

Taming the Tongue

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[0 : 00] James chapter 3 is where we're at this morning, verses 1 through 12.

! If you don't have a Bible, there are Bibles in the pews that you can use. If you don't own a Bible, please take that Bible home with you today as a gift from our church to you and our hopes you'll continue to be reading God's Word. If you're there, would you please stand with me?

As we honor the reading of God's Word together. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

Look at the ships also. Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also, the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

[1 : 15] How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set amongst our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

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. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. Listen, my brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening, both fresh and salt water?

Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. May God add a blessing to the reading of his word.

[2 : 17] Would you please be seated? I'm sure that every one of you at some point in time received instruction from a parent or a teacher that if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say it at all.

I have no doubt that you heard those words because you said something that wasn't very nice. Which leads me to the other phrase that you've probably heard or used when someone said something that wasn't very kind to you.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. But words do hurt. And as James points out in our text this morning, the tongue is often used to abuse.

It can inflict a lot of pain, a lot of hurt, and it can create a lot of damage. Human beings, unlike any other creature, have been created in the image of God.

And they've been gifted by him in unique and special ways. But tragically, these gifts are abused and used to abuse our fellow image bearers and distort God's purposes for them.

[3 : 44] Take, for example, our minds. God has given us brains and minds that we might know him and understand him and his truth and delight in who he is.

But sinful people have abused that gift. As Paul says in Romans chapter 1 verse 21. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Another example is our hands. Instead of using them to serve and to worship God, sinful people have used them to make idols and shed innocent blood.

Our eyes also are a gift from God. With them, we are able to behold the beauty of his creation and to read his word.

But often this gift is abused by observing perverted and debased images. Instead of diverting our eyes away from those things, we gaze upon them with a depraved kind of delight.

[4 : 50] But of all these gifts, the one that has the greatest capacity to inflict pain, damage, and abuse is the tongue.

Instead of using our tongues to bless and encourage others, we use them to curse them instead. Instead of using our tongues to sing God's praises, we use them to blaspheme and to slander him. It's interesting that when describing the wickedness of fallen humanity, the apostle Paul uses imagery that doesn't describe the mind or the hands, but the mouth.

In Romans 3, 13 through 14, he says, The Bible is full of examples of how we use our tongues for evil instead of good.

But I think our text this morning contains the most explicit instruction and warning about the damage that our tongues are capable of inflicting.

[6 : 13] In our study of James, we've already seen a couple of his exhortations regarding our mouths. In chapter 1, verse 19, he urges us to be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

In chapter 1, verse 26, he says, If anyone thinks he is a religious person and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

And now in chapter 3, verses 1 through 12, James presses that point further. And this is the main idea from our text for our sermon this morning, that true believers tame their tongues.

True believers tame their tongues. Now, I don't think there's a better example of this truth than the one we read about in Isaiah chapter 6, verses 1 through 7.

Let's read that together. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

[7 : 20] Above him stood the seraphim, each had six wings. With two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said, Holy, holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is full of his glory. And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.

And I said, Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips. And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and he said, Behold, this has touched your lips.

Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for. In the presence of God, Isaiah does not speak about how blessed, how privileged, and how special he is to have had that experience.

[8 : 31] No, instead, he's undone. In the presence of God, he sees his true self. Though he had made great strides in spiritual growth, though he was a prophet for God's people, here in the unmediated presence of his holy creator, the true king of all, he sees himself as more sinful, more filthy, more unworthy than he ever had known or understood before.

In the presence of God, he is full of fear and self-loathing. He curses himself, saying, Woe is me, I am lost.

I am coming unglued. I am coming undone. It's like the wicked witch of the West. I'm melting. But notice that this prophet, this man of God, melting, as it were, in a pool of his awareness of his own depravity, connects his ruinous feeling to what?

His lips. His mouth. His dirty mouth. The one thing that, as a prophet and a man of God, he probably thought that he had the most control over.

He was God's mouthpiece to God's people. Yet the first thing he felt in the presence of God, his creator, was the filthiness of his speech.

[10 : 05] The sinfulness of his speech. But God doesn't leave Isaiah to wallow in his self-despair and self-loathing for long.

The infinitely holy God is also gracious and merciful and loving and forgiving. And for Isaiah, he immediately provides that forgiveness and cleansing.

He decontaminates his prophet's heart by purifying his prophet's mouth. By cauterizing his lips, he was refined by holy fire.

Though profoundly aware of his sin, Isaiah responds to the call of God to go and to continue to speak for him. And so the point that I want you to see from Isaiah's experience as we look more deeply at James chapter 3 is this.

The tongue reveals the true spiritual condition of your heart. And the tongue that is tamed by the Lord is the tongue that is used to praise, worship, and honor him.

[11 : 18] If you recall, last week in James chapter 2 verses 14 through 26, the last couple of weeks, James concludes his discussion about the relationship between our faith and our works.

He's compared dead faith with living faith. And now he wants us to know that works are not limited to actions, but they include our words.

Just as the genuineness of your faith is proven by your actions, so also the genuineness of your faith is proven by your words.

And so in our passage today, James provides five reasons why you should desire to tame your tongue. The first reason is this.

Because the tongue condemns. The tongue condemns. Look at verses 1 through the beginning of verse 2 again. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

[12 : 21] For we all stumble in many ways. James' first concern is with those who preach and those who teach in the local church.

He is not discouraging those whom God has called to serve and gifted. Those to serve in that role. We know that's true because Paul tells Timothy, a young pastor, in 1 Timothy 3, verse 1, the saying is trustworthy.

If anyone desires to be an overseer, a pastor, an elder, somebody who needs to be able to preach, that he desires a noble task. So James is here emphasizing the point that the responsibility to teach and to preach God's word should not be taken lightly and it should not be abused.

You know, Jesus' sharpest criticisms and rebukes were often directed to Israel's teachers. Because they so often abused their positions for selfishly ambitious reasons.

And they did not practice what they preached. One of his sharpest rebukes of them is in Matthew chapter 23, verses 2 through 7. The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat.

[13 : 38] So do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to bear and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. And they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues. And greetings in the marketplaces. And being called rabbi by others. Those who teach God's word have a responsibility to defend truth, combat error, and provide moral and theological instruction that affects the lives of others in profound ways.

If you teach God's words to others, if you instruct others in God's word, you're telling them how they should think, how they should live, how they should act.

And if you fail to practice what you preach, if you misinterpret God's word or soften its edge to tickle people's ears, giving them what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear, God will not be pleased.

[14 : 53] And so James begins his discussion on taming the tongue by making it clear that anyone who teaches God's word must do so with a deep sense of responsibility.

To sin with your tongue when alone or a few others is bad enough. But to sin with the tongue in public while acting as a speaker for God is immeasurably worse.

In Matthew 12, 34 through 37, Jesus said to Israel's teachers, You brood of vipers, how can you speak good when you are evil?

For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.

I tell you, on the day of judgment, people will give an account for every careless word they speak.

For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

[16 : 00] Now when James says that we all stumble in many ways, he's not talking about stuttering or making grammatical mistakes. I'd be in a lot of trouble if that was the case.

What he's doing is he's calling attention to a form of verbal recklessness that damages other people. I think he's talking about being a bully.

There's a temptation to please people when you teach so that they'll like you, but there's also the temptation to teach in a way that just beats people up and beats them down, that leaves them feeling burdened and not uplifted.

God's word, when taught rightly, will convict, but it will also encourage in ways that lead to repentance. So if you've been called to teach, do not take that responsibility lightly, and do not

abuse it.

Because you will have to give an account for God, for what you said, how you said it, and also for what you didn't say, but should have said.

[17 : 15] And so that's why I write down my sermons in manuscript form, honestly, because I want to ensure that the only things that I say from this pulpit are things that I intend to say, having prayerfully, carefully, and diligently done my part to communicate God's word.

Now the next reason why you should tame your tongue is because of its ability to control. The tongue controls. And the rest of verse 2, moving into verse 5, James says, and if anyone does not stumble, or the rest of verse 2, if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he's a perfect man, also able to bridle his whole body.

The term James uses for perfect in the Greek has two possible meanings. One carries the idea of absolute perfection. If that's James' meaning here, he would be speaking hypothetically, since no human being would qualify for that sort of perfect speech besides Jesus Christ.

But the term can also be used to mean complete or mature. The idea is that the spiritually mature believer who has learned from spending time with God and time in God's word has learned to tame their tongue.

And that's what I think James intends, that's how I think he intends to use it here. Spiritual maturity is most often revealed by a person's speech.

[18 : 48] Speech that sounds like Jesus Christ. In 1 Peter 2, verses 22-23, Peter there encourages Christians to respond to suffering with spiritual maturity like Christ.

And he highlights Jesus' ability to control his tongue when he suffered. He then is the example, and he's always the example, that we are to follow.

Look at what Peter said there. Speaking of Jesus, he committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return.

When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. A spiritually mature person responds to things as hard as sufferings in this way, like Jesus Christ.

James then claims that a Christian who has learned to tame their tongue is able to bridle his whole body. If the Holy Spirit has control over the most volatile member of your body, that indicates that he has control over the rest of you.

[20 : 10] Warren Wearsby told a story about a pastor friend of his who shared an interaction that he had with a woman in his congregation. This woman was known for being a terrible gossip.

She said to Wearsby's friend, Pastor, the Lord has convicted me of my sin of gossip. My tongue is getting me and others in trouble.

The pastor asked her, well, what do you plan to do about it? And she replied, I want to put my tongue on the altar. Because she had said this same thing so many times without ever changing, the pastor told her, well, there isn't an altar big enough.

Maybe that's being a bully. Maybe that's just calling it like it is. There is an altar big enough. Just read 1 John 1, 9.

But the pastor's underlying frustration is understandable, isn't it? The woman knew her sin. She knew what was required.

[21 : 21] But she was unwilling to pay the price. She loved her gossip more than she loved righteousness. More than she wanted to pursue holiness.

How about you? Does the Holy Spirit have a hold of your tongue? Is your tongue gossipy?

Or is it godly? The tongue is something very small. Hidden from sight, caged in by teeth, walled in by the mouth.

But it has incredible power. It has incredible influence over things that are so much bigger than it.

As James says in verses 3 through the beginning of verse 5, if we put bits in the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

Look at the ships also. Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

[22 : 31] The bit in the horse's mouth is small compared to the horse, yet that small thing controls it. Wherever or whatever direction its rider wants it to take, it will take it.

A rudder on a ship is minuscule compared to the rest of the boat, but not even strong winds exert as much influence over it compared to its rudder.

Words have power. Words have influence. Your tongue is capable of accomplishing great good and tremendous harm.

Lying, boasting, exaggerating, gossiping, making false accusations, betraying someone's confidence, these things split churches and ruin the gospel's influence.

A healthy church body is full of people who have learned to control their tongues. Ephesians 4.25 says, therefore having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor. [23 : 51] for we are members of one another. Now the third reason why you should tame your tongue, because the tongue corrupts.

The tongue corrupts the rest of verse 5 into verse 6. How great a force to set ablaze by such a small fire and the tongue is a fire.

The great Chicago fire of 1871, which lasted two days, killed around 300 people, charred three and a half miles of the city and destroyed 17,000 buildings, was ignited by an old lady's cow who kicked over her lantern when she was milking it.

Kent Hughes in his book *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, which many of our, or a couple of our men's groups read, it's a great book, I recommend it to you, but he said of this verse in that book, those who misuse the tongue are guilty of spiritual arson.

A mere spark from an ill-spoken word can produce a firestorm that annihilates everyone that it touches. And you know, the first sin committed after the fall was a sin of the tongue.

[25 : 06] When God came to Adam and Eve and called them out from their hiding and he questions Adam about what he had done, who had told him to eat of this forbidden fruit, what does Adam do?

God, I confess, it was, I should have, I should have done something differently. You know, Eve was being tempted and as her husband, as her, as someone who loves her and who protects her, I should have stood in and I didn't.

No, he doesn't do that. What does he do? Genesis 3.12, the man said to God, the woman that you gave to me, she gave me the fruit and I ate.

It's not my fault. It's her fault but really it's your fault, God, because you gave her to me. Ever since, the tongue has been used like that to inflame.

As James says, it inflames a world of unrighteousness. And by that I think he means all the evil characteristics of a fallen sinful world find expression through words of the tongue.

[26 : 15] The tongue gives vent to every sort of sinful passion and desire. With the tongue sinful human beings have dishonored God's name for thousands of years, taking it in vain.

With the tongue sinful human beings uttered all kinds of blasphemous lies about Jesus Christ, God's only son when he walked the earth. with the tongue they shouted their demands for him to be crucified.

With lying and corrupted speech they colluded and they demanded with their tongues for Jesus' death. James continues saying in verse 6, the tongue is set against our members staining the whole body.

An untamed tongue stains the whole person. Mark 7 20-23 Jesus said, What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All of these things come from within and they defile a person. The tongue corrupts. Now I remember in high school and you maybe do too, those kids, maybe you were one of them who would sneak into the bathroom or they would sneak outside during a break or during class to smoke cigarettes and then they'd come back to class and they had doused themselves with cologne and perfume but to no avail.

[27 : 54] We all knew what they were doing. That cancerous smell clung to them no matter what they did. In a similar way, words have power to stick to us and like toothpaste, once it's out of the tube, it's impossible to get it back in.

The language you use reveals the true condition of your heart and what James says next should terrify us all.

verse 8, speaking of the tongue setting on fire the entire course of life, here's the scary part, and set on fire by hell.

The word hell is a Greek translation of the Greek word Gehenna. It's the word that Jesus often used to describe what hell is like.

From texts like Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 31 through 32, we learn that Gehenna was a valley outside of Jerusalem that was used in ancient times as a place where children were sacrificed, where they were offered as burnt offerings to pagan deities.

[29 : 12] Later, it became a place where people would take their garbage. They would just dump it out there. When an executed criminal, they would take him down from the cross or whatever, they would take his remains and they would throw it in this garbage dump where it burned continually day after day.

I think that what James wants us to understand here is how Satan and demons can take advantage of our speech, our vulgar language, our ill-advised comments to promote division and destruction in our churches and in our relationships.

The untamed tongue corrupts and it is used to spread corruption in devastating ways with eternal implications.

And not only that, the fourth reason to tame your tongue, the tongue contaminates. The tongue contaminates, verse 7.

For every kind of beast and bird and reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind. You know, you go to the circus, you go to the zoo, and you'll see all kinds of animals that have been captured, have been tamed to obey instructions from people.

[30 : 40] But James says in verse 8, no human being can tame the tongue. That is to say that no person in their own power, apart from the Holy Spirit's help, can tame their tongue.

And so with that in mind, like David, we must plead and constantly pray, set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth, keep watch over the door of my lips.

And the rest of verse 8, James says of the untamed tongue that it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. again in Kent Hughes's Disciplines of Godly Men, he references the chilling power of the tongue's ability to corrupt by sharing a story about female spiders.

Female spiders are often widows because they regularly kill and eat any male suitor who comes their way. having no stomach, she injects her prey, whether that's another spider or fly or something that flies into her web.

She kills it and she puts her digestive juices into it, her poison. She poisons the inside of it and she turns the inside of the insect into like this warm kind of soup that she can suck out and eat.

[32 : 07] Yeah. Yeah, so I apologize for those of you going to lunch after this, just forget about that, but hold on for just a second because there's more.

On the outside, her prey looks whole, but it's truly a hollow casket. Her web is full of corpses, her dining room is a morgue.

That's not a pleasant thought, especially if you have arachnophobia like Pastor Tyler. If ever you need your pet tarantula to be watched while you go out of town, don't call Pastor Tyler.

Words corrupt, words spoken by an untamed tongue can ruin people's lives and they can poison people's souls. We have a lot of people living in this world who are like corpses in Satan's spider web.

God. They have been told that there is no God. They've been told that they can determine their own truth. And they've been promised that those things will lead them to a happier life.

[33 : 19] But that's not what I see. How about you? If anything in this age of fake news and everyday some kind of corruption that's been uncovered, one thing I think that we've all learned is that it's hard to know who you can trust.

And so Christians need to know God's word. Christians need to be hearers of God's word. It is the antidote.

It is the helmet of salvation that keeps the world's poison and corruption from entering our mind and into our lives. now the fifth reason to tame your tongue because the tongue compromises.

The tongue compromises. Verses 9 through 12 James says with it we bless our Lord and Father and with it we curse people who are made in his likeness. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.

My brothers these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree my brothers bear olives or a grapevine produce figs?

[34 : 34] Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water? The application there is pretty obvious isn't it? We can be walking contradictions with how we use our tongues.

One moment Sunday morning praising God the next moment Monday morning cursing those who are created in his image.

In the end James says a hateful heart cannot produce loving works or loving words. And so to what use are you putting your tongue?

Do you use it to excuse sin or to confess sin? Do you use it to speak truth or to spread lies? Do you use it to lift up or to tear down?

Do you use it to praise God or yourself? Like Isaiah we need to be in the presence of the Lord constantly that he will cauterize our lips that our tongues will boast in Jesus Christ and him alone.

[35 : 53] So the main point of application is this submit your tongue to the Lord submit your tongue to the Lord every day every moment of your earthly life.

The other day we were in the car and Jack asked us Danny and I why do some people speak with an accent? And you know we kind of kicked around the idea as to why that is or why that might be but you know you can tell where somebody is from in this country really in this world based upon how they sound based upon their voice and even the choice of words that they use.

If someone from New York City walked into our church someone might hear their accent and they might say well you ain't from here you ain't from around here right I'm from Kansas I'm learning it be patient and vice versa somebody from Oklahoma from the south went up to the northeast they could tell by our accent that we were we were from somewhere else not from around there and so as Christians our voices our tongues must have a biblical twang to them reflecting our transformed hearts that by God's grace we learn to speak with a Christ like accent so people will know that we are different and in seeing that we're different we'll have a chance to share the gospel with our tongues submitted to the Lord that they would know

Jesus too but you can't tame your tongue unless the Holy Spirit has transformed your heart we all sin we all have sin we sin every day I know all of us has used our tongue at some point in time in ways that we wish we could take back we've used them to hurt people to offend to blaspheme God and thankfully for us we know that as 1 John 1 9 says he is faithful to forgive us of all our sins that we confess and he does that all the time thank God for that if you're here this morning and you realize that I don't have a tongue that is tamed and you realize it's because I don't have a transformed heart let me tell you that you are here by God's divine design and appointment to hear this word to hear this truth to hear this gospel that we've sung about and acknowledging your sin and confessing of your sin and repenting of your sin you'll be forgiven completely and totally made a child of God forever because you know what you could never do enough you could never work hard enough to be saved it's all of God it's all by his grace so this morning if you realize my tongue is not tamed because my heart has not been transformed then what you need to do is turn to the Lord Jesus Christ confession of your sins and admittance of your need to be saved and delivered from them and you will be forgiven completely and totally transformed from the inside out I have four questions application questions for you guys to discuss tonight look at them today and this week I encourage you question number one the God of the Bible is a God who speaks how should that reality affect our view of words including our own God of the Bible is a God who speaks how should that reality affect our view of words including our own question number two what do our words tell us about our hearts why is the tongue so difficult to control what do our words tell us about our hearts why is the tongue so difficult to control question three what characteristics should we look for in teachers of

[40 : 20] God's word God holds them to such a high standard when you are listening to someone preach God's word whatever that's on the radio YouTube on your TV what characteristics should you be looking for to make sure that that person who is preaching God's word and teaching God's word to you is someone whom you can trust!

God's say is what you want us to say that it will build up that it will lift up that it will encourage that they will be sprinkled with love and that we would share the gospel with our mouths that more and more people would come to know how great a

Savior Jesus Christ is we ask these things! His name Amen! Amen