The First Lesson
January 17, 2007

In the Annals of Aristocoles, Plato tells the story of an early conversation between himself and his teacher, Socrates. A peasant named Pambo approached Socrates and asked if he might learn some portion of the Scripture from the teacher. Socrates read Psalm 39:1, "I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth…" Pambo left saying he would learn that lesson first. Several months went by when the two accidentally met, and Socrates asked Pambo why he hadn't come back for more lessons. He said, "I'm still learning the first lesson." Forty nine years later Pambo was asked why he never went back to learn more lessons from his teacher, and he said, "I'm still learning the first lesson."

The First Lesson for us is going to last us two, maybe three weeks—I'm not sure I've got forty-nine years left in me.

James 3:2-8
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.
[3]When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. [4]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.
[5]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. [6]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.
[7]All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, [8]but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

I. We All <u>Stumble</u>.

James 3:2a
We all stumble…

I know you've had similar experiences to mine where you really wished you could be invisible…

- I've mispronounced names when introducing people:
  - Mr. & Mrs. Warren Lee Bates instead of Mr. & Mrs. Warren Bates Lee.
  - Mr. & Mrs. Donald Duck instead of Mr. & Mrs. Donald Williams.

- I've misquoted texts…

- I've mistakenly uttered phrases that bordered on the profane…at least on the indelicate.
- One Sunday I opened my Bible read my text and taught the entire lesson, then I asked the folks to pray with me, dismissed the congregation and sent them on their way. The only problem is that I was supposed to welcome people, make a few announcements, have a little greeting time, announce the offering and continue with the singing…
- I ripped the seat out of my pants, and not just a little.
- I tripped walking up the steps to the rostrum and went all the way to the ground.
- I slammed a lady's head on the baptistery steps…and dropped another one, but in my defense she stepped backward causing me to lose my center of gravity which might not have been such a problem if she hadn't been…well she wasn't thin…she was otherwise.
- I've lost my train of thought so completely in the heart of a message that I didn't have a clue of what I had planned to say next…and I don't mean I didn't remember how I wanted to say it; I mean I didn't remember if I was going to talk about grace or greed.
    - So I just kept talking, hoping somehow to make enough sense to disguise the fact that I was 99% occupied in a frantic search of my own brain trying to get back on track all while maintaining a faint glimmer of ill-fated, self-deluding hope that nobody knew…
    - On one hand I was talking to them about something, and doing so in complete sentences…
    - On the other hand I was actually replaying what I'd already said to them hoping to reconnect.
    - Yet on a third hand—I could have used one—I was anticipating questions my listeners might have that I hadn't previously considered and simultaneously forming answers to those questions.
    - All while I kept on talking until I finally remembered where I was headed.
    - It was no fun…it's no wonder that I'm tired on Sunday afternoons.

II. We <u>All</u> Stumble <u>A Lot</u>.

James 3:2b
We all stumble in many ways.

He's talking about you…and he's talking about me. When James says "We all stumble in many ways" he means two things…

1. **He means there's no limit to <u>how</u> we can mess up.**

It would be nice if I only stumbled when it was funny, but I've stumbled in a lot of other ways, ways that hurt or wound other people, and in ways that damage the work of the gospel.

ILLUSTRATION
Have you ever done something that, when you look back at it, might give someone else a reason to think that maybe you really didn't believe as much about the kind of life Jesus wants you to live as you'd like for them to believe? Sure, we've all done it.

I'm not of the opinion that I have the power to frustrate the purpose of a sovereign omnipotent God—I don't believe that. But I can make it harder for myself and others to get where God wants us all to be…

2. **And he means there is no limit to <u>how often</u> we can mess up.**

I used to think that by the time people were older, like 30 or 40, that they'd surely be smart enough not to get in as many messes as they did when they were younger. And there may be some truth to the notion that we can learn from our mistakes, but I don't think any of us is ever going to be finished making them…

DISCUSSION

1. Would you agree that most men have a hard time admitting when they've made serious mistakes? Yes__ No__

2. Why do you think most men are so reluctant to admit our mistakes?

3. Do you think it's hard for most men to offer an earnest apology? Yes__ No__

4. Why do you think most men find it so hard to apologize?

If we can admit that we make mistakes, and that it's hard for us to apologize when we do, then we can move on to the next part of what James wants us to learn…

III. We Stumble Most Frequently When We <u>Talk</u>.

James 3:2c
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.

1. **The <u>irony</u> of this kind of sin.**

James 3:3-4
When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. [4]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.

- We can control almost everything else…regardless of its size and power…
- But we seem, for the most part and for the greater part of our lifetimes, unable to control what we say…

James 3:5a, 7-8a
Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.
[7]All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, [8]but no man can tame the tongue.

2. The <u>danger</u> of this kind of sin.

James 3:5b-6, 8b
…Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. [6]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.
[8b]…It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

A. Uncontrolled speaking can totally <u>destroy</u> someone else…

a. It's like a forest fire…consuming everything in its path…
   1. Your friends…
   2. Your coworkers…
   3. Your wife…
   4. Your kids…

b. We used to say, *sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me…*
   1. That would be nice if it were true…
   2. But it's not true…not at all.
   3. Your words have the power to destroy people…especially your kids.

B. Unrestrained speech habits will totally <u>corrupt</u> the speaker…

a. James says that failure to control the things you say, and how you say them indicates:
   1. Yielding to the most <u>evil</u> part of your nature (v 6a)…
   2. Yielding to the allure of personal <u>corruption</u> (v. 6b)…
   3. Yielding to <u>satanic</u> activity (v. 6c)…
   4. Yielding to the temptation to <u>poison</u> everyone around you (v 8b)…

DISCUSSION

1. How would you explain the *irony* of this sin as it relates to you?

2. Since “no man can tame the tongue” (v. 8), what’s your next step?

Conclusion…

Maybe Pambo’s on to something…