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## TAMING THE TERRIBLE TONGUE

James 3:1-12

By

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James Lesson 12

## Taming the Terrible Tongue James 3:1-12

On a windswept hill in an English country churchyard stands a drab, gray slate tombstone. The faint etchings read:

Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, lies Arabella Young,  
Who, on the twenty-fourth of May, began to hold her tongue.

Let's hope that we learn what that woman never did, to tame the tongue! As a wise sage observed, "As you go through life you are going to have many opportunities to keep your mouth shut. Take advantage of all of them" (quoted by James Dent, *Reader's Digest* [12/82]).

As we move into chapter 3, James has gone from preaching to meddling! He has just made it clear that genuine faith *works*. If God has changed your heart through the new birth, the saving faith that He granted to you will inevitably show itself in a life of good deeds. But now he moves from the *generality* of good deeds to the *specifics* of the words that you speak. Genuine faith yields to Christ's lordship over your tongue. With David (Ps. 141:3), all true believers will pray, "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips." While the monster may never be totally tamed, if you know Christ as Savior, you are engaged in the ongoing battle to tame the terrible tongue.

In building his case that all have sinned, the apostle Paul zeroes in on the sins of the tongue (Rom. 3:13-14):

"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 and bitterness...."

It would be nice if conversion resulted in a total makeover of the mouth, but it is not so! Although we become new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), we also carry around 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 the war. To become godly people, we must wage war daily on this front.

James is a savvy pastor who knows that we won't gear up for the battle and face our own sins of the tongue unless we recognize the magnitude of the problem. We all tend to justify ourselves by pointing to others who are notoriously bad. In comparison with how they talk, I'm doing okay. But James comes in with vivid illustrations to open our eyes to just how serious our problem is. It's interesting that he never gives any advice on how to control the tongue. He just leaves you reeling from his portrait of how huge this problem is. He's saying,

To tame the terrible tongue, we must recognize the tremendous magnitude of the battle that we face.

It's difficult to outline this section, but we can organize it under four truths that we must recognize to tame our terrible tongues:

1. To tame the tongue, we must recognize that we will be held accountable for what we say (3:1-2).

Apparently the churches to which James was writing had too many men who were self-appointed teachers. In the Jewish synagogues, rabbis were highly respected and the office was often one that parents coveted for their sons. It was proper to respect the rabbis because of the sacred Scriptures that they expounded, but it was wrong to give men the honor that God alone deserves. Jesus confronted the Jewish leaders on this account (Matt. 23:6-11):

"They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and 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."

There's a certain inherent prestige in becoming a teacher. Presumably, you know more than those that you teach, which means that in some way they should look up to you. Because of this, there is the built-in danger that some will take upon themselves the office of Bible teacher for the wrong reasons, or that those who took the position for the right reason later will fall into pride. If a man

goes into teaching the Bible because of a secret desire for status or recognition, he is doing it for self and not for the Lord.

Because of the Matthew 23 passage, for many years I was uncomfortable with people addressing me as "Pastor." Why not call me by my name, like everyone else? While I've grown accustomed enough to the title now that I don't ask everyone to call me by my name, I hope that if they call me Pastor, they are respecting the office. But I'm also quite comfortable with being called Steve! I'm only a member of Christ's body whom He called to shepherd His flock and teach His Word. Christ is the Leader!

James' point is that a man should not take on the role of teacher unless God has called him to it, because teachers will incur a stricter judgment. We who teach God's Word will be more accountable, because our words affect more people. Any time that we teach, we should keep in mind the serious fact that we will stand before the Lord to give an account!

Verse 2 further explains verse 1 ("For"). James includes himself when he says, "For we all stumble in many ways." We're all prone to sin! One popular author and Bible teacher emphasizes that we should not view ourselves as sinners, but as saints who occasionally sin. Well, by God's grace I'm a saint, but I'm a saint who stumbles in many ways, not just occasionally!

James then zeroes in on the tongue, saying, "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well." *Perfect* does not mean sinlessly perfect, but rather, *mature*. We can never achieve sinless perfection in this life, but we can grow to spiritual maturity. One important gauge of that is our speech.

One way to tame the tongue is to recognize that we all will be held accountable for our speech. Jesus said (Matt. 12:36-37), "But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." Jesus was not teaching justification by works. But, like James, He was teaching that our words reveal whether our faith is genuine faith. Our words either validate that we are true believers or reveal that we do not know God. If we sin with our speech, we need to ask

God's forgiveness and also the forgiveness of the one we sinned against. Genuine believers have this sense of being accountable for their speech.

2. To tame the tongue, we must recognize its power for good or for evil (3:3-5a).

James uses two analogies here to make the point that the tongue is small, but mighty: the bit and the rudder. A bit is a relatively small instrument, but when you put it into a horse's mouth, you can control the entire horse. The same thing is true of a ship's rudder. It is relatively small compared to the size of the ship, but with his hand on the wheel or tiller, the pilot can steer a mammoth ship, even in a strong wind.

James' point of comparison is not so much the matter of control (the tongue does not really control the body), but of the inordinate influence of such a small part (3:5a): "So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things." James is saying, "Don't underestimate the power of the tongue, because if you do, you won't be able to tame it." There may be a comparison in the sense of influencing direction. If you control your tongue, it can direct your whole life into what is acceptable in God's sight. If you don't control your tongue, it will get you into great trouble!

Both the bit and the rudder must overcome contrary forces to direct the horse and the ship. A horse is a powerful animal that can do much useful work, but only if it can be directed. A ship is a useful means of transporting cargo or people, but if the rudder is broken, it will be at the mercy of the wind and waves, and could result in a shipwreck causing the loss of life and cargo. To work properly and accomplish good things, both bit and rudder must be under the control of a strong hand that knows how to use them properly. In the same way, the tongue must overcome the contrary force of the flesh and be under God's wise control if it is to accomplish anything good.

James would vigorously disagree with the familiar children's taunt, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me." James is steeped in the Old Testament, and it (especially the Book of Proverbs) has much to say about the power of the tongue, either for good or for evil. Proverbs 12:18 states, "There is

one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” Imagine that all of us here today were carrying into church an unsheathed, razor-sharp, two-edged sword. It would be a miracle if we got through the morning without anyone getting cut! The fact is, we all have a razor-sharp, two-edged sword—in our mouths! We should use them with the greatest care to bring healing, not injury.

Proverbs has many other references to the tongue. For example (16:24), “Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.” If we all would read Proverbs frequently and pay attention to its wisdom, we would be a source of sweetness and healing in our homes and our church!

So James wants us to recognize that we will be held accountable for how we use our tongues, especially those of us who teach God’s Word. He wants us to recognize the inordinate power of the tongue, either for good or for evil, so that we use it carefully.

3. To tame the tongue, we must recognize that it is a humanly untamable source of terrible evil (3:5b-8).

James uses two more word pictures for comparison and contrast: a forest fire and tamed animals. Living here in Flagstaff in the midst of the largest ponderosa pine forest in the world, we are very much aware of the potential danger and damage of forest fires. All it takes is one tossed cigarette or one campfire that is not totally extinguished and thousands of acres of beautiful forest can be destroyed. Under control, fire is useful; out of control, it is frightening and devastating!

In November of 1980, after a very dry autumn, on an extremely windy day an arsonist lit a fire in the tinder-dry brush just above San Bernardino, California. The high winds quickly fanned the flames up the mountain toward the town of Crestline, where we then lived. While firefighters were trying to contain that blaze, the same arsonist drove to the east and then back to the west, lighting separate fires in each location. Many of us who lived on the mountain had only a few hours’ notice to evacuate our homes for several days, so that we would not be trapped if the flames came up that far. Several homes in San Bernardino were destroyed, killing at least four people. Forest fires are devastating!

In verse 6, James states directly, "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." Scholars debate as to how to translate and punctuate that verse, but however it is done, the point is clear: the tongue is a deadly, powerful source of evil that taints every part of our being. If we do not use our tongues with great caution, we are like spiritual arsonists, lighting careless fires that cause widespread destruction.

James says that the one who is careless with his tongue is the first to be defiled. An unchecked tongue is "the very world of iniquity," that "defiles the entire body." This goes back to James 1:26-27, where he said that true religion requires bridling the tongue and keeping oneself unstained by the world. "The sense is simply that since speech is the hardest faculty to control it is there that one first observes 'the world' in a person's heart" (Peter Davids, *New International Greek Testament Commentary on James* [Eerdmans], p.142). Like a spark that lights a bigger fire, it not only defiles us, but also it "sets on fire the course of our life." If you have a careless tongue it damages your entire life!

Then James goes one step further and identifies the ultimate source of the problem, "and is set on fire by hell." *Hell* translates the Greek *gehenna*, which is a transliteration of two Hebrew words meaning, "Valley of Hinnom." This valley, just outside the walls of Jerusalem, 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 New Testament use is by Jesus (11 times) to refer to the place of eternal torment. James means that an evil tongue is set on fire by Satan himself.

Most Christians would shrink back from sins like homosexuality, molesting children, or murder as being satanically depraved. Yet we tolerate gossip, slander, deceit, half-truths, sarcastic put-downs, and other sins of the tongue as if they were no big deal. James says that all such sins have their origin in the pit of hell. They defile the one committing them. They destroy others. As a believer in Christ, you must confront these sins in yourself and you must be bold enough to confront them in others.

James goes on to use an analogy from the animal world. If you've been to Sea World, you've seen trained whales, dolphins, and seals. At the circus, you've seen trained elephants, lions, and tigers. But James says that there is one beast that cannot be tamed: the human tongue! He adds, "it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." Being restless means there is never a time when it sleeps. You must always be on guard against it. Being full of deadly poison, you should handle it as cautiously as you would a vial of anthrax.

James does *not* say that the tongue is untamable. He says that *no one* can tame it. It is *humanly* untamable. Only God can tame it. James does not state that because he wants us to get a clear view of the horrible monster that we must do 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, and self-control, which all relate to the control of the tongue. To tame this terrible 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. That is James' final point:

4. To tame the tongue, we must recognize that its inconsistencies are rooted in its source (3:9-12).

James points out a gross inconsistency that he no doubt had observed. Christians say, "Praise the Lord" in one breath, and in the next breath they say evil things about another person, made in the likeness of God. They sit in church singing hymns to God and no sooner get out the door than they whisper, "Did you see so-and-so? She makes me sick! She's such a hypocrite. Why do you know what she did?" Etc., etc. James gets very direct (3:10b): "My brethren, these things ought not to be this way."

Then he points out that what often happens among Christians is contrary to all of nature. The same spring does not send out fresh water one minute and bitter water the next. He asks rhetorically (3:12), "Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh."

His point is the same as that of Jesus (Matt. 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 (Matt. 15:18), "But the things that proceed out of the mouth come

from the heart, and those defile the man." The mouth is simply the opening that vents whatever is in the heart. If there's raw sewage in the heart, there will be raw sewage gushing from the mouth! That's why Proverbs 4:23 exhorts us, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life."

Have you ever thought about how terribly embarrassing life would be if there were a direct open line between your thoughts and your mouth, so that you blurted out loud whatever you were thinking? Instead of your polite, "I'm pleased to meet you," out comes, "I couldn't care less about meeting you!" After listening to someone drone on about something, instead of, "Yes, that's very interesting," you blurt out, "How can I get away from this bore?"

I'm not suggesting that we should abandon politeness and become brutally blunt. I'm only pointing out that even if you control your tongue, you often have a heart problem. If you want to tame the terrible 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 by memorizing Scripture (Rom. 12:1-2; Ps. 119:11). Memorize James 1:19-20: "This you know, my beloved brethren. But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God." Memorize Ephesians 4:29: "Let no unwholesome [lit., *rotten*] 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."

### Conclusion

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin has lectured around the country on the powerful and often negative impact of words. He has asked audiences if they can go for twenty-four hours without saying any unkind words about, or to, anybody. He says, "Invariably, a minority of listeners raise their hands signifying 'yes,' some laugh, and 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 twenty-four hours without drinking liquor, you are addicted to alcohol. If you cannot go for twenty-four hours without smoking, you are addicted

to nicotine. Similarly, if you cannot go for twenty-four hours without saying unkind words about others, then you have lost control over your tongue" (*Imprimus* [1/96], p. 1). He goes on to say, "There is no area of life in which so many of us systematically violate the Golden Rule."

He encourages his audiences to monitor their conversations for two 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 two-day period, and do not try to be kinder than usual in assessing another's character and actions." He states, "Most of us who take this test are unpleasantly surprised" (p. 2).

Why doesn't James give us a list of helpful tips on how to control our tongue? Maybe it's because most of us, like the alcoholic, are in denial about the magnitude of the problem. The first step to dealing with the problem is to acknowledge, "I have a serious problem! I have a tool of Satan in my own mouth!"

Lehman Strauss (*James Your Brother* [Loizeaux Brothers], p. 120) considers James 3 "to be a key to the solution of most of the ills in church life today." I would agree and add that it is a key to most of the problems in our homes today. It's forest fire season. Things are tinder dry in your home and in this church. You have a fire set among your members! Ask God often to tame your terrible tongue!

### Application Questions

1. How can a man know if God is calling him to preach?
2. How can we know whether it is right to speak out to confront sin or to remain silent, since we can sin either way?
3. What should you say when someone shares a juicy bit of gossip with you "so that you can pray about it"?
4. Is it always a sin to criticize? When and how may it be proper?

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