

Taming the Tongue: James 3:3-12
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We all know the feeling—the feeling of wanting to take back something you just said. Sometimes the feeling comes upon us immediately, sometimes it's days or weeks or even years later. But we all have said things—many things—that we wish we had not said. And if we could rewind time we would erase those words. We would have said it differently, or in most cases, not at all. There are certainly times when our words simply make us sound stupid. And when we realize how stupid we sounded, we're embarrassed. But the problem is much worse than that. Because our words not only reveal our ignorance, but our words reveal the much more serious and pervasive problem, which is our sin. If you're not convinced that you're a sinner, just think about your words. Just rehearse in your mind some of the things you have said in the past week—words you spoke to your spouse, or to your children, to co-workers and friends, even words that nobody else heard, that you just mumbled under your breath or in solitude. What do your words reveal about you? What if we had this morning a recording of every word you have spoken in the past month, and we were to play that recording for all of us to hear? That's a scary thought, isn't it? Each and every one of us would be ashamed, embarrassed, convicted. It would be plain to all that *I am a sinner!*

Even more terrifying than the thought of broadcasting to the world a recording of all your words is the reality that on the last day God will judge us according to our words. Listen to what Jesus said to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:36-37, "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." That is far more frightening because it's not just an issue of embarrassment, but an issue of our eternal destiny. And, just to be clear, Jesus is not saying here that we attain salvation by our words. The word justified is used in that verse the same way James uses the word in James 2 (which we looked at a couple weeks ago). It means that our words will demonstrate the condition of our hearts. The actions of our lives, and the words that we have spoken, will be clear evidence either that we have been changed by the power of the Gospel, or that we have not have been changed. Jesus said a couple verses earlier (in Matthew 12:33, and we'll come back to this at the end of this message), that "the tree is known by its fruit." The words that come out of our mouths are a very telling fruit, and they show the nature of our hearts. If our words are being sanctified by the

power of the Spirit, then it's evident that God is at work within us. But if our words are not in the process of becoming more holy, then it will be clear on the last day that we were never truly born again.

That's one of the main things I want us to understand this morning, and I think it's communicated very clearly toward the end of our passage. We're in James 3:1-12, which is a passage about taming the tongue. Last week we studied the first two verses, and we saw the warning to teachers in the first verse. This week we'll look at the remaining verses in this section, which contain some very vivid illustrations and statements about the tongue. I'll divide these verses into 4 pieces, making the following points: First, the tongue is small but powerful (verses 3-5a). Next, the tongue is a fire (verses 5b-6). Third, no human being can tame the tongue (verses 7-8). And finally, a double-tongue is evidence of a divided heart (verses 9-12), which will bring us back again to Jesus' words in Matthew 12.

The Tongue is Small but Powerful (verses 3-5a)

The first thing we see, in the illustrations of verses 3-5a, is that the tongue is small but powerful. As children we learned this little saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." And when we didn't have a good comeback—when we couldn't think of something hurtful to say back to the person who just hurt us—then we would say these words as way to save face. But again and again our experience has proved the error of that statement. Instead we should say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but hurtful words will break my heart." Indeed, broken bones heal much more quickly than the wounds inflicted by words. Those wounds can be with us for a lifetime.

What James writes in these verses shows us something very remarkable about our lives. Among the various members of our bodies, we each have this one very small member called the tongue. And the tongue is powerful far beyond it's size.

James, as you know, is a wonderful teacher. One of the things we see throughout this letter is the use of very helpful illustrations. He takes things that might be difficult to understand, and he uses concrete illustrations to help us grasp them. Here he has just made the point in verse 2 that the person who does not stumble in what he says is a perfect man and is able also to bridle his whole body. The tongue is such a significant part of who we are, and it is such a clear measure of our spiritual maturity, that it can be said that the person who has perfect speech will be perfect in every other way as well. If you can bridle this one small member of your body, you will be able to bridle everything else,

too. And now this idea of bridling the whole body he illustrates with the image of bridling a horse. It's only a small bit that has to be put into the mouth of horse, and then the horse obeys us. We can guide the whole horse with just a small bit. Isn't that an amazing thing! A huge horse, with the ability to use its strength in very productive ways or in very destructive ways, and yet if you control the bit then you control the horse. In the same way, if we could control the tongue, small as it is, we would be able to harness the whole body.

Do you see the connections between verse 2 and verse 3? There's the connection between the word "bridle" in verse 2 and "bit" in verse 3. And also the phrase, the "whole body," is found in each verse. In verse 2, the perfect man is able also to bridle his whole body. And then in verse 3, "If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well." So it seems that the comparison is meant to show that the tongue, though small, sets the course for a person's life. Just as the horse's whole body will be guided by the bit in its mouth, so also the course of our lives will be guided by the tongue. That is the power and the significance of the tongue. It is small but very powerful.

The next illustration is that of a ship and its rudder. The point is the same, but it gives us a new picture of how such a small thing can set the direction for something so large. The rudder of a ship is small in comparison to the rest of the ship. Look at how James describes the ships: "though they are so large and are driven by strong winds . . ." Think of a massive ship in the midst of a tumultuous storm, and think of the immense power needed to direct that ship. But James says, "they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs." The rudder is very small, but it is powerful enough to set the course for a large ship even as it is driven by strong winds.

The beginning of verse 5, then, tells us explicitly how these illustrations relate to the tongue. "So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things." This is the only place in the New Testament where this particular word for "boast" appears. James condemns boasting in 4:16, "As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." But the word in James 3:5 seems to be making a more neutral point—simply that the tongue is powerful far beyond its size. And if anyone is able to bridle the tongue, he will be able to bridle the whole body as well. This is the tongue's great boast. It is small but powerful. It will determine the course of your life. And it will be a clear evidence of the course your life has taken. It will show whether your faith is a dead faith or a working faith, to put it in the language of James 2.

The Tongue is a Fire (verses 5b-6)

The second half of verse 5 moves to a new illustration, and in verses 5b-6 James makes the point that the tongue is a fire. The statement in 5b is similar to the previous illustrations in that it shows how something small can have big effects. “How *great* a forest is set ablaze by such a *small* fire!” But James is now introducing a new point. The previous illustrations emphasized generally the power of the tongue, but now James will focus on the *destructive* power of the tongue. And what better image to evoke in our minds than a raging wildfire? The small spark of our words has the potential to cause vast devastation. Just like the person who lights a match in the woods, not intended to start a forest fire but just to start a small campfire, but then the fire spreads and engulfs thousands of acres. Our words can do the same thing.

Think about how this can happen, and *does* happen so often. A few words of gossip, which you thought were so innocent, are repeated to person after person. And eventually the information becomes so misleading that relationships are damaged and reputations are maligned. Or think of quarrelsome words and how quickly a small squabble can turn into a war. How many marriages have ended in divorce because of seemingly minor quarrels? Words of complaint and criticism, which can be so much more contagious than words of gratefulness and encouragement. Critical remarks and complaining can do so much damage as it infects those around us. Finally, think of impure speech and how it degrades our minds and our souls. The coarse joking that is carried along the radio waves and fills the TV screens and then becomes the substance of so many conversations—it is a wildfire of destruction, drawing our attention away from God to be amused by perverted things.

In Proverbs there are similar descriptions of the destructive power of words. Proverbs 16:27 says, “A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire.” And Proverbs 26:20-21, “For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases. As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.” The fire of our words is a very destructive force. And the more words we heap upon the flames, the greater the destruction. It’s like pouring gasoline on a bonfire.

Look at what happens in James 3:6. Up to this point he has been teaching us with illustrations. The tongue is like a bit in the mouth of a horse. The tongue is like the rudder of a ship. The tongue is like a small fire that can set ablaze a great forest. But do you see what is different about the statement in verse 6? He writes, “And the tongue *is* a fire . . .” His comparison becomes

more direct. The tongue *is* a fire. It is an evil fire burning within our souls. Look at how James describes it. There are four parts.

First of all, it is a world of unrighteousness. We have within us, within our mouths, a world of unrighteousness. The fallen nature of this world, the unrighteousness that has affected everything in the world, it has taken up residence in the tongue. John Calvin wrote, “a slender portion of flesh contains the whole world of iniquity” (quoted in Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*). The tongue is depraved, fallen, sinful.

Secondly, “the tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body.” This world of unrighteousness that resides in the tongue, even though the tongue is only one member among many, it can stain the whole body. Jesus taught this same thing when He said, “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person” (Matthew 15:11). And then He explains further, “Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (verses 17-19). You see, the words that we speak arise from what’s in our hearts. And as James is teaching us about the destructive nature of the tongue, he shows us that our sinful words, which arise from sinful hearts, will defile us and stain us. Again we see this phrase, “the whole body,” and we’re reminded of how powerful the tongue is. It’s a small member, but it can stain the whole body.

Thirdly, it sets on fire the entire course of life. The statements in this verse could not be any stronger. James piles these descriptions upon each other—these vivid descriptions of how destructive the tongue can be. The destruction is pervasive and far-reaching. It stains the whole body, and it is a fire that sets on fire the entire course of life.

And then fourthly, the last statement in verse 6 says that the tongue is set on fire by hell. The fire of the tongue is the fire that comes straight from hell. The uncontrolled tongue is something Satan uses as a destructive weapon. He is the father of lies, and he uses sinful and deceptive speech to spread his lies. Listen to these things that Jesus said to the religious people of His day. James would surely say that these folks had a dead faith, an empty faith, a useless faith. They were very religious. They knew a lot about the Scriptures. They kept a lot of rules. It even says in John 8 that they had believed in Jesus. But based on what Jesus says to them, it’s clear that their hearts had not been changed. This is what Jesus said to them in John 8:43-44, “Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of

your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father lies." This reminds us of those deceptive words which the Serpent spoke to Eve—words filled with lies. Words filled with evil intent. Words straight from the pit of hell. And Satan continues to use untruthful, unholy words in order to promote his evil plans.

These four statements in verse 6 describe the destructive power of the tongue as we learn that the tongue is a fire.

No Human Being can Tame the Tongue (verses 7-8)

The next point, which we see in verses 7-8, is that no human being can tame the tongue. "For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." As I was outlining this message I had first summarized verses 7-8 as "The tongue cannot be tamed." But that's not quite right. It doesn't say the tongue cannot be tamed. It says no human being can tame the tongue. And we'll learn in the following verses that the person who has been changed by God will produce new fruit. And one of the fruit will be a sanctified tongue. So the point is not that the tongue cannot be tamed. But, rather, no human being can tame the tongue.

We see again in these verses the continued theme that the tongue is small but powerful. We think of how amazing it is that people can tame large animals. All kinds of animals are tamed and taught to do various tasks. They're taught to obey their masters. Even very large animals, like elephants or killer whales. But there is one very small member of our bodies that no human being can tame.

Verse 8 gives two more descriptions of the tongue. It is a restless evil. The word for restless was also used in 1:8 to describe the double-minded man who is "*unstable* (or restless) in all his ways." And we're going to see the restlessness of the tongue described more fully in just a moment.

It is also "full of deadly poison." A vivid and repulsive image. Psalm 140:3 says, "They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's, and under their lips is the venom of asps." This, again, is the destructive power of words.

So we see in verses 7-8 that no human being can tame the tongue. This point reiterates the power of the tongue. But it also shows us our inability to reform ourselves and our desperate need for the new birth. And that's what we'll see in the final verses of this section.

A Double-Tongue is Evidence of a Divided Heart (verses 9-12)

The last point is that a double-tongue is evidence of a divided heart. Look at what James writes in verses 9-10 about the double-tongue. This is the tongue that is a restless evil. It is unstable, like the double-minded man. “With it we bless our Lord and Father.” This is speaking out of one side of the mouth. And then out of the other side of the mouth, “we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.” And then verse 10 states the contradiction and condemns it. “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.” Verses 11-12 illustrate why these things ought not to be so. Number one, a spring pours forth either fresh water or salt water. Number two, a fig tree bears figs and a grapevine produces grapes. And number three, a salt pond cannot yield fresh water. What James is saying here is the same thing that Jesus taught in Luke 6:43-45, “For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” Jesus was making the same point in Matthew 12, in the verses I read at the beginning of this message. “the tree is known by its fruit.”

What I want us all to see in James 3:11-12 is the connection between the tree and the fruit. The tree is either the divided heart or a new heart. And the fruit is either the double-tongue or the sanctified tongue. And just as bad fruit is evidence of a bad tree, the double-tongue is evidence of a divided heart. And just as good fruit is evidence of a good tree, the sanctified tongue is evidence of a new heart. We won't be perfect in our speech, but we will be different. Those who have a new heart will have a new tongue.

As I think about how we might be inclined to respond to this passage, I think about my 3 year old son. There are times when he does something wrong, and as an attempt to avoid punishment he will say most seriously and sincerely, “I will never, ever do that again.” And it's hard for me to keep a straight face because I know that before the day is over, he's going to do it again. Possibly within the hour. And, of course, I realize that I'm the same way. And so are you. The point is: an act of the will, however sincere it may be, is not the solution.

Therefore I want to say to you, as this message comes to a close, don't apply the things that have been said this morning by promising, “I will never, ever do that again. I will never speak a sinful word again.” That would be the wrong response to this

passage. James said very clearly, “No human being can tame the tongue.”

The proper response is to see your desperate need to be born again. Before our speech will change, God must change our hearts. If you are convinced that you’re a sinner—and this is something we should all be convinced of, simply by thinking of our sinful words—then the proper response is to cry out to Jesus for grace and forgiveness. He is the One who does not stumble in what He says. He is the perfect man, able also to bridle His whole body (v. 2). And this perfect man went to the cross to die in the place of sinners like you and me. He died so that all who put their trust and hope in Him will not have to die, but will have eternal life in heaven.

Don’t think that you can change yourself. Cast yourself on Jesus and plead for His grace. And then, by the Spirit, put to death the deeds of the body (as Paul writes in Romans 8). It’s only with a new heart, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, that we can tame the tongue. So let’s pray to God to do this work in our lives.