. We can’t tame the tongue, but God can. *The cross of Christ has*

*redeemed your tongue.* We eliminate our dragon breath when we replace it with streams of living water that come from faith. And Jesus invites us to speak to Him, and speak about Him. When the Holy Spirit first came down upon the early Christians, He came with tongues of holy fire. And today, we must breathe pure, holy fire, not dragon breath. Every morning we wake up with dragon breath. And once we brush our teeth, we face a choice of how we use our words. Pray for God to make them pure and holy, and start practicing: words *to* God and words *about* God.

**Watch what you eat.** Remember, your breath is affected by what you eat. The old saying is true: garbage in, garbage out. So let's feed ourselves with God's goodness: the Bible, God's word, prayer, and Christian accountability. Put away the hot peppers of sin and the garbage of the ungodly world. You don't have to leave the TV on. Watch what you eat.

**Breathe love into the situation. Where ever you are, look for ways to bless those around you.** Love unexpressed is not love at all. Satan says "Your life is not good enough for you to speak about God." But let's not fall for that lie. Let's decide that we are going to use our tongues to make God famous and lift others up. Remember James' truism: our words guide us – for bad *or good*.

**Use God-talk. Talk with one another of the things of God.** Practice saying "How's your walk?" "What's God showing you?" "How can I pray for you?" "How's your dragon breath?" If we let it be known at school that we're actually Christians, on the sports field, at home, and even at work, it might have an over-the-top or under-our-breath effect of catching the rest of our lives.

**Remember James: Every day that you and I have the power to change lives with our words.** John Trent shares a powerful story to illustrate: Mary had grown up in the 1950's knowing that she was different from other kids, and she hated it. She was born with a cleft palate and had to bear the jokes and stares and dragon breath of cruel children who teased her non-stop about her misshaped lip, flattened nose, and unusual speech.

With all the teasing, Mary grew up hating the fact that she was different. She was convinced that no one, outside her family, could ever love her...Until she entered Mrs. Leonard's class. Mrs. Leonard had a warm smile, round face, and shiny brown hair. While all the other students liked her, Mary came to love Mrs. Leonard.

In the 1950's, it was common for teachers to give their children an annual hearing test. However, in Mary's case, in addition to her cleft palate, she was barely able to hear out of one ear. Determined not to let the other children have another "difference" to point out, she would cheat on the test each year. The "whisper test" was given by having a child walk to the classroom door, turn sideways, close one ear with a finger, and then repeat something which the teacher whispered.

Mary turned her bad ear towards her teacher and pretended to cover her good ear. She knew that teachers would often say things like "The sky is blue," or "What color are your shoes?" But not on that day. Surely, God put seven words in Mrs. Leonard's mouth that changed Mary's life forever. When the "whisper test" came, Mary heard the words: "I wish you were my little girl.

*"I wish you were my little girl."* Oh, that we would let our words be such good words of life and love! **With our words, we can set the course of a life.** And God has given us his Word today. With God's word, let God set the course for your life. By sending his Son Jesus, God bends over and whispers in your ear *"You are my child, and I'm crazy about you, and I've loved you this much.* (Hold out arms like a cross)." From now on, may we let His Word set the course for our lives.

**Let us pray:** *Oh Lord, you've spoken it. You long for us to hear. Lord, we need to hear it. We must hear your words of truth and love. Lord, we know those around us need to hear it. Let us join our words with yours. But Lord it's not easy. So even as we have offered our hearts for you to cleanse and purify and use for your glory, we must offer equally our tongues – our words: that they may be cleansed by you, pure, glorifying*

*your name. May they do nothing but make you famous! Oh Lord, make us hearers, and doers, of your Word.  
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.*