

Taming The Tongue

James 3:1-12

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A true Christian is known not only by how they walk but by how they talk. It's important how you live, but what you say is just as important.

In our series, James has pointed out that a Christian is, number one, patient in trouble—we saw that in chapter 1; number two, they practice the truth, chapter 2—“Be doers of the Word and not hearers only”; and today, we come to chapter 3, which says that the mark of a true Christian is that they have control over their tongue. So a true Christian is patient in trouble, they practice the truth and they have power or control over their tongue.

When I use the word “tongue,” we're not just talking about the physical tongue. We're talking about our speech. We use our tongue and our voice to speak, but the word “tongue” in this passage is a reference to our words or to our speech.

That is one of the blessings that God has given to us as human beings. We have been made in the image and likeness of God. We have the ability to communicate. We have the ability to speak in words. God speaks in words and He speaks in His Word. We have been given the gift of communication and the ability to speak in words. Just as our deeds are evidence of our faith, our words are also. Jesus said in Matthew 12:34: “Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.” So if it's in your heart, it comes out on your tongue. Words reveal what is in our hearts.

The tame tongue is a mark of Christian maturity. I want you to notice the key to this whole passage in verse 8. James says, “But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” The emphasis grammatically from the Greek in verse 8 is on “man”; “But no man can tame...” But what man can't tame, God can. We know that “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” So even though I can't control my tongue, I believe that God can come to live inside me, and He can empower me and enable me and help me to have speech that is under control.

In this passage, James warns us of two things: the power of the tongue and the problems of the tongue. We'll look at each one individually.

First of all, in verses 1-6, we have the power of the tongue to either direct us or to destroy. James says, “My brethren...”—so he's writing to believers—“...let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect...”—or “mature”—“...man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is

a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.”

In these first six verses, James points out two powers that lie in the tongue. There are more than two, but we want to restrict ourselves to this text.

The first is the power to direct, in verses 1-4. James starts with a warning about teaching, in verse 1. It's a classic passage. He says, “Let not many of you become teachers.” The early church met in much more informal settings than we do. We gather on Sunday mornings, we sing and then we sit and listen to the pastor preach from the Bible. But in James' day, anyone could stand up to talk and preach and share a verse. Anyone could read a psalm and sing. The service was taken a lot from the synagogue service. The early Christians were Jews who had just come from their synagogue gatherings. In the synagogue, a person might be called on to speak or to give a dissertation or to give an explanation of a text. So it was kind of informal. A lot of people spoke out.

What was happening was that everyone wanted to be the teacher. No one wanted to be the learner. Everyone in the church aspired to teach others. When you teach, you use your tongue. I think that in the 45 years I've been preaching, I can't imagine how much tongue work I've done; I've been flappin' for a long time. I think about how many words have come out of my mouth in 45 years of preaching—quite a few.

So James says here that you shouldn't all aspire to be teachers. Why? He gives us the reasons for the warning, in verses 1-2. First of all, we teachers will come under a stricter judgment. He says, “We shall receive a stricter...”—or “greater”—“...judgment” or “condemnation.” It is the Greek word *krima*. One of the reasons for this judgment is that “To whom much is given, much is required.” One of the challenges of being a preacher is that you have to live what you preach. The easy part is getting up and talking to others. The hard part is taking it home and living it in my daily life.

The challenge for me is that my wife comes to this church. Sometimes I'll be preaching and I'll connect eyes with her, and I'm saying something and I can see she's thinking, I hope you're listening to yourself right now. Uh, I think I'll look somewhere else right now. Or we'll get home and she says, “That was a good sermon, pastor. Are you going to put it into practice?”

People come to her and say, “It must be wonderful to live with Pastor John.” She grits her teeth and says, “Oh, yes; it's wonderful all right. It's just amazing. He glows in the dark.” I don't think so. It's not easy to preach all of these truths and then have to live them in your daily lives, but that's what's required. It doesn't do me any good to tell others what to do if I don't practice what I preach. Notice what James says: He says that judgment is because you know this information, so you need to live this information.

Notice also that we stumble, as well. That is a second reason you shouldn't all aspire to be speakers, preachers or teachers of the Word. James says in verse 2, “For we all stumble...”—

or “offend.” It has the word “scandal” attached to it. It means we trip—“...in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word...”—or in “his speech”—“...he is a perfect...”—or “mature”—“...man, able also to bridle the whole body.” There’s the point of this whole first section: If you are able to bridle your tongue, that’s an indication that you are mature.

Only Jesus Christ was perfect, and only Jesus Christ never said anything wrong. How many times have you and I said, “Oh, I wish I’d hadn’t said that” or “Why did I say that?” We don’t realize that our words have power to direct other people. They have power for good or for evil.

Isaiah said, “I saw the Lord high and lifted up, and His glory filled the temple. When I saw God, I saw myself and realized I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell amongst the people of unclean lips.” He realized that his mouth had been tainted and affected by sin.

We also know the Apostle Peter was a classic example of one who many times said the wrong thing. He would argue with the Lord: “Not so, Lord. You’re not going to go there.” Jesus had to say, “Get thee behind me, Satan. For you’re not saying the things that be of God, but saying the things that be of men.” So Peter many times stuck his foot in his mouth.

There is a house in Israel we’re going to go to that they call “Peter’s House,” and I thought, How do you know it’s Peter’s house? Did you find a sandal with teeth marks on it? He was the apostle with foot-and-mouth disease. He was always saying something stupid, and we do the same.

So don’t look to become many teachers, because we shall have a stricter judgment, and we all stumble and we all fall. Only Jesus was perfect. 1 Peter 2:22 says, referring to Christ, “...Who did no sin, neither was any deceit found in His mouth.”

Now James moves immediately, in verses 3-4, to two illustrations of what he says in verses 1-2. He says, “Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires.” So the first illustration is a horse, and the second is a ship.

I am not a horse guy. I’m a beach guy; I like to surf. I don’t do horses. I remember the first time I ever rode a horse. (It’s also the last time I rode a horse.) The horse would not cooperate. It knew that I was freaked out. It knew that I didn’t know what I was doing. It just went wherever it wanted to go. I was trying to control that sucker, but it just wouldn’t work; he was just going through the bushes and going around in every different direction. After it was all over, I couldn’t walk for about a week. You call this fun?! So if you’re into horseback riding, come after service and I’ll pray for you. Horses are big, scary and they can step on you. They can spit on you and bite you. So I don’t do horses. I’ll stop right there.

But that big, scary, powerful animal with just a tiny bit in its mouth can be led and directed—by somebody who knows what he’s doing. Not by me, of course. The focus is that little instrument we call a bit, in the horse’s mouth, can direct that horse and guide that horse. So our tongue

can actually have a powerful influence and direction over our lives.

James also uses the word “ships” in verse 4. “Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder.” So very small bit—very big horse. Very small rudder—very big ship. You take a very big cruise liner or you take a very big aircraft carrier. If they are dry docked, you can actually see that the rudder is very small in proportion to the size of the ship. It’s amazing that that huge ship can be turned around with just a rudder that size.

So also in our speech, our tongues can direct. Someone put it like this:

“A careless word may kindle strife.

A cruel word may wreck a life.

A bitter word may hate instill;

A brutal word may smite and kill.

A gracious word may smooth the way;

A joyous word may light the day.

A timely word may lessen stress;

A loving word may heal and bless.”

So our words have power to influence and direct. Even though our tongue is a small member, it has power to yield great influence.

In Proverbs 18:21, it says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” I think of a judge who says, “Guilty!” and someone is sentenced to death. The power of the tongue.

Those of you who are married, remember the day you got married, and the pastor asked, “Do you solemnly swear to love this person and commit yourself to this person?” You said, “I do.” Do you remember that? And your life was never the same. You’re now a married person. We’ll stop right there.

I believe that the highest power and use of the tongue is, number one, to praise God. Use your tongue to praise God. How wonderful to sing in worship songs and praise to the Lord. We take this tongue and this gift of speech that God has given us, and we give it back to God. “We love you, Lord. We praise you, God. We worship you, God. You’re worthy. You are holy.”

The second thing that we can use to influence our tongues is with prayer. We can pray with our tongues; we can talk to God. It starts in our hearts, and it’s powered by the Spirit. Prayer is a

powerful force and use of the tongue.

Thirdly, we can use our tongues to proclaim the Gospel, to tell others about Jesus Christ. On April 22, 1855, a man by the name of Edward Kimble went into a shoe store in Chicago, Illinois and shared the Gospel with a young boy named Dwight Lyman Moody. Later on, he accepted the Lord and became known as D. L. Moody, one of the great evangelists in American history. Thousands of lives were changed by the power of one man in a shoe store telling a young boy about Jesus Christ. So God can use your speech to influence others.

We can use our speech to comfort and to encourage. What a blessing to be able to say that my words brighten someone's day. They can dim someone's day, but they can also brighten someone's day. I can comfort. I can encourage. I can strengthen. I can educate with the power of my words.

But notice in verses 5-6 that the words we speak have power not only to direct but also to destroy. James uses the imagery of the tongue being like fire. He said, "Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell." The word "hell" here is the word "Gahanna."

On the south side of the city of Jerusalem there is a valley known as Hinnom. The Jews used to put their rubbish and their trash and their garbage in the Valley of Hinnom. It burned with a smoldering fire. From the imagery of Hinnom we have the word "Gahanna," which is translated in our Bibles "hell." It was a picture of this rubbish heap where the trash was burning. What a picture of our tongues. Our tongue is like the fires of Hinnom or Gahanna or hell. They have power to influence people for evil if we use them in the wrong way.

What are some of the bad uses of our tongue? The list could be quite lengthy. Obviously we shouldn't lie. The Bible says, "Thou shalt not lie," speaking something that isn't true or holding back information. You may say, "Well, it's just a white lie." A white lie is a lie. There are no colors in God's chart of lies. You're either telling the truth or you're lying.

Or you can use your speech to slander someone. Or you can curse or swear. In Ephesians 4:29, the Bible says, "Let no corrupt communication come out of your mouth."

I was doing some business with some people the other day, and they were cussing and swearing, and when they found out I was a pastor, all of a sudden they were Christians. "Oh, praise the Lord! Hallelujah!" It was like, "You were just swearing and dropping filthy words, and now it's like you love Jesus Christ!? I don't think so."

When Peter was sitting by the enemy's fire, they said to him, "Your speech betrays you. You're a Galilean." Your speech betrays you; you're a heathen. Or your speech betrays you; you're a Christian. Wouldn't it be nice to have someone come up to you at work and say, "Are you a Christian?"

“Yes. How did you know?”

“I’ve been listening to you talk. You can tell by your words. I’ve been watching you walk. I can tell by the way you live.” So our words reveal what is in our heart.

Maybe you’ve been backbiting. This is the favorite pastime of Christians, by the way. They don’t get any exercise, so they’re running down people. They’re jumping to conclusions. We say things behind people’s backs that we never would say to their face. They use flattery; we say things to their face that we would never say behind their back. Or we criticize. I think of parents who criticize their children and wound their sensitive hearts.

I say that quite sensitively, too, because I’ve raised my kids and I have grandkids. But, oh, to be able to go back and to do it over again and correct all of my mistakes. It pains me to think about the times I was curt with my kids or I yelled at my kids or I was cross with my kids or I came home and took my frustrations out on my kids. Now they have forgiven me and they love their dad and we love each other; everything’s fine. But it still pains me to this day to think that I didn’t speak as kindly and as lovingly and as gently as I always should have to my children.

Someone put it in a poem that says:

“Only a word of anger,

But it wounded one sensitive heart;

Only a word of sharp reproach,

But it made the teardrops start;

Only a hasty, thoughtless word,

Sarcastic and unkind,

But it darkened the day before so bright,

And left a sting behind.”

It pains me to think that I might have hurt somebody or said something that offended them or stumbled them. So we need to be careful that we don’t use our words to criticize harshly in dealing with people. Then, of course, we gossip. The tongue can be our strongest asset, or it can be our greatest liability. Oh, God, help us to tame the tongue by the power of the Holy Spirit!

Then, secondly and lastly, James moves to the problems of the tongue, verses 7-12. There are three problems here. There are more than three, but I’m sticking to this text. The first problem is that the tongue is untamable by man. James makes it so clear in verses 7-8. He said, “For

every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind.” The idea of “tamed” here is that they are subdued or conquered or we control them. Here’s the point: “But no man...”—emphasis on “man”—“...can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.”

Notice the two things he says about the tongue. You’re saying, “Well, that’s my neighbor’s tongue. That’s not my tongue. Man, I wish my neighbor were here right now! Verse 8 is for them!” No; verse 8 is for us. He’s talking about our tongues and the words that we use. He says there that the tongue “no man can tame.” Notice that it’s untamable by man.

This “beast” “bird” “reptile” and “creature of the sea” mentioned in verse 7 is perfectly consistent with Genesis 1:28, where God gave man dominion over these creatures. He listed them in the same categories: “beast of the fields,” “birds of the air,” “the creeping things,” and “those that swim in the sea.” So the same categories are listed in Genesis 1:28, that says man has dominion over these animals. We do control them.

Have you ever been to Sea World? I know there’s quite a controversy now; they want to free the whales, don’t have any whales, be nice to the whales, because the whales are eating people, and stuff like that. The last time I went to Sea World I realized the show’s a dud now. They used to ride Shamu. That was awesome! Could you dig riding on an orca whale?! It would be a rush, to be sure. You think, John, you’re afraid of a horse and you want to get in the tank with a whale?! I like to think about it; that’s all. What a rush that would be! Jammin’ on an orca whale! That would be sweet! So we’re able to tame this big beast, but we can’t tame that little beast, that little beast that makes its den behind the human teeth. We can’t seem to tame it.

It’s interesting that Paul said this in Romans 3:13-14 when describing sinful man: “Their throat is an open sepulcher; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.”

In Psalm 140:3, the Bible says, “They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adders’ poison is under their lips.” How true that is. So the tongue is untamable.

The second problem with the tongue is in verses 9-10. The tongue is inconsistent. This one really convicts you. “With it...”—our “tongue”—“...we bless our God and Father...”—We all did that today. We sang praises to God. “Praise the Lord!”—“...and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.” That’s totally inconsistent.

You’re in church on Sunday morning saying, “I love You, Lord. I worship You, Lord. I praise You, Lord.” When you leave the service it’s, “God bless you, brother. God bless you, sister.” Then you get in your car, and you try to exit the parking lot. But some idiot won’t go! Isn’t it funny? That same tongue that was just praising God is now cursing his brother. Then it actually gets worse when you get on the freeway. When you try to go over the Scott Rd. bridge,

you lose your sanctification. "I was saved at Revival, and now I lost it on the bridge! Hallelujah!"

And then you're driving—oh, the other day! One of my pet peeves is that people honk their horn when it's not necessary. "I see you." I was trying to get in a lane, they wouldn't let me in the lane and they sped up to purposefully keep me out of the lane. "Honk, honk!" It's like, "Oh, I have to just speak in tongues for a few moments. Lord, Lord! If I didn't have a Revival sticker on my car, I would have done something." The thing screws me up all the time. But it's so hard! Oh, Lord! I can see it in the newspaper: "Pastor flips out; road rage." It's hard. Only God can take control.

But it's inconsistent that I can sing praises to God, I can pray to God, I can proclaim the Gospel, and I can curse a human being who is made in the image and likeness of God. I heard this story of a little girl who had her arms wrapped around her daddy's neck and was looking backwards over her daddy's shoulder. Then her mother saw her sticking her tongue out at her little brother. I love what her mother said. She said, "Darling, you need to take your arms from around your daddy's neck. You can't love your father and hate your brother." That's from the Bible; that's Biblical.

How often we want to love God, but we want to stick our tongue out at our brother. The Bible says that you can't do that; you can't say that you love God and hate your brother. You haven't seen God, but you love Him. You've seen your brother and you don't like him. We use our speech in two different ways inconsistently.

Thirdly and lastly, the problem with the tongue is that it is contrary to nature the way we use it. Notice the imagery in verses 11-12: "Does a spring..."—so it's an artesian well—"...send forth sweet water..."—which is a reference to fresh water—"...and bitter..."—which is a reference to salt water—"...from the same opening?" Notice the question marks in verses 11-12. There are two of them. They are rhetorical, expecting a "no" answer. "Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?" The answer is "No." "Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?" The answer is "No." Here's the application: "Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh."

I remember years ago I was hiking and I found an artesian well. It was water bubbling right out of the ground. It was some of the best water I ever drank. You could put your face right in it and drink the water. It was fresh water. You have either fresh water or salt water; you can't have both.

Likewise, you can't have one tongue that praises God and curses people. You can't have one tongue that blesses God and bruises other people. This is inconsistent and it's contrary to nature.

The tongue displays what we really are. (Meditate on that today.) Your tongue is a barometer, an indicator, a revealer of who you really are. Someone said, "The fruit of our lips finds its source in the root of our soul." One of the greatest indications of what a person really is is what

they say in their speech, what they want to talk about. When you're together with your Christian friends do you talk about people? Do you talk about issues? Do you talk about God? What's the subject of your conversations? What comes out of your mouth?

In conclusion, how can we tame the tongue? Number one, we must be born again. If the heart is the source of your speech, you need a new heart. Only God can give you a new heart.

I remember when I got saved, my speech changed immediately. It was one of the great indications that I had really been born again. I was driving a nail with a hammer and hit my thumb, and I didn't cuss. I went, "Oh, praise God! Thank you, Jesus!" Then I stopped and said, "Wow! I really am saved! I really got born again. Listen to what came out of my mouth!"

So if you want to conquer the tongue, tame the tongue, you need a new heart. And only God can give you a new heart, but you must turn from your sins and trust Jesus, Who died on the Cross and rose from the dead. He can forgive you and give you a new life. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things pass away and all things become new."

The second thing you need is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 5:18 says, "Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in songs and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." When you're filled with the Holy Spirit, the words "making melody in your heart to the Lord" actually means plucking the strings of your heart. It's a word-picture; your heart is a stringed instrument. The Holy Spirit plucks the strings of your heart, and out of your mouth comes sweet music praising God.

When the Bible describes people filled with the Spirit, it says that their lips are loosed to either praise God or proclaim the Gospel. A Spirit-filled individual is praising God and preaching the Gospel or speaking forth the Word of God. So we need the Spirit of God to control us and to empower us.

Thirdly, we need to be cautious. Before you speak, ask yourself these questions: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? I know that's hard, because sometimes we speak first and think later. That's our big problem. Once the words come out, you can't take them back. You can ask for forgiveness, but you can't take the words back. They're out there. We say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." That's not true. Words can hurt. They can wound. They can destroy a life. A wrong word spoken at the wrong time can send somebody down the wrong path and condemn their soul for all eternity. A pastor or preacher preaching the Word but not preaching the truth of God's Word—souls can be lost, lives can be destroyed.

It's like a little fire, a little spark. Just take one little match. We see the damage that fires have done in California this year. Be careful how you use your tongue. Ask yourself: Is what I'm saying true? Is what I'm saying kind? Is what I'm saying necessary? I have to laugh, because I didn't need to say that. It didn't do any good. It didn't help anything. Is it necessary?

Fourthly and lastly, be prayerful. Pray. You want to tame the tongue? Get on your knees and pray and ask God to take control of your tongue.

Psalm 119:14 says, "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer." Amen.