

# Taming the Tongue

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 30 April 2014

Preacher: Don Coleman

[ 0 : 00 ] James, that's where we are, and we're going to be getting into chapter 3 here tonight.

You're recalling in your mind what chapter 3, the first half of chapter 3 is about, and it's about the tongue, and it is a pretty familiar ground as we study that chapter, that first part of the chapter, and a number of things that we're going to be looking at, a number of verses and illustrations that James used, we're pretty familiar with that, and so we're kind of on familiar ground, so let's get right into it. Just kind of by way of introduction, James introduces the subject of the tongue with a word about teachers, so he's not just kind of inserting some unrelated subject here in the very first verse of the chapter.

This is related to his whole discourse on the tongue. So in verse 1 you have, my brethren, so again you know he's speaking to believers, and that's important to remember by the way, in fact at every juncture of our study in the book of James, remember that he's writing to, boarding in believers, and that means that believers have a problem with their tongue.

Can I get a witness? Alright? Maybe not a testimony, but I think we all can at least agree that we have a problem with the tongue, and if we disagree with that, then I guess you're saying you're perfect, because James says if you don't have a problem with the tongue, then you're a perfect person.

[ 2 : 09 ] And I don't think we have any perfect people in this room. And I can say that with all confidence, because I know me, myself, and I can assume that like me, you also are not perfect.

We don't have the mastery of our tongues. So he's speaking to believers. He said, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

So this is how he begins the chapter, and begins, kind of going to use this to launch out into his discourse on the tongue. A few things we might say about that.

The Greek word that James used here for teachers is didaskalos, and it's translated masters in the King James Version. I know you're not necessarily looking at your Bibles right now.

That's one of the downsides to using notes. We have a tendency to look at the notes and not look at the Bible. That's one reason why I insert the Scriptures in the notes, so that we can have it all there in front of us.

[ 3 : 08 ] But the King James uses the word masters, and that ought to give us kind of a tip-off on what this word didaskalos means in relation to the church.

It refers to those who hold an official position or even office of teaching in the church. And so that would include pastors, it would include elders, it would include others in very official positions in the church who are teachers.

Now, what James is going to say about the tongue doesn't just apply to official teachers, it applies to all believers. And so, don't worry, this doesn't let you off the hook, just because you may not be in a role of teaching in the church.

So when we get into the issue of the tongue, it's going to apply to all of us. But just understand what verse 1 is talking about here. And so James, really what he's actually doing is, he's speaking to the church, but he really is calling upon those who are members of the church to be very careful.

It's a warning, really, a caution. He calls for a self-limitation of teachers in the church. Now, that's interesting, because in the culture of the day, I mean, the early church, many of these Jewish believers, Jews who have become Christians, they certainly are very close to the way things were as Jews, and the thinking was for a young person, a young man, to aspire to be a rabbi, to enter into the rabbinical school and to become a teacher, was something of really kind of a prideful thing.

[ 5 : 14 ] Kind of like maybe we could come up with something like that in our culture for a father and mother to have a son or daughter who would desire to be a doctor or be a professional in some

way.

That would be a very, not necessarily a prideful thing, though it can be a prideful thing, it would be something to aspire to. And that was the case in the Jewish world, for young people to aspire to be in positions of leadership and to be teachers.

And so that same kind of mentality kind of crossed over into the church, and so it was a bit of a prideful thing for people to desire to be teachers.

That would put them in a place of notoriety, a place of honor. And so James is cautioning them, you need to self-limit that. And why?

Well, clearly because greater responsibility requires greater accountability. You don't become a teacher just because you want to and you want to because of the prestige of it.

[ 6 : 27 ] He said, be very careful about that. Knowing that we, and James is including himself here, shall receive a stricter judgment.

I like the ESV here, judged with stricter judgment. So there's accountability here. So understand, this is a warning, this is a caution.

Unless clearly God is calling you, your church has approached you and you feel God's calling to be in a place of leadership in that sense, to be a teacher, whether it's the teacher of the youngest or teacher of the oldest or those in between, just be cautious.

Because that responsibility carries a great accountability before God. Now, chiefly, teachers will be judged according to how they use their tongues. Because that's the natural question at this point.

Judged for what? I mean, the greater judgment or greater scrutiny of judgment, judgment for what? Well, I think because of the context, the subject that he's now going to launch us into, it has to do with the tongue.

[ 7 : 38 ] How you use the tongue, how you teach, the words that they speak. For we all stumble in many things, he said. If anyone does not stumble in word, he's a perfect man.

So that's how you know that this issue of teachers and the need for people in the church to limit themselves, to not just step right out into teaching and getting ahead of God and not taking into consideration the responsibility of that.

He says the greater judgment, I think, is attached to what they speak, obviously. And not just what they speak, but how their lives, whether or not their lives match what they are actually speaking and teaching.

All right, so in the context, I think teachers then must be sure they are teaching the truth. That goes without saying, doesn't it? That's why he starts with teachers and this issue of teachers in the church and the self-limitation of teachers and then launches right out into the tongue because teachers need to teach the truth.

And teachers must be sure they are practicing the truth they are teaching. All right, we all know that, don't we? In a sense, the same applies to everyone.

[ 9 : 06 ] Doesn't it? Jesus said, and I gave you this quote out of Matthew 12, 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. Now, Jesus, of course, is speaking to Pharisees here. And he also, just before this, mentioning that what we speak comes from the heart.

It's out of the heart. That's where the issues of life are. And then he makes this statement about careless words. Now, if God feels this strongly about careless words, idle words, words that are not in line with him and his word, if he's that serious about it, then he's serious about it for every one of us.

And so this kind of launches us out into the discussion on the tongue. And so that's what James is doing at this point in verse 1.

Now, in addition to chapter 3, verses 1 through 12, which we're going to be studying here tonight, James actually refers to the tongue quite often throughout this book.

[ 10 : 25 ] He's already, in a couple of places, made reference to the tongue. Chapter 1, verse 19, and we studied this a long time ago. Be swift to hear, slow to speak. That's the issue of speaking.

Slow to speak, slow to wrath. In chapter 1, verse 26, there's another reference to the tongue. If anyone among you thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue.

There's almost kind of an introduction to the subject there in chapter 1, and now in chapter 3, it's going to really go headlong into the subject. If you don't bridle your tongue, you deceive your own

heart, and your religion is worthless, he said.

Then in chapter 2, verse 12, he says, So speak and so do. I'm kind of pulling that out of the verse, but the idea is that you do what you speak.

So the tongue and how you use the tongue, very important. And certainly what you speak must match what you do. Chapter 4, verse 11, and we'll get to this by and by.

[ 11 : 28 ] I'm not sure when, but he says, Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother speaks evil of the law and judges the law.

And we'll get to that eventually. And then chapter 5, verse 12, But above all, my brethren, do not swear. That's the using of your tongue, your speech. Do not swear.

Do not swear either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, lest you fall into judgment. And you're wondering, what does all that mean? Well, we'll get to that in a few weeks or so.

Who knows how long that will take. All right, now, getting to this discussion on the tongue, there are three lessons we want to consider tonight concerning the tongue.

Here's number one. The tongue is small but powerful. The tongue is small but powerful. Verses 2 through 5, first part of verse 5.

[ 12 : 35 ] And what James has to say about the tongue is all inclusive. That is, not only what he said, that's not really worded well.

Those he's directing, what he has to say about the tongue, those to whom he is directing, it is all inclusive. For we all stumble in many things. All of us.

Not only in many things, but specifically stumble in this area of the use of the tongue. Every single one of us. That's not Don Coleman speaking. That's what James said. And he was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

And so, if he said all of us do, then we all do. And so, that's how he begins this discussion. And I think when you read throughout these verses, and as we kind of take them step by step, you're going to certainly sense that James is not optimistic about this whole issue of taming or controlling the tongue.

In fact, he says, if anyone does not stumble in word, he's a perfect man. Now, you might think that opens a doorway, or at least the possibility, that some could come to the place where they master their tongue.

[ 13 : 50 ] And actually, he's not saying that at all. He is actually, literally saying that no one will ever come to the place where they don't stumble on a word.

And hence, then, no one will ever come to the place where they're perfect. This is a Greek second-class conditional sentence. Now, you may not remember that, but we've talked about a first-class conditional.

Sometimes you'll have in the Bible the word if, a clause that begins with if, if then, and the first class means that it is a condition that is sure.

So, we could even translate that sense and so on and so forth. But this is a second-class conditional clause or sentence, and the condition is assumed false.

Now, the way you know that is you have to study those who know grammar. Greek grammar and the form of the words and the construction of the sentence reveals to you whether or not this clause is a first-class conditional or a second-class conditional.

[ 14 : 59 ] And this one's second-class conditional. So, it assumes something that is false or even impossible. So, we could reword it this way. If anyone does not stumble in the word, even though no one like that exists or ever could, he would be a perfect man.

That's what he's saying. If it were possible, we can almost call it a hypothetical. If it were possible for someone to control their tongue completely, which is not possible, this is what James is saying, then that person would be a perfect man.

So, it was a rather pessimistic kind of outlook on it. Meaning, you can't tame the tongue. That's James' point.

Actually, I think it's safe to say that his real point here is one of measure. One of measure. And what I mean is, to the degree you control your tongue, and we can control the tongue.

We can, to a degree. And we ought to attempt it. Of course, we can't do it ourselves. We must have grace.

[16:09] We must have the Lord to help us. But to the degree that you do control your tongue, to that same degree, you can control your whole body. That's what James is saying.

You control everything else. To that same degree. To that same measure. So, the underlying truth, then, is not so much just the organ of the tongue and the words you speak, but the maturity of faith. That's the real issue, the underlying issue that we need to understand from this discourse on the tongue. The maturity of faith to bridle the tongue conveys, then, the power to guide the other activities of the body as well.

Or the life as well. And not just away from evil words and actions, but toward good communication. Good actions. So, the tongue is crucial, then. You see, for everything. And it is rooted in, founded in, the maturity of our faith.

[17:18] James uses two illustrations here, then, to help us understand this. And they're very vivid illustrations. The first illustration, indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us.

And we turn their whole body. That's verse 3. That's a very vivid illustration. You may not be into horses. Maybe you've never ridden a horse.

I have on occasion. And half of those times, the horse stepped on my toe. You know, I just don't know anything about horses. But I do understand a little bit about the bridle, the bit, and all that, and what you do with that, and so forth.

And so, the illustration is pretty clear, pretty easy to see. Now, it is important to note that the Greek word translated bits is *kalinós*, but it refers to the entire bridle.

In fact, if you look up the word in a dictionary, the Greek word in the Greek dictionary, then the translation will be bridle. Be bridle.

[18:27] And so, it refers to the entire bridle used to control the horse's movement. So, the bit is the crucial part of it. You can't have a bridle without the bit.

You can't control the animal without the bit. So, using the word bit is not wrong. That's the crucial part of it, but it involves the other parts of the bridle that are used in maneuvering, directing, you know, the horse to go, stop, turn, to the right, to the left, and so forth.

All of that works together. Thus, if we do not control the tongue, here's the point of the illustration. If we do not control the tongue, then the rest of our discipline is worthless.

As you're not going to, nothing else is going to work. If you don't control the tongue, you can just forget any of the rest of it. It almost negates. The untamed tongue negates everything else in your life in regard to spiritual discipline.

That's the point of the illustration. It is interesting to note the connection here between bridling the horse and turning his whole body, that's verse 3, and bridling the tongues and turning our whole bodies.

[19:51] And that's the point, the connection that James is wanting us to see in the illustration. The second illustration, look also at ships.

Although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. That's verse 4.

There's the second illustration, very vivid illustration. I think we all understand that. We can see that. So, even in the midst of a storm at sea, here's the idea, James is saying, trying to convey, a ship can be guided, mastered, by a tiny little rudder.

Even in the midst, so he's using an extreme example. Now, you know, I don't know if you've ever tried to navigate a sailboat. I did one time in my life, and it was a disaster.

I didn't know what I was doing, because you not only have the rudder to deal with, but you've got the sail and all that. And I just, you know, I had great trouble, but I did understand that that rudder was key.

[21:05] It would go where I would turn that rudder, you know. And I had difficulty, even in a peaceful body of water. It wasn't the ocean, it was the lake.

But he's saying, you know, even in stormy weather, that boat will respond to that small little rudder there on the boat.

Alright, so if that's the case, even in a stormy sea, the ship can be guided, mastered by a tiny rudder, then the same is true of the believer's life. Here's the connection, here's the point of the illustration. And whether it's stormy or not, you know, sometimes we have stormy life, but the tongue is small, but it's powerful.

Even so, the tongue is a little member, small part of the body, and it boasts of great things. It has great power. We need to understand that about our tongue.

So, it does matter how we use it. It does matter the words that come out of it. You know, sometimes a person will say, well, I can't help myself. You know, I just say what I speak, or what I think.

[ 22 : 18 ] And, well, great, that's the problem. Actually, the problem is much deeper than that. You know, because out of the heart does the mouth speak.

You know, what's down in the well comes up in the pump. But, we can control, and must control, look to the control of our tongue.

It's small, but it is powerful. The illustration, this second illustration, harkens back to chapter 1 and James' lesson on faith.

Because I want to make sure we keep these two things together. It's not just simply a tongue, you know, being used and, you know, unconnected to anything else.

It's connected to the maturity of our faith. And so, that's why it harkens back, I think, to chapter 1. Thus, the tongue acts according to the maturity of faith.

[ 23 : 23 ] He who doubts, he's talking about faith here, he who doubts, or is faithless, is like the wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. So, we can see the two analogies connect the two together.

The tongue, here's number two, the tongue is significant. It's a significant part of our bodies but perilous. Perilous.

And verses 5, the latter part of verse 5 to verse 8. Alright, so, here's the idea. The tongue is a significant and necessary member of the human body but it, but perilous, even dangerous, if used wrongly.

He says in verse 5, see how great a forest a little fire kindles. Now, that's another illustration, really more an analogy. He says, here, here's how you need to understand, see what, just a little spark will burn down an entire forest.

And we understand the analogy. It's pretty poignant. Let's just take what he says there and take it a little bit further. The tongue is a small fire.

[ 24 : 41 ] That's what James called it. I think the NIV uses the word spark. Really, the word means fire. It's the same word fire that he's going to use here a little bit.

Same word for fire. That's a small one. Small little fire. We could even say the flame of a match. I've told this story, used it to illustrate something else, but when I was a little kid, several of us kids, we went out to a field behind our house where a bunch of brush had been piled up.

It probably wasn't as big as I remembered it, but it was big enough. And we thought we would play with matches and light a little bit of it. One match. One match. And put that to that, and it exploded in flames so much so we ran for our lives.

So that one little match ignited and burned that entire pile. It may have burned more than that. I don't know. Because I'd go back to find out. Of course, dummy me, I left my bike there, so the police knocked on my door a bit later and asked my parents if the bike belonged to me.

Yes, where'd you find it? Well, back here where this fire went. Anyway, so I got caught. That's why I used that illustration for be sure your sins will find you out. But we understand the analogy.

[ 26 : 05 ] It's very poignant. Just like a small fire, fire, even a spark that could ignite and burn to the ground an entire forest. Our tongue is just like that.

The tongue is, and he goes on to say, the tongue is a world of iniquity. Or, literally, the world of iniquity. What does that mean? Well, you know, the short answer is contained within the tongue. really that way of speaking and speech, that organ of speaking. Contained within that are all the representations of wickedness in the world.

Put it even simpler, there is no evil the tongue cannot tell or initiate. Think about that. The world of iniquity. One tongue, there is no limit to what one tongue can do.

in telling about wicked and iniquitous things, about actually initiating vile and wicked things.

[ 27 : 16 ] And, that's the tongue, the world of iniquity. It's very poignant. And then, he says, the tongue is so set among our members that it defiles, stains, corrupts, the whole body.

He's kind of repeating this, saying it in different ways. He's already made this point a couple of times and illustrated it a couple of times. The point being, we can violate every commandment.

Every one of God's commandments, we can do it with the tongue. There are limitations to what you can do with your hands and with your feet and with your eyes and ears, but there's no limit to what

you can do with your tongue.

That's his point. You can violate every one. For example, and I kind of thought about this and I could have gone a little bit further. I'll just give you a few examples. With the tongue, we can profane the name of God.

We can take his name in vain. With the tongue, we know that. With our tongue, we can worship false gods. And then God not being the one true God.

[ 28 : 19 ] With the tongue, we can steal a person's reputation. You can steal with the tongue. With the tongue, you can murder. We certainly know that. Jesus mentioned that.

With the tongue, we can express lust and immorality and adultery. We can do all that with the tongue. Now, obviously, again, it comes from deeper in. And that's why the tongue is so crucial because it's attached to everything else.

And if you don't control the tongue, then you don't control anything. And it defiles, it stains, it corrupts the entire Bible.

a body, rather. Then go a little step further. The tongue is set on fire by hell. And that's another interesting expression that James uses, and I will add, not easy to necessarily understand.

But it carries, I think, a two-fold meaning. One, hell, the idea is that what's going on with the tongue, or what you can do with the tongue.

[ 29 : 27 ] It's so attached to hell. Hell has extensions in this world and representations in this world, and one of them is evil speaking.

It's so attached that way to hell. The other would be that since hell is associated with Satan, now he's not there now, but he will be.

It's associated with Satan and is the place of eternal torture for him, then James may be saying that the root of trouble with the tongue is the activity of Satan. So the tongue is the extension of hellishness.

And the tongue is representative and even prompted by the activity of Satan himself.

Serious thing, isn't it? All of that attached to that little thing inside our mouths behind our teeth, that thing we need to keep behind our teeth more often than we do.

[ 30 : 33 ] And all of that attached to the tongue. Now in the next analogy, James identifies the tongue as a unique, one-of-a-kind animal.

kind of likens it to an animal. Every kind of beast and bird and reptile and creature of the sea is tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no man can tame the tongue.

There he comes right out very plainly and says it. You know, and I just listed a few that I could think of, man's been able to teach or tame or train, bears to dance, and by the way, also to wrestle.

We had a man in our church when I pastored in Harrisburg, forgot about him, and for a number of years he was a promoter, wrestling promoter, just kind of local events, and he promoted a wrestling bear, a bear that would wrestle, or rattle, depends on where you're from, out there in the ring, and he was trained to do that kind of thing.

So you can train a bear, you can kangaroos to box, you can train dolphins to talk, in a sense, birds to do acrobats, and they can talk as well, monkeys to act human, you know, dress like a human, drink, and do all kinds of things.

[ 31 : 56 ] But no man can tame his own tongue, that's what James says, what God says, no man can, but God can. And that's really the answer, isn't it?

we can't do it ourselves, but God can, if we'll submit to him. Now in his closing words of verse 8, James takes us back to the Garden of Eden and the serpent.

He says the tongue is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison, and the imagery is of a viper, a venomous serpent, and kind of takes us back to the garden.

Satan, then, the serpent tempter, used evil words to lead Adam and Eve astray and to poison their thinking about God with his lies, and so this is the perilous nature of the tongue.

It's poisonous, the tongue is and can be often used in that sense. Alright, finally, third lesson, we're almost there, almost finished, the tongue is supportive, but paradoxical.

[ 33 : 12 ] I just had to find a P word there, but that is what I want to convey. The tongue has many good and useful functions to support life and spiritual growth in the body of Christ.

Clearly it does, but it is often paradoxical, self-contradictory, it's unreliable, inconsistent, we could use a number of words to describe that.

James presents two ways to view the paradoxical nature of the tongue through some stark contrasts.

In verses 9 and 10, with the same tongue, tongue, or with the same tongue, we bless or praise our God and Father, and with it we curse men.

It's self-contradictory. Who have been made in the similitude or likeness of God, so we curse men who are in the likeness of God.

[ 34 : 15 ] Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Have you ever experienced this? One minute you're praying, praising God, worshiping God, and then the next minute something comes out of your mouth.

You say, where in the world did that come from? How did I? Have you ever had that experience? You know, just blessing God, thanking God, and then you'll say some ugly thing to a person or about a person to another person.

It just comes out of seemingly nowhere. There's a stark contrast here, and that's how he's presenting this kind of paradoxical nature of the tongue.

Second, through some silly contradictions. They're silly. Does the spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? The answer is no, of course.

How silly. It reminds me of my granddaughter, our oldest granddaughter. She likes to say that.

That's silly. Maybe that's where I came up with the word silly.

[ 35 : 29 ] Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives? Or grapevine bear figs? Ridiculous. Of course not.

Thus, no spring yields both salt, water, and fresh. There's silly contradictions that are helping to illustrate the self-contradictory nature of the tongue.

Now, I'll just close with a quote. The tongue is our greatest opportunity for good and the greatest threat for evil in our lives. Would you agree with that? I think so.

No man can tame the tongue. We can never take it off the leash. Our tongues must always be in check. Unless it is under God's control, it will strike out.

The mastery of our tongues is only possible through the Lordship of Christ in our lives.