

The Tongue is a Fire
James 3:1-12
ABC 6/16/19

Reader's Digest tells of a catering manager planning a party for a young couple & their new baby. The manager didn't know a lot of details, but as she met with the young couple in person, she thought she would pay a compliment to the mother when she 1st saw her: *You look like you've lost most of your pregnancy weight.*

Thanks, came the grim-faced reply. *We adopted.*¹

As James says, **we all stumble in many ways** in what we say.

Maybe you've heard about the young man working at the grocery store in the produce section. His 1st day on the job an elderly woman came to him & said she wanted to buy ½ a head of lettuce. He tried to dissuade her, explaining he wasn't allowed to cut produce in half, it was all or nothing, but she persisted. Finally, he told her, *I'll have to go to the back & talk to the manager.* He went to the rear of the store to talk to the manager & didn't notice the woman was right behind him. He got to the back & said to the manager, *There's a stupid old lady who wants to buy ½ a head of lettuce. What should I tell her?* Seeing the horrified face of the manager & then turning to see the woman behind him, he quickly added, *& this nice lady wants to buy the other ½ of the head of lettuce. Will that be alright?* Considerably relieved, the manager said, *That will be fine.*

Later in the day he congratulated the boy on his quick thinking. He asked the new employee, *Where are you from?* The boy replied, *I'm from Toronto, Canada, home of beautiful hockey players & ugly women.* The manager looked at him & said, *My wife is from Toronto.* The boy replied without missing a beat, *Oh, what team does she play for?*²

We could all give examples from our own mouths & the trouble they've got us into, proving what James will tell us this morning in 3:1-12. This section has no shortage of illustrations, examples, & metaphors of the universal problem of foot-in-mouth disease. We may chuckle when someone else puts his foot in his mouth, but when we do it, it's not nearly as funny. It has well been said, *As you go through life you are going to have many opportunities to keep your mouth shut. Take advantage of all of them.*³ It's also been said, *It takes 2 years to learn to talk & 60 years to learn to keep quiet.*⁴ Sinful speech is addressed in all 5 chapters of this letter, but chpt 3 is the most concentrated teaching in the entire Bible. The end of James 2 has been emphasizing that words aren't enough; there must be works to go along with them (2:14-17). But words aren't unimportant. In fact, both words & works are evidence of where the heart is. When genuine faith is present, it results in a transformed life. One proof is transformed speech. James has already told us, **If anyone thinks**

¹ June, 2005, p 67

² *Taming the Tongue*, sermon by Steve Hereford, 2/14/1999

³ James Dent, www.appleseeds.org/March_13.htm

⁴ unknown

himself to be religious, & yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless (1:26). If God has changed your heart through the new birth, the saving faith He granted you will show itself in a life of good deeds. But now he moves from the generality of good deeds to the specifics of the words you speak. Genuine faith produces good works even in our speech.

Paul, In building his case that all have sinned, zeroes in on the sins of the tongue. **Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips; Whose mouth is full of cursing & bitterness...** (Rom 3:13-14). It would be nice if our salvation resulted in a total makeover of our mouths, but it's not that easy. Although we become new creatures in Christ (2 Cor 5:17), we still carry with us the old nature or the flesh, which wars against the Spirit (Gal 5:17). The tongue is one of the major battlegrounds in this war. To become godly people, we must fight daily to use our tongue for good & not evil. We all tend to justify ourselves by comparing ourselves with those who are worse than we are. *In comparison with how they talk, I'm doing OK.* But James insists we open our eyes to just how serious our problem is. It's interesting he doesn't give advice on how to control the tongue here. He just leaves us reeling from his portrait of how huge the problem is. **3:1-12** PRAY

James give us at least 4 truths we must recognize before we can begin to control our tongues & use them for good & God's glory.

1. We're Accountable for What We Say (1-2). If you were to list the top 3 most dangerous occupations you might think of soldiers, loggers, & firemen. But spiritually speaking, James wants us to see the ones in the most danger are those speaking before others as teachers. A Bible teacher's words can do tremendous good or terrible evil & there's stricter judgment by God because of it. It appears the Jewish Christian communities James is writing to had some who were self-appointed teachers. In the Jewish synagogues, rabbis were highly respected & the office was often one that parents coveted for their sons. It was proper to respect the rabbis because of the sacred Scriptures they expounded, but it was wrong to give men the honor that God alone deserves. Jesus confronted the Jewish leaders on this account:

They love the place of honor at banquets & the chief seats in the synagogues, & respectful greetings in the market places, & being called Rabbi by men. But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, & you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant (Mt 23:6-11).

There's often an inherent prestige in becoming a teacher, because, presumably, you know more than those you teach. This means, in some way, they should look up to you. Because of this, there's the danger that some will take upon themselves the office of teacher for the wrong reasons or because of pride. James' point is that no one should take the role of teacher unless God has called them to it, because teachers will incur a stricter judgment. Those who teach God's Word will be more accountable, because our words affect more people. Any time we teach, we should keep in mind the serious fact that we'll stand before the Lord to give an account. Vs 2 further explains vs 1. James includes himself when he says, **For we all stumble in many ways**. We're all prone to sins of the tongue. If you say you're without sin you are a liar (1 Jn 1:8). Teachers talk more & the tongue is hard to control. Thus they expose themselves for greater judgment. We all sin with our speech but the more we talk the more likely we are to sin & the more people we talk to, the more trouble we get in. James then zeroes in saying, **2b**.

Perfect doesn't mean sinless but *mature*. We can never achieve sinless perfection in this life, but we can grow in our spiritual maturity. One important gauge of that is our speech. One way to tame the tongue is to recognize we'll all be held accountable for our speech (Mt 12:36-37). Our speech either validates that we're true believers or reveal that we do not know God. If we sin with our speech, we need to ask God's forgiveness & the forgiveness of those we sinned against. Genuine believers have this sense of being accountable for their words, all their words. This includes what's never verbalized. Actual speech is a small % of our words. We can't think without formulating our thoughts into words. We can't imagine without painting a word-picture in our minds. Our speech problem goes deeper than just our tongue. It goes to our heart & mind.

2. Recognize the Tongue's Power for Good or for Evil (3-5a). James uses 2 analogies here to make the point that the tongue is small but mighty: the bit & the rudder. A bit is a relatively small piece of metal, but when you put it into a horse's mouth you can control it completely. We must learn to

say *whoa* to our words before we speak them too hastily. The horse doesn't bridle itself though & no human can tame his wild tongue by mere human effort & natural power. It's only by God's power that the wild mustang of our mouth can be broken & bridled. We must tame, restrain, & rein back our voice or it can do more damage than a bucking bronco. A wild horse broken & brought under control has great usefulness, but an untamed tongue is like a runaway stallion. You must *hold your horses* when it comes to your speech.

The same thing is true of a ship's rudder. It's relatively small compared to the size of the ship, but with his hand on the wheel or tiller, the pilot can maneuver a mammoth ship, even in strong winds. The Queen Elizabeth weighed 83,673 gross tons. The rudder of that ship weighed less than 1/5th of 1% of the total. Yet when the rudder turned, it controlled the direction of the ship. It seems incredible that a man can control so vast a vessel with such a relatively small device; yet this is exactly what happens.⁵ We should never misjudge the power of the tongue because it's so small. In WWII the phrase, *Loose lips sink ships*, was a frequent reminder of the power of the tongue. In the church, loose lips shoot down individuals & destroy relationships. One tongue can shipwreck a church. Don't underestimate your tongue. If you do, you won't be able to tame it. James' point of comparison here isn't so much the matter of control (the tongue doesn't really control the body), but of the disproportionate influence of such a small part. **So also the tongue is a small part of the body, & yet it boasts of great things** (5a). James is telling us not to underestimate the power of the tongue. There may also be a comparison in the sense of influencing direction. If you control your tongue, it can direct your whole life into what's acceptable in God's sight. If you don't control your tongue, it'll get you into great trouble! *The control of the tongue is more than an evidence of spiritual maturity; it is the means to it.*⁶

To work properly & accomplish good things, both bit & rudder must be under the control of a hand that knows how to use them. In the same way, the tongue must overcome the force of the flesh & be under God's control if it's to accomplish anything good. James is steeped in the OT & it has a

⁵ W. MacDonald & A Farstad, *Believer's Bible Commentary*

⁶ J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, p 121

lot to say about the power of the tongue, for good or for evil. Prov 12:18 tells us, **There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.** Imagine all of us were carrying into church today an unsheathed, razor-sharp, 2-edged sword. It would be a miracle if we got through the morning without someone getting injured! The fact is we all have this sword built into our mouths! We should use them with the greatest of care to bring healing not hurting. Proverbs has many other references to the tongue. For example, **Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul & healing to the bones** (16:24). If we'd all read Proverbs frequently & pay attention to its wisdom, we'd be a source of sweetness & healing in our homes, schools, neighborhoods, community, & church. James wants us to recognize that we'll be held accountable for how we use our tongues, especially those of us who teach God's Word. He wants us to recognize the power of the tongue, either for good or for evil, so that we use it carefully & wisely. But he also says...

3. The Tongue is Untamable (5b-8). James uses 2 more word pictures for comparison & contrast: a forest fire & tamed animals. We're all aware of the potential danger & damage of forest fires. All it takes is one spark or lightening bolt & thousands of acres can be destroyed. Under control, fire is useful; out of control, it's frightening & devastating! Fire has the amazing capacity to reproduce itself in an almost unlimited way as long as it has fuel to burn. If there's sufficient flammable material & enough oxygen to sustain combustion, it will burn on indefinitely. On October 8, 1871, at about 8:30 pm, a lantern in Mrs O'Leary's barn, presumably kicked over by her cow, ignited the great Chicago fire. Before it could be contained, 17,500 buildings were destroyed, 125,000 were left homeless, & some 250 people died.⁷ But that wasn't the worst fire that day. In the Wisconsin country-side a fire burned at the same time that left more than 1500 dead, the most fatalities by fire in US history. The Great Peshtigo fire burned 2 towns completely & scorched 400 sq miles of forest. It was reported that...

...a convection column, a whirling chimney of superheated air generated by the fire suddenly broke through the blanket of heavier, smoke-laden air into the colder air above, thus creating a huge updraft that led to a fire tornado & whirlwinds of unimaginable proportions & temperatures.

⁷ John MacArthur, *James*, pp 154-155

An eyewitness said, *The menacing crimson reflection on the western sky was rapidly increasing in size & in intensity; in the midst of the unnatural calm & silence reigning around, the strange & terrible noise of fire, strange & unknown thunderous voice of nature. The wind was a forerunner of the tempest, increasing in violence, sweeping planks, gate & fencing away into space.*⁸

James states clearly, **6**.

Scholars debate as to how to translate & punctuate this vs. However it's done, the point is clear: the tongue is a deadly, powerful source of evil. If we don't use our tongues with great caution, we're like spiritual arsonists, lighting careless fires that cause widespread destruction. James says the one who is careless with his tongue is the 1st to be defiled. An unchecked tongue is **the very world of iniquity... which defiles the entire body**. This goes back to 1:26-27, where James said true religion requires bridling the tongue & keeping oneself unstained by the world. Like a spark that lights a bigger fire, the tongue not only defiles us, but also **sets on fire the course of our life**. If you have a careless tongue it damages your entire life. James then goes a step further & identifies the ultimate source of the problem, **& is set on fire by hell**. Hell translates the Greek *gehenna*, which is a transliteration of 2 Hebrew words meaning, *Valley of Hinnom*. This valley, just outside Jerusalem's walls, was where the Jewish worshipers of Molech burned their children as sacrifices to appease this pagan idol (Jer 32:35). It later became a place to burn trash. The only other NT use is by Jesus (11x) to refer to the place of eternal torment. James means that an evil tongue is set on fire by Satan himself. We all would shrink back from sins like child-abuse & murder as being satanically depraved. Yet many of us tolerate gossip, slander, deceit, half-truths, sarcastic put-downs, cutting remarks, & other sins of the tongue as if they were no big deal. James says all such sins have their origin in the pit of hell. They defile the one committing them & destroy others. As a believer in Christ, you must confront these sins head on.

James goes on to use an analogy from the animal world. We've all seen trained whales, dolphins, seals, elephants, lions, tigers, & bears (oh my!). But James says there's one beast that cannot be tamed: the human tongue. He says, **it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison**. Being **restless** means there's never a time when it sleeps. You must always be on guard against it. Being **full of deadly**

⁸ <https://shepherdexpress.com/around-milwaukee/great-peshtigo-fire/>

poison, you should handle it as cautiously as you would a vial of anthrax. Like venom on the tip of an arrow are words on the tip of the tongue. Men can tame cobras to dance to a flute, but men cannot tame the deadly snake in their mouth that can harm & kill from an even greater distance. Note that James doesn't say the tongue is untamable. He says **no one** can tame it. It's humanly untamable. Only God can tame it. James doesn't state that because he wants us to get a clear view of the horrible monster that we must battle with. When the Holy Spirit controls your heart on a daily basis, over time the fruit of the Spirit will appear. These include love, patience, kindness, gentleness, & self-control, which all relate to the control of the tongue. To tame the tongue, you must daily walk in the Spirit, taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. Ultimately, an evil tongue is the tool of an evil heart, which is James' final point.

4. The Tongue's Inconsistencies are Rooted in its Source (9-12). James points out a contradiction that he no doubt had seen in himself & others. We can say, *Praise the Lord* in one breath & in the next say evil things about someone who's made in the likeness of God. We sit in church singing hymns to God & no sooner get out the door than we whisper, *Did you see so-&-so? She makes me sick! She's such a hypocrite. Do you know what she did?* James gets very direct, **My brethren, these things ought not to be this way** (10b). Then he points out that what often happens among Christians is contrary to all of nature. The same spring does not & cannot send out fresh water one minute & bitter water the next. He then asks rhetorically, **Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh** (12). The solution to a bad apple tree isn't to take a bucket of good apples & a nail gun & attach the stems of some good apples to the branches. That might look good from a distance but it hasn't addressed the fundamental problem. We can't dress up the outside with artificial fruit & not deal with the root. Neither will sheer will power or behavior modification do anything for us in the long run if there's no inner spiritual change. What's going to happen to those apples? They're going to rot because they aren't attached to the life-giving resources of the tree. More importantly, what kind of apples is that tree going to grow the next year? Nothing good because there's been no organic change in the tree. I'm convinced that much of what we do in an attempt to change our speech is nothing more than apple

nailing. Our problem isn't people, situations, or circumstances. Our problem is our heart. James' point is the same as Jesus in Mt 12:34, **You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.** Jesus also said, **But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, & those defile the man** (Mt 15:18). The mouth is simply the vehicle that vents what's in the heart. If there's bitterness in the heart, there will be bitterness pouring from the mouth. If there's a critical spirit in the heart, there'll be critical words bursting forth from the mouth. That's why Prov 4:23 exhorts us, **Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.** How is it that our mouths can bless God in prayer & seconds later we use that same mouth to crucify someone? How can we be singing thanks to God for the family of God on Sunday, but at home we express anything but appreciation for our earthly family all week long? The same mouths that sing *Holy, holy, holy*, are unholy. Have you ever thought about how terribly embarrassing life would be if there were an open line between your thoughts & your mouth so you blurted out whatever you were thinking? Instead of your polite, *I'm pleased to meet you*, you'd say, *I don't care who you are!* After listening to someone drone on about something, instead of, *That's very interesting*, you blurt out, *How can I get away from this boring buffoon?* I'm not suggesting we should abandon politeness & become brutally blunt. No, I'm pointing out that even if you control your tongue, you still have a heart problem. If you want to tame the tongue, the place to start is with your heart. Work daily at taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor 10:5). Walk daily under the control of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:18). Renew your mind with Scripture (Rom 12:1-2; Ps 119:11). Meditate on Eph 4:29. **Let no unwholesome (rotten) word proceed from you 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.** Does your speech give grace to those who hear you? James isn't trying to beat us up for being imperfect, but he wants us to see how inconsistent it is for a Christian to be this way. James wants us to see our hypocrisy so we will come to the Savior whose grace & power helps us as repentant sinners. But we need to see the source of what comes out of us, our own heart.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin has lectured on the powerful & often negative impact of words. He asks audiences if they can go for 24 hours without saying any unkind words about, or to, anybody.

He says, *Invariably, a minority of listeners raise their hands signifying 'yes,' some laugh, & quite a large number call out, 'no!'* He responds, *Those who can't answer 'yes' must recognize that you have a serious problem... If you cannot go for 24 hours without saying unkind words about others, then you have lost control over your tongue.*

He encourages his audiences to monitor their conversations for 2 days. *Note on a piece of paper every time you say something negative about someone who is not present. Also record when others do so, as well as your reactions when that happens. Do you try to silence the speaker, or do you ask for more details?* He adds, *To ensure the test's accuracy, make no effort to change the content of your conversations throughout the 2-day period, & do not try to be kinder than usual in assessing another's character & actions.* He states, *Most of us who take this test are unpleasantly surprised.*⁹

That may not be a bad idea for us to try. But why doesn't James give us any helpful tips on how to control our tongue? Maybe it's because most of us are in denial about the magnitude of our problem. The 1st step to dealing with the problem is to acknowledge we have a problem. To realize we have a tool of Satan in our own mouths. How's that for an encouraging end to a sermon? But there's actually an encouraging note in the images James uses. His illustrations show us our hopelessness but each also has hope. What do I mean?

The tongue cannot be tamed by the human race, but as Jesus said, what's impossible with man is possible with God (Mk 10:27).

The horse cannot bridle itself but its Master can.

The ship cannot steer itself through stormy seas but the Captain can, & Jesus is the Captain & anchor of our soul (Heb 6:19).

The fire that burns from hell can be overcome by a greater power from heaven, transforming the tongues of sinful men.

Remember Peter? He had a fiery tongue that caused him trouble. Jesus even once said to him, **Get behind Me, Satan** (Mt 16:23)! But on the day of Pentecost, another fire from heaven came down like tongues of fire, & settled above him & the others. Peter went out & preached the gospel with the Holy Spirit's power. For Peter, a charter-member of the foot-in-mouth club, the right kind of fiery tongue now empowered him to preach the gospel powerfully & to start a blaze that would eventually set the world on fire.

⁹ *Imprimus*, 1/96, pp 1-2

For every one of us there is healing in sincerely & humbly confessing our sin to those we sin against & to God. *I was wrong to speak that way. That was sin, & by God's grace I have repented to God but I'm also sorry for any hurt or pain I caused you. Will you please forgive me?* Lehman Strauss considers J's 3 *to be a key to the solution of most of the ills in church life today.*¹⁰ I'd agree & add that it's a key to most of the problems in our homes today as well. It's fire season. Things are tinder dry not only outside but also in your family & your church. Your tongue is a fire. Be careful. Ask God often to tame your tongue & use it for all our good & for God's own glory. Don't be content with external religiosity in an unchanged heart. Don't just try to speak less or less quickly (although that's a good start). Take your sinful thoughts captive & be transforming them by renewing your mind in God's Word. Ps 19:14 says, **Let the words of my mouth & the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock & my Redeemer.** Ps 141:3 tells us, **Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips & guard our hearts (Prov 4:23) as well as our lips.**

Fresh water will never come out of a salty ocean (12b). If a fountain or faucet puts out bitter water (11), the solution isn't to go the store & buy a new faucet. Why? The water coming through the pipes to the faucet isn't bitter because of its spout but because of its source. What is filling the source will determine what comes out in the mouth. Eph 5:18-20 tells us to **be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms & hymns & spiritual songs, singing & making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God. & Col 3:16-17 tells us, Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching & admonishing one another with psalms & hymns & spiritual songs (if they fill your heart they will come out your lips), singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. Is Ps 71:8 your prayer? Let my mouth be filled with Your praise & with Your glory all the day (NKJV).** May God in His amazing grace be kind enough to transform our hearts more by the renewing of our thinking more, enabling us to guard our hearts more so that we can guard our lips more, that we would be

¹⁰ James Your Brother, p 120

filled with His Spirit more & have His Word dwell more richly within us so our heart meditations & words of our mouth would be more pleasing in His sight, giving more grace to others, giving God more glory, & giving us more joy in Christ. PRAY