

## **TAMING THE TONGUE**

**James 3:1–12**

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We're continuing along in the Book of James. James 3. We're going to consider the first twelve verses of that third chapter. We'll make reference to it on verse-by-verse basis. These particular twelve verses have to do with the subject "Taming the Tongue."

We've found, already, as we've been in James, that James does deal with the practical side of the Christian life, where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. We have seen him giving us tremendous help on the subject of encountering trials, of our need to have concern for the needy, and also the importance of faith being at work and not having faith in word only, but also of deed.

As we closed James 2 a couple of weeks ago, we were confronted with the teaching that real faith affects our works. Now, in chapter 3, James is saying that real and vital faith affects not only our work, but also our words. Twice already in his letter, James has addressed the subject of the tongue. Chapter 1:19, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak..." My mother put it this way: God made us with two ears and one mouth, so that we could take in twice as much as we give out. That's what James really is saying. Everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak.

The second thing that James has already said about the power of the tongue is in James 1:26, "If anyone considers himself religious and does not keep a tight reign on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless."

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The entire Bible itemizes the many sins that it is possible for the tongue to commit. Before we head into James 3, let me give a little quick landscape tour of the kinds of sins the tongue is capable of committing.

One, of course, is gossip, which is perhaps not the most “serious” sin that the tongue can commit. But it is nevertheless damaging to other people. Gossip is kind of hearsay information that becomes part of the grapevine. So often it’s passed-along information without malicious intent. The body of information, however, as it is passed along, grows with each telling. I’ve found that the simplest way to check gossip out is to go directly to the source. I’ve had occasion to do that. I’ve had people do that with me. Go to the source.

Another sin of speech is the sin of slander. This involves character assassination. It is made, sometimes, with conscious will. Sometimes, perhaps without a conscious will. An individual said, “A tongue 3 inches long can kill a man 6 foot high.” Perhaps there’s not a great deal wrong with that statement.

Saint Francis of Assisi told this story against slander. He said, “Take a goose, pluck its feathers, put a feather at each doorway where you’ve spoken unkind things about the people who dwell there. When you have finished, go pick them back up. You will find that the wind has blown many of them away. You can repent, but you cannot always recall what you said about another person. Once it’s out, it can’t be drawn back.”

Other sins of the tongue include boasting, which is a false form of self-esteem. Self-esteem in a sinful nature, where we make ourselves better than we are or better than other people.

Quarreling, which involves speech, is used in anger and continual confrontation with another person, which is needless.

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There is cursing, which is more than simply invoking God's name in vain or using an oath. But cursing can include negative, put-down speech, where we curse—pull down—rather than bless—which is to speak well of. Cursing can include even the whole body of language that maybe is in the category of fault-finding.

There is also foolish speech, which Paul speaks of in Ephesians 5:4, which is constant dribble. Meaningless.

There is the sin of the tongue of false teaching and false instruction. Titus 1:11 says, “They must be silenced because they're ruining whole households by teachings that they ought not to teach.”

There's filthy speech, which of course has sexual references to it (Ephesians 5:4).

Then there's the speech which involves lying and perjury. A violation of the ninth commandment (Exodus 20:16).

There are a lot of things the tongue can get in trouble with. The tongue does set a climate of encouragement or discouragement. It uplifts or it tears down. It heals or it hurts.

So James, when he begins his teaching on the tongue, begins, first of all, with a reference to the people in the body of Christ who ostensibly use their tongue the most. That is, the teachers.

People like me, who occupy a lectern or pulpit. “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check” (James 3:1–2, NIV).

Why does James begin with teachers? Because teachers, by the very nature of their task, must be evaluative. Therefore, they must be careful. Teachers are going to be judged by a higher standard, because when we assume the office of teaching, we assume the responsibility and

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accountability for what is being said. If we are judged by our words, then we must be careful, as those who teach that our words are accurate and timely and helpful and healing.

Probably the safest thing in the world, in light of this, would be not to talk at all. If we're going to be judged for our words, then it's better, perhaps, to go into a monastery of silence and retreat.

James does give all of us, not just the teachers, some very helpful words when he says, "We all stumble in many ways." That is, none of us can always carry out our speech in a totally correct fashion. All of us find ourselves slipping up with the tongue at times, saying things we wish we hadn't said. Someone has said that life is strewn with banana peelings. Maybe we have that feeling when we have slipped up in our speech.

James is saying, the greater control we gain over the tongue, the greater control we have altogether. He's saying, "Show us a person who is out of control in their language and there, then, is a person who is out of control in their life." On the reverse: When speech is measured, when it is considered, when it is wisely and encouragingly used, then other aspects of our personality manifest maturity. "He is a mature man, a perfect man, a completed person." When the person is in control, then maturity is manifesting itself in the individual's life.

I think a special note is the fact that James never tells us specifically how we are to control the tongue, he just proceeds, from verses 3 to 12, to give us six illustrations of the damage the tongue can do.

#### **I. We want to look at the damage the tongue can do in these six illustrations.**

But then, I want to close on a hopeful note by giving you some ways that are outside of James, but covered in the Scripture, that speak to us about getting things in control.

The six illustrations that James uses, are first of all, in verse 3.

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**A.** The illustration of the bridle (the bit) and the horse. “When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal” (James 3:3, NIV). We’re getting so far from the horse age that probably half this audience has never had the experience of putting bits into horses’ mouths. Perhaps in the twenty-first century, we’re going to have to use stepping on the gas peddle, or turning the wheel of the car that turns all four wheels in a different direction. I’m not sure if we’re going to have to go for a different analogy or not. But the principle is the same. James is saying that what is true of horses is true of people. If we can control their mouths, we can command their obedience and determine their direction.

**B.** The second illustration which James gives is the illustration of the rudder and the ship. “Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts” (James 3:4–5, NIV). The little bit in the horse’s mouth and the little rudder on the ship achieve big results. The illustrations are both saying the same thing, although the first illustration of the bit is working with an animate object, the horse. And the second is working with something inanimate, a ship. The tongue is likened with them. It’s small, but it controls things of much significantly larger scope.

James says, “The tongue makes great boasts.” That is, the tongue can legitimately boast of some magnificent achievements. For example, there is the power of oratory, to encourage the depressed, to rouse the careless, to encourage and stir people to noble action. Who can forget the ennobling and powerful words of FDR, when he said, “There is nothing to fear but fear itself.” Or who in Great Britain can forget how they were stirred to action by Winston Churchill’s great speech, “We will fight on the ocean, we will fight on the beaches.” There is the power of speech—to ennoble human life and to stir and to encourage and to cause great actions to ensue.

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But the tongue also can be a very destructive force, as Hitler has taught us. It is the rudder, which has an effect upon the totality of life, upon the big ship. Even though the ship is driven by strong winds, the rudder has a say in the direction the ship is going, even in the strong winds. It is in the adverse times and strong winds of our individual lives that the tongue also charts the direction that we face in those circumstances.

C. The third illustration which James gives of the power of the tongue is the illustration of the fire and the forest. “Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:5–6, NIV). On the basis of what James is saying, I would conclude there are three implications of the tongue being a world of fire. One thing about the tongue is that it can do damage at a distance. A spark here, if left to burn, can damage over there. And a word spoken out of season or unfitly also can damage a distant point.

Jewish rabbis had a statement that went something like this: “Life and death are in the hand of the tongue.” Has the tongue a hand? No. But as the hand kills, so does the tongue. The hand kills only at close quarters. The tongue is called an “arrow” because it kills at a distance. An arrow kills at forty or fifty paces, but of the tongue it is said, “They have set their mouth in heaven and their tongue goes through the whole earth.” The tongue ranges over the whole earth and reaches heaven. Damage at a distance.

The second way tongue and fire are linked together is both are quite uncontrollable once they get going. It is hard to get them in check. James says, “The whole course of life is set on fire.” Literally, “The ‘wheel of being’ is set on fire by the tongue.” That is, there is no dimension or age or category of life that is exempt from this terribly destructive power of the tongue. It

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reaches into every area and every occasion. It commits sin, it defends sin, and it suggests sin to others.

Then the third linkage between the tongue and fire is, both are often set through carelessness.

Someone has said, “Three things come not back—the spent arrow, the lost opportunity, and the spoken word,” often said through carelessness.

**D.** The fourth illustration that James uses of the tongue is in verses 7–8, where he likens the tongue to the taming of a wild beast. “All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:7–8, NIV). James’ point is that man has still been given dominion over nature and has authority to rule the animal world. This ruling authority is seen in animal shows, where a dog or lion, a bear, an elephant can even be taught simple elemental commands of obedience. We’ve seen occasions of that. James is saying it is possible for man to have dominion over the world, but nature has also showed that, because of the fall of man, the sinfulness of man, he does not have control over himself. And the tongue is the manifestation of that lack of control.

No man can tame the tongue. That doesn’t mean that God can’t tame it, but it suggests we cannot do it on our own. Isaiah shows us, in chapter 6, where he indicates that the first thing that God touched in his life after He gave him a vision of himself was his tongue. God sent an angel to take a coal off the altar and touch his tongue. As a person who was going to have an office of speaking, a prophetic office, his speech needed to be cauterized right at the beginning, he needed to have pure words.

**E.** Then James gives a fifth illustration, the illustration of sweet and bitter water (verses 9–11).

“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made

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in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?" (James 3:9–11, NIV).

In Bible days and today, when you're in an orthodox Jewish community, when the name of God is mentioned, a religious person responds to the mention of the name of God with "Blessed is He." Three times a day, a devout Jew is called upon to recite the prayers called "eulogies," each of which begin with the phrase, "Blessed be thou, O God." James is reflecting that here, because he's writing largely to people who come out of the Jewish faith who have now become completed Jews through their experience of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who are used to saying, "Blessed be thou, O God." James is saying, "How can that tongue which, on the one hand, is used to articulating praise to God, on the other hand, turn around and run down other people? It cannot be. Fresh water and salt water do not flow out of the same spring." Therefore, if God is truly being praised, other people will not be at the receiving end of a brunt of negativity and tearing down.

John Bunyan in his famous *Pilgrim's Progress*, has a character named Talkative, whom he describes as a person who was a saint abroad and a devil at home. Talkative. That's what James is saying here. Saying, on the one hand, praise to God and hallelujah on religious occasions, and then turning around and using the tongue to destroy fellowship and communication when, in fact, the tongue was given to enhance fellowship and communication.

**F.** The sixth illustration that James gives of the power of the tongue is found in verse 12, the illustration of the vine and the fig tree. "My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water" (James 3:12, NIV). That's back to the teaching of Jesus, which James had heard. As is the root, so will be the fruit. What is in the inner

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life will manifest itself in speech. Therefore, a tree bears fruit consistent with its nature. The words of the Christian's life also reflect what is happening on the inside.

All of James' illustrations are warning us to watch the tongue. We've described the problem, but we haven't given help. If we have been wounded by others' speaking, or we ourselves have misspoken, how do we come out of that and establish a kind of speech and language that is as God would intend?

### **II. Gaining control of the tongue.**

I would suggest that there are at least four things that the Scripture has to say about the use of the tongue in terms of gaining control of it.

**A.** The first is to begin with honest prayer. If any of us have a problem with our speaking and are saying things that are inappropriate and unkind, critical, negative in orientation—then begin with an honest prayer to God. The Scriptures give us some of the kinds of things that we are to pray. Psalm 141:3 says, “Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD. Keep a watch over the door of my lips.” Just as you see guards governing a major public building somewhere, so, Lord, park two of Your sentries right at the corners of my mouth. Set a guard over my words. Keep watch over the door of my lips. Or Psalm 19:14, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.” Honest admittance coupled with honest prayers is the first step of changing any wrong in our life.

**B.** The second step the Scriptures would have us take is a confession of where we have done wrong, with restitution wherever possible. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness,” suggesting to us that we must begin at the place of confession. Matthew 5:23–24 says, “If we are at the altar and remember that our brother has an offense against us, we are to leave the altar and seek to have

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that relationship repaired.” If that’s true when we are the innocent party and the other person is the one who has offended us, how much more true it is if we are the guilty person. When we have done wrong, real healing and health comes when we have admitted that we have misspoken.

**C.** The third step that the Scriptures give in gaining control of the tongue is to begin to praise and express thanksgiving. This praising and expressing of thanks is something that should not only be directed towards God, but is meant to be directed towards others as well. Psalm 34:1 says, “I will extol the LORD at all times. his praise shall always be on my lips.” To have a life that is, from the inner man, springing out with praise to the Lord, is itself a great remedial action to incorrect speech. Paul tells us in Colossians 3, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:15–17, NIV). Let your speech be filled with praise and blessing and thanksgiving.

**D.** Then the fourth thing that Scriptures tell us to do, about gaining control of the tongue, is to speak to build up and encourage. Build up and encourage others through speaking. This doesn’t take away, from time to time, the need for correction. Jesus verbally corrected His disciples when they got out of line. It isn’t to say that we always say positive things. But the tenor and emphasis of speech is to build up and encourage.

One of my mentors who has had a vast influence on me, Dr. Ashcroft—president of Evangel College for years—was with me at a meeting. Sometimes when I get in large church meetings, I

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have well honed and sharpened opinions which, of course, I think are always right. He knows I have a propensity to even say things that I might later regret. He caught me in one of these sessions one day and handed me a little 3x5 card. He said, “I’ve been praying and I believe I have a prophetic word for you.” He had never said this to me on any occasion. I thought, “If he’s got a word for me, I’d better listen.” In his own handwriting, he had written these words, “Let your emphasis be on the creative and the constructive above the critical and corrective.” He went on to explain that there are times in life we need to be critical and corrective. But let the emphasis be upon the creative and the constructive.

That’s exactly what Paul is saying when he says, “Speak to build up and encourage.” “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth. But only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29).

Peter reminds us, in our speaking, that we are to follow the example of the Lord in following after His steps. That in His speech He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth. I’m sure that the Lord has sent us this message today as part of His overall construction of the personality of Jesus Christ in our lives. In an audience such as this, there are so many of us who have struggled with the tongue. The Lord is saying to us, “Watch your speech.” If it is out of control, then get it to the Lord and get it under control. In family life, in relationships within the body, in interpersonal relationships, let speech build up and encourage.

### **Closing Prayer**

Lord, we want to do that in this moment in time. We want to bring ourselves to You and ask You that You will put words within us that are helpful and healing. Probably, Lord, each of us can call to mind words we have spoken in the last week, or even in the last month, that we wish we had not said. That we wish we could call back. Lord, it is the function of Your Word to bring us

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to that acknowledgment that we do fail and we do sin in our speech, and that is not a matter which we are to simply gloss over with, “That’s just me.” But You are really serious about wanting to form Your character in us. That our lives might have an inward reality of Your presence that expresses itself in words that give glory and honor to Your name. Where we have withheld words of blessing and thanksgiving from You or from others, open up a well deep inside of us that lets those words pour forth in thanksgiving and praise and blessing. Lord, I pray for those who have been hurt by other people’s words. And perhaps have been the target of words that have not been helpful or healing. I pray that within those who find themselves in that circumstance, You would give Your forgiveness and Your forgiving ability. And rather than harboring something against a person for what has been said, may there be an open and full forgiveness, so that restoration and healing can always be at work in our lives. Lord, words can divide us. But words can also unite us. You show importance of language by birthing Your church with an ability to praise You, even with tongues that were not learned—signifying that when the Spirit comes upon our lives, our very patterns of speech are affected. It’s not uncommon or unusual that we should find ourselves speaking effusive praise to You. We thank You, Lord, that Your Spirit is at work in our life to do that very thing. Let our words not only be an encouragement to others, but set a watch over our lips as they pertain to ourselves. We are saying things about ourselves that drag ourselves down and cause us to be discouraged because we live in a climate of verbal discouragement about ourselves. Put a new song and new words in our heart. Lord, we want our speech to have flavor and health and life. Teach us, Lord, to use our tongues in the most healing and helpful way we can. We ask, in Christ’s name. Amen.