

Taming the Tongue James 3:1-12

Words are fundamental to our existence.

The fact that we *communicate* is a sign that we are made in God's image.
He is the talking God.

You might get a **parrot** or a **dolphin** to utter a few words, **but it's a small miracle to get some kids to be quiet!**

- **At first**, parents love hearing their kids talk! **But they soon get over that.**
- **Perhaps you remember your first words; Seinfeld's was, "Leave me alone."**
- **"You spend the first two years teaching your kids to talk, and the next sixteen telling them to be quiet!"**
- **We have sang RUN DMC to our kids, "You Talk too Much"**

But it's not just kids that have a problem!

- When we're **young**, we **whine**.
- When we're **old**, we **criticize**.
- When we **fail**, we **blame others**.
- When we **succeed**, we **boast**.

These are just a few of our tendencies. So we need this passage!

- James carries on the wisdom tradition, which has a big emphasis on proper use of words.
- **There are at least 90 Proverbs on the tongue/words.**
- **When you go to the doctor, they say, "Stick out your tongue" – it's amazing what doctors can tell about us simply by sticking out this "two-inch slab of mucus membrane."**
- **Likewise, James tells us that you can tell a lot about our person – particularly their heart -- by how they use the tongue/words.**

A Brief Theology of Words

In the beginning God speaks in power.

- He speaks the **universe** into existence.
- He reveals His **character** through words.
- He speaks his **commands** through words.
- And God gave **our first parents the ability to speak** to him in **worship** and one another in **relationship**.

We also see in the garden that **Satan speaks** – he uses **deceptive words**.

- His words **distort** and **twist** God's word.

Our parents fail in the garden, but **God Speaks with gospel promise in Gen 3:15** – through words.

Throughout the biblical narrative, God gives **specific commands** related to the tongue, and there are **many sinful examples of the wrong use of the tongue**.

- We have ample of examples of words that are wicked, deceitful, perverse, filthy, corrupt, flattering, slanderous, gossiping, blasphemous, foolish, boasting, complaining, cursing, contentious, sensual, and vile.
- And we also find the very words of God bringing life, hope, and redemption.
- **Proverbs:** “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (18:21)

We are awaiting this redeemer throughout the OT, and eventually, God incarnate, **Jesus, comes, the Word made flesh**.

- His birth is foretold through words.
- News of his birth causes various songs of praise.
- He begins his public ministry by preaching with authority; and he does miracles with words.
- Throughout his life, Peter tells us, that Jesus never sinned with his lips.
- His words are the sweetest words in the Bible: **“Your sins are forgiven”** and they are the most terrifying, **“Depart from me, I never knew you.”**

Jesus gave his disciples a Great commission to make disciples – and in Acts we see that happening, as they preach the word.

The epistles are written to Christians, churches and leaders – more words.

And in the end, we find God warning people in Revelation 22 not to tamper with His word.

Words Are Important.

In that famous passage about how **“out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks,”** Jesus also tells us that **“we will give an account for every idle word that we utter!”** (Matt 12:33-37).

- The **Source** of our words – the heart.
 - My words, **spoken verbally or typed** expresses the condition of my heart!
- A **Serious** warning about your words – you will give an account!

Technology has caused this to be an even greater challenge, perhaps – since **we are the generation that has published more idle words than any generation before us**.

- Technology makes are words **instant, permanent, and global**.
- This can be a good thing if we are using our words wisely and for gospel purposes, but **often technology exposes the sinfulness of the human heart**.

James says that **“no one can tame the tongue,”** and now we should add, **“No one can tame the thumb!”** (The thumbs are the new tongue!).

Taming our digital tongue is a great challenge.

Often technological communication **dehumanizes people.**

- We must remember that the people we tweet and text are real people – made in the image of God, and also broken and in need of the Redeemer.
- **The people we tweet and text will spend eternity somewhere.**
 - We then should use our words to point people to Christ and His glory.
 - We should seek to build up, not tear down in social media.
 - “Let no corrupting talk come out of your thumbs, but only what is good for building up, as fits the occasion, so that my social media investment will give grace to those who see it.” (Eph 4:29, Reinke)

James 3:1-12

This is the most sustained argument in the NT on the use of the tongue.

- James has been talking about “works” that accompany real faith.
- We see here that our “words” are “works” too.
- **What we say reflects our relationship to God.**
- **In 1:19-20, 26**, he introduced this theme already.
- **As a pastor-leader, James is seeking the *maturity* of God’s people, and one way he wants them to grow is by their use of their words.**

The improper use of words is a big concern in this letter:

- Shaming Speech (2:3-4)
- Superficial Speech (2:16, 18)
- Slandorous Speech (4:11)
- Cocky Speech (4:13)
- Complaining Speech (5:8)

#1: The Influence of Our Words (3:1-8)

A. The Danger of Becoming a Teacher (3:1)

- James draws attention those who teach w/in the Xian comm. (formally or informally).

“**stricter judgment**” – Those who use the tongue to teach not only can sin easily, but cause a lot of other people to sin – therefore, we must be careful with the use of our words.

- “causing one of these to stumble”

Bearing responsibility for people’s spiritual well-being is a big deal!

- **Hebrews 13:7, 17**
- **Thabiti in Grand Cayman, “I think that’s enough people to give an account for”**

If you teach then, be faithful to the Word and seek to be a person of integrity:

Acts 20:26-27: "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God."

If you are an aspiring teacher, let me give you 5 truths to keep in mind to consider:

- **It's a weighty call. (2 Tim 4:1)**
 - You will be judged strictly.
 - Interviewer to Stott: What do you think of before you teach?
 - "There are three steps up to the pulpit, and I prayer, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit, I believe in the Holy Spirit, I believe in the Holy Spirit.'"
 - "What do you feel after you've preached?"
 - "Ashamed."
- **It's a call to study.**
 - My pattern: 15-20 hours a week...
 - **2 Timothy 2:15; Ezra 7:10.**
 - The hardest part of teaching weekly is being *consistent; it takes work (2 Tim 2)*
 - **The best teachers are the best listeners and learners.**
 - Some people want to teach because they want authority; but they don't like to be under authority. The best teachers are the best students.
- **It's an exhausting endeavor.**
 - The study is exhausting.
 - The attacks (from people and the evil one) are exhausting.
 - The fact that you rarely see your product is exhausting. This is a strange vocation. "How did the sermon go?" "No idea." "I enjoyed it."
 - The fact that you are always dealing with controversy is exhausting.
 - It can be de-humanizing - appreciate your content production, but not care about you as a person. You'll be a resource, but not a real person.
- **It's a journey of a lifetime**
 - We must always continue learning and growing
 - "Let them see your progress." (1 Tim 4)
 - Chandler, Platt, Piper
- **Your life and teaching are tied together.**
 - *All of life is sermon prep (1 Tim 4:16)*
 - It's dangerous if your gifts surpass your maturity.

B. The Difficulty of Taming the Tongue (3:2)

James isn't picking on teachers.

- The reason that teachers are at such risk is because they're engaging in an activity that is so difficult to keep in check: the use words.
- James says if you can tame the tongue, then you have become quite an individual!
- "Let's have all the older men stand." "Let's have all the young men stand." Thanks. "Let's have all the perfect men stand." We won't have to wait long. They don't exist.
- If you can tame your tongue, you must have mastered your whole life.
- Though we aren't perfect, we should be growing into maturity.
- "Tongue-mastery," Ferguson says, is the fruit of "self-mastery."

- It's a mark of spiritual maturity, and the **Spirit's work in us.**
- No one, except of Jesus has been able to totally tame the tongue.
- **We must pursue Christ-likeness, and fight the battle for God-glorifying speech minute-by-minute, by God's grace.**

C. The Disproportionate Power of the Tongue (3:3-5a)

The tongue is little but it has tremendous power.

The tongue is like a bit in a horse's mouth (3:3)

- Horses are fascinating and majestic creatures.
- I grew up in KY, and I'm not horse expert, and certainly not a great rider – but I love to look at horses. (Some people from Hope Reins could teach this!)
- How are horses directed? The reins. Yes. But where are the reins connected? To the bit in the horses mouth.
- This massive creature is controlled by this little wedge put into his mouth.
- *If you control the mouth of the horse, you control the horse.*
- These powerful and energetic creatures some 1200 pounds are controlled by this tiny little apparatus.
- The rider directs and guides the horse with the bit.
- So it is with the tongue – it is small, but it has great influence.

The tongue is like a rudder in a boat (3:4)

- I was recently on a massive boat.
- The captain turns the wheel, and the rudder shifts and moves that massive boat.
- In James' day there were many large ships (Acts 27)
- These huge vessels could be turned by the rudder.
- The same is true of the tongue – it is small, but it has tremendous power.

But there's more. Look closely at the analogy.

- For the horse, a rider uses the bit to direct it.
- For the ship, the pilot expresses his will through the ruder to guide the ship.
- And the heart/will/affections moves the tongue.

This is why we must tend to our hearts to use our tongue wisely.

Negatively: this little tongue can be used to hurt people.

Positively: this little tongue can be used to heal people.

It can sway men to violence, or it can move them to the noblest actions. It can instruct the ignorant, encourage the dejected, comfort the sorrowing, and soothe the dying. Or it can crush the human spirit, destroy reputations, spread distrust and hate, or bring nations to the brink of war. (Curtis Vaughn)

Like a bit in a horse's mouth, like a rudder on a boat, you can use words to direct, influence, and display love, or you can cut, wound, destroy.

**MLK Jr. moved a nation with his powerful speech.
Hitler killed thousands upon thousands.**

Use your words to build up your brothers and sisters.

“The Christian needs another Christ who speaks God's Word to him.... The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure.” (*Life Together*)

D. The Destructive Potential of the Tongue (3:5b-8)

Kids fight over it; marriages are destroyed by it; countries go to war because of it.

A series of pictures:

A Fire (5b-6a, d)

- **One uncontrolled spark can cause a massive fire.**
- So it is with the tongue.
- It can **“set on fire the entire course of life”**
- It is set on fire by **“hell.”** – This is the energy source of it.
 - Notice James 3:13-15 – demonic
 - **You can unleash hell on someone.**
- Lying, Being Harsh, Gossiping, Slander – come from hell, and create destructive fires.

“Adultery, for example is perceived in most Bible-believing churches as a serious sin. And it is. But I have never seen adultery send a whole church into meltdown. Gossip, by contrast, is often perceived as a little sin. But it destroys churches. Gossip can even be perceived as some kind of need, ‘I have to let all this out!’ As Americans, we do have the right to free speech. In our political culture we have the right – if it's a right, nobody can stop us – to blurt out whatever we feel. But when we become Christians ... we stop blurting whatever we feel.... “A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back” (29:11).... Do you know how many people it takes to split a church? Not half the congregation. Just two. One to start spreading the fiery negativity, and another not to confront that behavior as the sin that it is.” (R. Ortlund Jr.)

A World of Unrighteousness (6b).

- Every evil in the world has an ally with sinful speech.
- Almost all evils involve speech, or evil deeds that have accompanying words of evil.
- We often add sinful words with sinful actions.
- The tongue is a microcosm of the evils of the whole world.

A Stain (6c).

- **One little spot can ruin a nice tie, suit, or dress.**
 - **I take my shirt off when I eat ... but I have an undershirt on.**
- You are very careful when you have your nice clothes on!
- So it is with the tongue.
- **One word can ruin it all.**

It can't be tamed (v. 7).

- You can tame almost any creature – **just go to the zoo.**
- **“Look at that cute little cobra.” “May I pet the lion?”**
- We can tame tigers, but **we can't get the animal in our mouths under control!**

A Restless Evil (8b).

- **It's wild. It's seeking to devour.**

In an age when anyone with a smartphone can publish dirt on anyone else, we must know that spreading antagonistic messages online, with the intent of provoking hostility without any desire for resolution, is what the world calls 'trolling' and what the New Testament calls 'slander'. (Reinke, 166)

Deadly Poison (8c).

This sounds like **Romans 3** – that classic text that Paul uses to talk about human sinfulness.

There's another creature that can kill people with its venom: humanity.

Only a heart filled with gospel grace and gratitude can put out the fire; overturn the world of unrighteousness, prevent stains, subdue evil, and not spew poison.

What kind of words are you using? Are you demonstrating maturity with your words?

#2: The Inconsistency of Our Words (3:9-12)

Here James speaks of **the forked tongue** – the inconsistency of the tongue.

The double-minded speaking with a double-tongue.

Verse 9: Observation

- **We can praise God! One of the highest forms of speech, if not the highest!**
- **We can curse image bearers! One of the lowest forms of speech.**
 - **Imago Dei Worthy of honor, love, dignity**

Anglican Liturgy (Ps 51:15).

- **Reader: “Lord, open my lips”**
- **Response: “And my mouth will declare your praise.”**

That's a good daily prayer.

Verse 10: Problem

- These things shouldn't be! This is absurd!

Verse 11-12: Final Illustrations

- Blessing God one minute and cursing people the next is as absurd as a spring that pours forth both fresh water and salt water; as absurd as a single tree that bears both olives and figs.
- Springs are consistent.
- Olive trees are consistent – they keep producing olives.
- Yet the tongue is so very inconsistent.

James doesn't give a solution. He leaves the illustration suspended.

#3: The Internal Change We Need

The change we need is in the surrounding context.

No man can tame the tongue.

- Scripture regularly refers to the tongue when explaining the sinfulness of sin:
 - Isaiah 6:5 – the prophet Isaiah
 - Gossip in the list of vices in Rom 1:29; 2 Cor 12:20
 - Paul's indictment of human sinfulness in Romans 3:10-14
 - The pollution of our heart is evidenced by the words of our mouths.
- No one can tame this tongue...

But God can – God by his mercy can.

- Like Isaiah, we need the cleansing power of the gospel to purify our speech.

Three Exhortations:

#1: Continue in the Word

- It is in the Word that we read truth.
- It's in the Word that we are reminded who we are – new creations. (1:18)
- It's in the Word that we are sanctified (1:21)
- It's in the Word that we see the Savior, the glorious Lord Jesus (2:1).

We need to see Jesus, who dealt with our sin, and empowers us to live and speak righteously!

1 Peter 2:22-25

²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been

healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Christ never sinned with his lips.

- He died for those who have.
- He took our punishment.
- And now we are empowered to “live to righteousness.”
- We must continue in the Word daily to see him, to know His love, and to live in his power.
- We must continue in the Word and hear the **sweet words of the gospel**: “It is finished!” “He delivered you from the dominion of darkness, and transferred you into the kingdom of his beloved Son.”

If you're not a Christian, that's the appeal: trust in Jesus for forgiveness and transformation.

- Look to the one who took our place.
- He died for gossips, liars, slanderers, haters, deceivers like us.
- He changes us from the inside out!

#2: Give constant attention to your heart

We live and speak out of the overflow of our hearts.

- Don't let bitterness and jealousy fester!
 - **4:1-3** – “cravings underlie conflicts”
- Cultivate peace, gentleness, and mercy.
- **Some heart questions: What do you idolize? What do you covet? Do you have selfish ambition in the heart?**
- You must deal with your heart daily. (
 - We will deal with this more next week: **3:13-4:3**
 - **To deal with the heart means uprooting sinful beliefs and desires, and replacing them with godly beliefs and desires.**
 - **You must uproot anger, lust, envy, and replace it with the fruit of the Spirit.**
- Pray about these things.
- Seek God's cleansing grace daily.
- **4:10**: It is by humbling ourselves under God's mighty hand constantly, do God's people use their words in a way that blesses others and glorifies God.

#3: Press on to the end with assurance, hope, and anticipation of the day in which we will never sin with our lips.

- Job 1:22, **2:10**: “Job did not sin with his lips.”
- Job endured much.
- **James 5:11** – Learn from Job's perseverance.
- Press on in faithfulness.
- **Press on knowing that you are secure in God's love.**

- Believe that the Father loves his children even when we sin miserably with our words.
 - Allow that love to transform your heart so that it transforms your speech.
- **1 John 3:1-3** – His children will see Jesus, and we will be like him!
 - We will not sin with our lips.

We look to Jesus for grace now.

We look forward to the future when we will no longer sin with our lips.

4. E'er since, by faith, I saw the stream
thy flowing wounds supply,
redeeming love has been my theme,
and shall be till I die.
And shall be till I die,
and shall be till I die;
redeeming love has been my theme,
and shall be till I die.

5. Then in a nobler, sweeter song,
I'll sing thy power to save,
when this poor lisping, stammering tongue
lies silent in the grave.
Lies silent in the grave,
lies silent in the grave;
when this poor lisping, stammering tongue
lies silent in the grave.

By God's grace let's resolve use our tongue for God's glory – until we see Jesus and he makes all things new.