

Taming The Tongue

James 3:1-12

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True Christianity is seen by how we walk. We're learning that in the book of James. But it's also seen in how we talk. In James 2:14-26, we read about a false profession of faith; that faith cannot be just an empty confession with words, but it must be backed up with the way we live. We must make sure that our lives are consistent with what we believe, as well. And our words must also be consistent. Our words are just as important.

James pointed out that a mature Christian is marked by being patient in trouble, chapter 1; he practices the truth, chapter 2; and now we will see that a true, mature Christian has power over the tongue, chapter 3.

"The tongue" means our speech. When "the tongue" is used in our text, and in other passages in the Bible, it's not talking about the physical organ in our mouth; it's talking about our speech, our words. Sometimes the Bible uses the word "lips" to refer to our words, but it's talking about the words that we speak. Just as our deeds are evidence of our faith, so our words are also evidence.

In Matthew 12:34, Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." Someone once said, and I like it, "If it's in the well, it'll come up in the bucket." Whatever you drop in the well will come up in the bucket. So our words are a manifestation of what is in our hearts.

When people say a wrong word, sometimes they'll say, "I don't know where that came from!" Then I say, "I know where it came from. It came from your heart." That's why our hearts need to be changed in order for us to speak words that are pleasing to the Lord. Our words reveal what is in our hearts.

The tamed tongue is a mark of maturity. But only God can tame the tongue. So the key verse in our whole text is verse 8. "But no man..."—emphasis on "man," which is emphatic in the Greek—"...can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." We painfully know that man can't tame the tongue.

In this text, James gives us two dangers of the tongue. He talks about the power of the tongue, and he talks about the problems of the tongue.

First, we will talk about the power of the tongue and its power to direct and to destroy, verses 1-6. James says, "My brethren..."—so he's speaking to believers—"...let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things." "Stumbling" here is referring to sinning with your speech. "If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect..."—or "mature"—"...man, able also to bridle the whole body."

Verse 3, "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 verses 1-6, James points out the two powers that lie in the tongue: the power to direct and the power to destroy.

Notice first the power to direct. It starts in verse 1. In it, he gives us a warning about teaching others. He says, "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers." He is speaking to believers and saying, "Don't let too many of you be self-appointed teachers" or "Don't be eager to teach others." We teach by using our speech as well as by our example. He means you shouldn't put yourself in a place of being a teacher if you're not called by God to teach. There's nothing more dangerous or more detrimental than self-appointed teachers in the church.

But God does give to many the gift of teaching. A pastor must have the gift of teaching. In Ephesians, it says that God has given to the church "pastors-teachers." It's hyphenated, so it's one word. So a pastor must be a teacher of the Bible, which is how he feeds the sheep. It's his primary calling: to preach and teach the Bible to the people.

We are not to be self-appointed teachers. The reason James said that was because in the casual format of the early church, anyone could stand up and speak, sing a song, read a psalm or share an exhortation. We, too, sometimes have testimony meetings, in which we could stand up and speak. So it seems that many of them wanted to teach, but few wanted to learn. If everyone wanted to be a teacher at church on Sunday, then no one would be taught.

Then James goes on to warn us why it's dangerous to be a self-appointed teacher. In verse 1, he says, "We shall receive a stricter judgment." Then he says, in verse 2, "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."

So the reason for the warning is stricter judgment, which is a Biblical principle. "To whom much is given, from him much will be required," Luke 12:48. This is one of the problems of being a teacher: God requires you to put into practice what you have been taught.

One of the greatest challenges for me is to preach when my wife is in church. I can tell sometimes when I preach and my eyes catch hers that she is thinking, I hope you're listening to what you're saying! I go home and look at her, too. "That was a good sermon, Pastor John." Sometimes people come up to my wife and say, "It must be wonderful living with Pastor Miller!" She's thinking, Yeah, it's wonderful all right.

So all the words that come out of my mouth have to be practiced in my life. That's a challenge. It's one thing to talk; it's another thing to walk.

But we all have the same responsibility. If you are sitting under good teaching and learning your Bible, when you're learning about the power and dangers of the tongue, you're responsible to put into practice what you learn. You can't just hear and not do. "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves," James 1:22.

So in our text, James starts with the warning, "Let not many of you become teachers," because we'll be judged greater. The Greek word for "judgment" is "krima." We will come under judgment for what we teach, if we don't practice it.

Secondly, verse 2 says, "We all stumble." The context is in reference to our words. In the King James translation, it reads, "We offend all." The word "offend" in the Greek is "skandalizó." It means "to trip" or "to stumble." That word was used for the trip stick in a fowler's trap.

When I was a little boy, we used to go in the backyard with a cardboard box, a stick, a string and some bread. We put the bread on the ground, propped the open box up over the bread with the stick that had a long string tied to it. We backed up around the corner of the house holding the string. We hid and peeked around the corner. When a bird came to eat the bread, we yanked hard on the string, the stick flew out, the box fell and we would catch a bird sometimes. Once we caught a big, black crow. I freaked out and yelled for my mom. Then we let the bird go. That's the last time I ever went bird hunting.

The stick with the string tied to it was the skandalizó, the trip stick. And many times with our speech, we stumble. How many times have we said, "Oh, why did I say that?! I wish I could take it back!" You might say, "I take that back," but you can't take it back. And once those words go out, they can wound and hurt and do damage. That's the power of the spoken word.

In Isaiah 6, Isaiah saw the Lord "high and lifted up." He saw the vision of God on the throne and His glory filled the temple. Then Isaiah said, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips. And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." But God sent an angel to take a piece of coal from the altar with tongs and touched Isaiah's lips with the coal and cleansed them. So God can heal our words and give us speech that honors and glorifies Him.

Peter was a man who often said things wrong. He said, "Lord, You're not going to die. Not so, Lord." He would say things to Jesus that weren't right. Many times he has been called the apostle with "foot-in-mouth disease." Have you ever put your foot in your mouth? Peter was doing that all the time, and God had to change his heart and transform his life.

Only Jesus Christ never sinned, 1 Peter 2:22. Speaking of Jesus, it says, "...who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth." I like that. Jesus, in His Incarnation, lived His whole life and never, ever said a word that should not have been spoken.

James illustrates this in verses 3-4 of our text. Go back to verse 2, to get a running start, it says, "For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body." That means if you have control over your tongue, it's a

mark of maturity, and you're able to bridle the whole body.

Verse 3, "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."

James uses two illustrations: that of a horse and a bit and that of a ship and a rudder. You have a tiny bit in a big, strong horse's mouth that controls the horse; it goes where you want it to go.

I'm not a horseman. I've only been on a horse a couple of times. The last time was many years ago, and I said I'd never ride another horse again. The last time I rode a horse, it went wherever it wanted to go and did what it wanted to do. And I was convinced it didn't like me. I knew the horse understood that he had a dumb pastor on his back. He was running through the bushes. I wanted him to go left and he'd go right. I wanted him to stop, but he wouldn't. With a car, you can turn the motor off, you can put on the brakes. You have a blinker. With a horse, you just go. And after I got off the horse, I couldn't really sit down, walk or move for about two weeks, I was so sore. So don't ever ask me to go horseback riding.

But the picture here is of this very small bit in the horse's mouth that controls a very large, strong, powerful animal. Likewise, the tongue has power over the whole body. So if you have power over the tongue, then you have power over the rest of your life and behavior.

Then James uses the illustration of ships, in verse 4. In James' day, ships were not anything in comparison to today's ships. Today we have big, giant cargo ships and great, big ocean liners that are so huge. If you could dry-dock them or get a picture of the ship, the rudder is very small in proportion to the size of the ship. You have this huge ship and a very small rudder. But that little rudder can control, guide and direct that ship.

So a little bit controls a large, strong horse and a little rudder controls and directs a large ship. This shows the power of our words.

Someone said,

"A careless word may kindle strife.

A cruel word may wreck a life.

A bitter word may hate, and still,

A brutal word may smite and kill.

A gracious word may soothe the way.

A joyous word may light the day.

A timely word may lessen stress.

A loving word may heal and bless.”

So with words we can either bless or curse, either build up or tear down. We have power in our words.

In Proverbs 18:21, Solomon says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” I think of a judge who says, “Guilty!” and a person is sent to prison for the rest of their life. I think of when you get married, and the minister says, “Will you take...to be your lawfully wedded wife [or husband]” and you say, “I do.” Two little words and your life goes a different direction. What a marvelous thing it is to be using our words in a way that honors and glorifies God.

Let me give you some good uses of the tongue. These aren’t from the text. First, God gave us speech, because we are made in His image and God speaks. The best and highest use of the tongue that I can think of is in praising God. You are using your tongue to glorify your Creator God.

The second use of our tongue that God would have us do is to pray; to talk to God and to intercede to God for ourselves and for others.

The third use of our tongue is to proclaim the Gospel. On April 22, 1855, a man by the name of Edward Kimball went into a shoe store in Chicago, Illinois, and he used his tongue and his mouth to speak to a boy who was working in the store selling shoes. The boy was Dwight Lyman Moody. Dwight Moody accepted Christ, then God called him as an evangelist and he became the great D. L. Moody. Thousands of people came to Christ through his ministry. So you use your words to proclaim. You pray, you praise and you proclaim. What a great use of the tongue.

The fourth use of the tongue, which honors God, is to comfort and encourage.

“Only a word of anger,

But it wounded a 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.”

Whenever I read that poem, it speaks to my heart. I think of how many times I may have discouraged my wife, my children or a friend, because I said a sarcastic, cutting or hurting word. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” That’s not true. Words can wound. And wounds can create scars that last a lifetime. So we need to pray that God will help us use our words to praise, to pray, to proclaim and to comfort and encourage.

The second area of the power of the tongue is in verses 5-6: the power to destroy. It has the power to direct, for good or bad, but the tongue also has the power to destroy. Verses 5-6 will illustrate the little bit in the horse’s mouth and the rudder on a ship. “Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!” A little word acts like one spark that can start a fire that destroys a whole forest.

You may say, “Well, it’s just a little word.” But that little word can start a fire that brings great damage.

Now notice the description, verse 6. “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.”

Let me give you a list illustrating the bad uses of our tongues. Number one, we should never lie with our words. Exodus 20:16, the Ninth Commandment, says, “You shall not bear false witness...”—or “lie”—“...against your neighbor.” What a sad thing to use a lie or to slander. To slander is putting someone down, speaking disparagingly of another person.

Number two, we should never curse. Ephesians 4:29 says, “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth.” If you are a Christian, you shouldn’t be using foul speech.

I was doing business with someone years ago, and he was cussing up a storm. Then he asked me what I do for a living. I said, “I’m a pastor.”

He immediately said, “Oh, I’m a Christian too!” Really!

We’ll see that a fountain cannot bring forth both fresh water and bitter water at the same time. So remember your words. They reveal who you are.

When Peter was around the fire in Caiaphas’ courtyard, a servant girl said of him, “You also were with Jesus of Galilee.” And another girl said, “This fellow also was with Jesus of Nazareth.” Peter began to curse and to swear that it wasn’t true. Later it was said of him, “Your speech betrays you,” Matthew 26:73.

Many times your speech will betray you. You say, “I’m a Christian,” but the words coming out of your mouth are dishonoring to God and not becoming of a true believer. One of the evidences of a changed life is a change in your speech. So “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your

mouth.”

Number three, we should never backbite. That is saying things behind people's back that you would never say to their face. Flattery is saying something to their face that you would never say behind their back.

Number four is we should never criticize. We have to be careful not to be critical or faultfinding with our words. And gossip is detrimental. So the tongue can be used to tear down and destroy. A lot of churches have been destroyed because of the words of the tongue. Someone said, “It's not the tongue's movement that destroys a church; it's the movement of the tongue that destroys a church.” People are destroyed by backbiting and gossip.

So the tongue can be our greatest asset or our greatest liability.

Now we move to the second, main division, in verses 7-12, the problems of the tongue. We first had the power of the tongue; now we have the problems of the tongue. There are three problems I want to look at. First, the tongue is untamable by man, verses 7-8; second, it is inconsistent, verses 9-10; and third, it is contrary to nature.

In verses 7-12, James says, “For every kind of beast...”—or “animal”—“...and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, 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. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.”

The problems with the tongue are threefold. First, it is untamable by men. Verse 7 says, “every kind of beast.” There is a direct parallel between verse 7 and Genesis 1:28, where God says, “Have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” In verse 7, the same categories are listed.

Our daughter and grandkids were visiting this week, and they went to Sea World. It's a cool place. You see people riding Orcas, and dolphins and seals doing tricks. What an amazing thing it is that we can control and direct them and have dominion over them.

But this little beast that makes its den behind the human teeth we cannot control. We can get a whale to do what we want, but we can't get that little tongue to do what we want. It is untamed by man. So James uses the analogy that the whole animal kingdom has been tamed. “Tamed” in verse 7 means that we have control of them or we have dominion over them. Verse 8 says, “But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.”

In Romans 3:13-14, Paul says, “Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.” He uses that to describe the degeneration of our culture. When we reject God and

turn away from God, the tongue is used to dishonor God. Psalm 140:3 says, "They sharpen their tongues like a serpent; the poison of asps is under their lips." So what a culture we live in today where the tongue is used to curse.

Secondly, the tongue is also inconsistent, verses 9-10. "With it we bless our God and Father..."—when we praise Him—"...and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God." Isn't that inconsistent? You lift your hands and your voice to God in praise, and then you get in your car to leave the church parking lot. Why do we get demon-possessed when we get behind the steering wheel? We don't even get out of the church parking lot when we lose our sanctification. You were just praising the Lord, and now you're calling your brother an idiot.

It was like the little boy who said to his mother, "Mommy, why is it that only when Daddy drives there are idiots on the highway?"

We're blessing God with the same tongue, but we are cursing others who are made in the image of God. Verse 10, "Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so." So the tongue's use can be inconsistent. That's a dangerous thing.

The third problem with the tongue is that it is contrary to nature. It's untamable by men—emphasis on "men"; it's inconsistent—we should be blessing God and not cursing men; and it's contrary to nature—he uses the illustration of a fountain. He has used the illustrations of a bit in a horse's mouth, the rudder on a big ship, animals are tamed but not man's tongue and now he uses a fresh-water fountain as an illustration.

Verses 11-12 say, "Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter..."—or "salt water"—"...from the same opening?" This is a rhetorical question calling for a "No" answer. There are no bitter-sweet fountains. Then James asks, "Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives?" Again, the answer is "No." "...or a grapevine bear figs?" And for the third time, the answer is "No." "Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh." So there is no such thing as a fig tree that bears olives, or an olive tree that has figs, or a grapevine that has figs. Rather, they produce after their own nature or kind.

The "fountain" in this illustration would be an artesian well. Years ago I was hiking in the foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains, and we found this cool artesian well. The water was bubbling right out of the ground. We could drink right from it, it was so fresh and clean. It was fresh water. It wasn't salt water. So a fountain is going to be either fresh water or salt water; it's not going to be a combination of both. The minute you throw salt in the fountain, it's no longer good water.

So the fountain is like the tongue. It speaks praises to God and curses others. This "ought not to be so." It's contrary to nature. And it should be contrary to the nature of a child of God.

The tongue displays who you really are. The fruit of our lives finds its source in the root of our

soul.

How can we tame the tongue? Let me give you three things to do to tame the tongue. Number one, be born again. Jesus said that to Nicodemus: "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." You can try all you want to tame the tongue, but it won't happen.

Have you tried, literally, to hold your tongue? It's a slippery little devil! You can't tame your tongue. But if you're born again, God will tame your tongue. Romans 10:9-10 says, "If you confess with your mouth..."—there's your tongue—"...the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart..."—there's your faith—"...that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." That's being born again. "With the heart one believes..."—there's your faith—"...unto righteousness, and with the mouth..."—there's the tongue—"...confession is made unto salvation." So if you're not a Christian, if you haven't been born again, use your heart to believe and your tongue to confess your belief.

The Bible says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness," 1 John 1:9. The word "confess" means "to say the same things as God says." It means to agree with God and to say the same thing. God says that you're a sinner, and you say, "Yes, God; I've sinned." You use your tongue to confess Christ as Lord, and ask Him to forgive you and you put your faith in Him. Then you will be saved. How marvelous that is.

The second thing you need to do to tame the tongue, after you're born again, is to be filled with the Spirit. It's not enough to be born of the Spirit; you must be controlled by the Holy Spirit. So it's not a matter of having the Spirit; it's a matter of the Spirit having you. A lot of Christians boast that they have the Holy Spirit. Good. But does He have you? Does He control your heart and your tongue? If you "walk in the Spirit," you will "not fulfill the lust of the flesh," Galatians 5:16. No one walking in the Spirit is going to use their tongue for anything that dishonors God.

The command for that, or imperative in the Greek, is Ephesians 5:18: "Be filled with the Spirit." And the evidence of being filled with the Spirit is in verse 19: "...speaking..."—there's the tongue—"...to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord."

Years ago when I was studying the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, I discovered an amazing thing. When anyone in the Bible was said to be "filled with the Spirit," what they did was they praised God, they prayed to God and they proclaimed God. Not once did it say that they jumped or rolled. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they praised the Lord. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they went to prayer. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they preached the Gospel.

The evidence of the Spirit-filled life is singing. If you are Spirit-filled, you have a song in your heart, and you will sing to the Lord. He will use your speech for the highest purpose for which He intended it.

And third, be cautious, be careful. This is not from any specific text. Here are three questions to ask yourself before you speak. Number one, "Is it true?" The Ninth Commandment says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Number two, "Is it kind?" And number three, "Is it necessary?" If the Spirit is controlling you, your speech will be true, kind and necessary.

Sometimes after we speak, we say to ourselves, That was so unnecessary! I didn't need to say that! We do so much damage. It's like we flick the match out the window, a fire starts and the whole house goes up in flames. So God, please put a watch around my lips!

Number four, we are to be prayerful.

So we are to be born again—if you haven't trusted Christ, get saved. He'll give you a new heart and change the way you speak. We are to be filled with the Spirit by surrendering to Him and yielding to His control. We are to be cautious of our speech. And we are to be prayerful.

Psalms 19:14 says "Let the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer." Pray this prayer.