

“TAMING THE TONGUE”

James 3:1-12

Your words carry immense power. They can build up or tear down. They can encourage or discourage. They can speak life or death. The Bible contains sober warnings about the use of our tongue. Jesus said:

Matthew 12:34–37... “You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. **35** “The good man brings out of *his* good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of *his* evil treasure what is evil. **36** “But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. **37** “For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Most of us grew up hearing this—**“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will**

never hurt me.” That’s flat out wrong. Words can wound us deeply or they can bless us greatly! It all depends on what we say and how we say it.

An elderly couple was sitting by the table after dinner. The man looked at his wife and had one of those nostalgic, romantic thoughts. He said, “After 55 years, I’ve found you tried and true.” His wife’s hearing wasn’t so good, so she asked, “What did you say?” He repeated, “After 50 years, I’ve found you tried and true.” She snapped back, “After 50 years, I’m tired of you too.”

James emphasized how faith should work in the lives of true believers. He started with the tongue. In chapter 1, he wrote . . .

James 1:19,26... *This* you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak *and* slow to anger; **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.

James comes back to this issue multiple times. He warns . . .

- **against slandering (4:11)**
- **against empty boasting (4:13)**
- **against grumbling (5:9).**

I think it's safe to say. The most dangerous animal in the world has its den behind your teeth. Here's the truth that captures the essence of our text today . . .

WHAT YOU SAY MATTERS TO GOD!

Because taming the tongue is such an important issue, James wanted the believers to know what they are up against. First, he pointed to . . .

1. THE DOMINANCE OF THE TONGUE

The first century church was built upon the tradition of the Synagogue. In that tradition, teachers were highly respected and honored. Evidently a great number of those early Christians were striving to

become teachers in their local assemblies. So, James wrote . . .

James 3:1–2... Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. 2 For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.

There was a need for caution. The pastors and the people who teach the Word of God are accountable to the Lord for what they teach. Therefore, they must teach the truth, and they must practice what they teach. The dominance of the tongue and the weakness of one's theology can wreak havoc in the church!

In verse 2, we see the power and dominance of the tongue. Every Christian must admit that “we all stumble in many ways.” Sins of the tongue seem to head the list.

Isaiah 6:5... Then I said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.”

Psalms 106:33... Because they were rebellious against His Spirit, He (Moses) spoke rashly with his lips.

There is a need for control. The tongue is the barometer of the soul and of Christian maturity. The word “perfect” carries the idea of full grown, spiritually mature person. Obviously, this is crucial for the pastors and teachers, but it is also important for the members of the Body of Christ! This issue of controlling the tongue is illustrated by James when he wrote . . .

James 3:3–4... Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. 4 Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.

A small bit enables the rider to *control* a powerful horse, and a small rudder enables the pilot to steer a huge ship. Both the bit and the rudder must overcome contrary forces. The bit must overcome the wild nature of the horse, and the rudder must fight the winds and currents that would drive the ship off its course. Sin on the inside and pressures on the outside are seeking to get control of your tongue. Is your tongue under control? I must remind you . . .

WHAT YOU SAY MATTERS TO GOD!

Because taming the tongue is such an important issue, James wanted the believers to know what they are up against. First, he pointed to the dominance of the tongue. Now, let's look at . . .

2. THE DANGER OF THE TONGUE

The words we speak have the power to affect the lives of others. Your words can become a dagger

that damages others or it can become an instrument that inspires others. The danger of the tongue becomes evident as we size up the next illustration James uses . . .

James 3:5–8... So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. 7 For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. 8 But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

Dr. Rogers said, ***“We need to be careful how we use our tongue because it is like a torch.”*** James emphasizes how a tiny spark can ignite a massive forest fire.

Proverbs 16:27... A worthless man digs up evil, while his words are like scorching fire.

Proverbs 18:21... Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

Every time I read verse 5 I think of Hitler. It's been said that for every word in Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*, 125 lives were lost in World War II. Our own words may not have caused wars or wrecked cities, but they can break hearts and ruin reputations. They can also destroy souls by sending them into eternity without Christ. ¹ Just look at James' description of the tongue. He points out how . . .

(6) decadent it is— “*the world of iniquity*”

(6) defiling it is— “*defiles the entire body*”

(6) destructive it is— “*sets on fire the course of our life*”

¹Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, "An Exposition of the New Testament Comprising the Entire 'BE' Series"--Jkt. (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996, c1989), Jas 3:5.

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(6) devilish it is— “*set on fire by hell*”

(8) deceitful it is— “*it is a restless evil*”

(8) deadly it is— “*it is full of deadly poison*”

No wonder the Scriptures speak so frequently about the tongue . . .

Psalm 141:3...Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips.

Ephesians 4:29... Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

You and I must remember the driving message of this text . . .

WHAT YOU SAY MATTERS TO GOD!

Because taming the tongue is such an important issue, James wanted the believers to know what they are up against. First, he pointed to *the dominance of the tongue*. Secondly, he dealt with *the danger of the tongue*. Finally, let's take an honest look at . . .

3. THE DUPLICITY OF THE TONGUE

James reproves believers. I'm sure many of them loved the Lord, but they were inconsistent in what they said. Hear the Word of God . . .

James 3:9–12... With it we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; 10 from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. 11 Does a fountain send out from the same opening *both* fresh and bitter *water*? 12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor *can* salt water produce fresh.

When you go to a doctor, the nurse will come in with a thermometer and tell you to place it under your tongue. You see the tongue reveals a great deal about your physical health. However, James wants us to understand that the tongue also reveals a great deal about our spiritual life.

Once again, he employs some basic illustrations from nature to make his point crystal clear. God forbid that we worship the Lord this morning and then go out and criticize our spouses, our parents, our fellow church members, our fellow workers, or our teammates.

James uses rhetorical questions to drive home the message. He uses two of them in verses 11-12. The expected answer to these questions is “NO.” Do you love the Lord? Okay, let it be shown in your speech. Jesus said . . .

Matthew 15:18... “But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man.”

What you say reveals what's in your heart. Let's be consistent!

CONCLUSION

Be honest with yourself. What does your tongue reveal about your heart today?

Your speech is characterized by filthy language or gossip or criticism on a consistent basis. Does this not reveal that you need to be saved? Won't you use your tongue to call upon Jesus out of a heart of repentance and saving faith? Acknowledge Him as the Lord of your life . . .

Romans 10:9–10... that if you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; **10** for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

Maybe your speech reveals that you are a believer whose tongue is out of control. You need to tame it

but you can't. Is this not an indication that you need to be filled with Holy Spirit? Listen to the words of Paul . . .

Ephesians 5:18–20... And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, **19** speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; **20** always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father;

Colossians 3:15–17... Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. **16** Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. **17** Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

You can't tame your tongue, but the Lord can! Oh what a blessing your speech can be to your family

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and your friends and your fellow church members!

Don't forget . . .

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