

James 3:1-12

"Taming The Tongue"

Responsibility & accountability, that's what God places upon the words we use. Way too often we underestimate the power of a spoken word. – That is, the way our words impact & influence others. They can be directive, destructive, encouraging, edifying, discouraging, or disheartening. A well-timed word can set someone on the pathway to greatness or completely derail their otherwise fruitful trajectory in life.

The capacity of speech, the ability to translate & communicate thought is one of the greatest gifts God gave to mankind. By our tongue we can worship & praise our Creator, we can pray, proclaim God's Word & lead the lost to J.C. ... We can also fill a heart w/perversion & pollution, we can poison people's minds, gossip, slander, embark upon smear campaigns & commit character assassination... The proverbs put it like this, "*Death and life are in the power of the tongue,*"¹ God holds us responsible & accountable for the way we use our tongue.

Too often we speak before we think, but that's the wrong order. Someone said, "You are the master of the *unspoken* word, but the *spoken* word is master of you." Meaning, it's *under* your control before it comes out of your mouth. But once it leaves your mouth, it's *out* of your control.

James has been speaking of our *works* as believers. But not at the expense or in a way that would somehow overshadow or diminish our *words* as believers.

Vs 1-2

Back in Vs 19-20 of Ch 1 we spoke of the open format in the synagogues of the ancient world. As to where today we anticipate & appreciate a basic monologue for our time of teaching. In the ancient world they would be much more open to allowing anyone to say or share something that was on their heart or mind. (You find Paul the apostle taking advantage of that opportunity throughout the book of Acts when he would visit various synagogues throughout the known world as a platform to preach the gospel).

But James, in speaking to those a little newer to the faith was saying, "Don't be quick to offer your own opinion or enter a debate w/the leader of the service. You're there to receive God's word, not show everyone how smart you are." Here, he kind of picks up on that same mentality. Evidently, they were having problems w/a lot of men wanting to be sort of seen in the spotlight of the teacher/spiritual leader of the local assembly.

¹ [The New King James Version](#). (1982). (Pr 18:21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

So, James seeks to put those who would jockey for that position in check w/this incredibly sobering admonition (at least to me, & I trust to you as well), “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.”

It’s easy for people to be drawn *toward* & attracted *to* the authority & prestige of the platform but forget about the tremendous accountability & responsibility (before God) that comes along w/it!

Jesus said it like this, “*For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.*”² Pertaining to our present passage; the more knowledge a person has, or the more *access* to knowledge that a person has, the greater the responsibility & accountability that person has before God. & When you’re given the platform to instruct, direct & correct people concerning the *heart & mind* of God as it relates to the *word* of God, you’re entering an arena whereby the margin for error reduces radically. (Of course, that’s not to say that those who teach God’s word will lead lives of sinless perfection, James readily confesses that *we all* stumble in *many* things. Though certainly we have a right to expect an additional element of character from those who teach/preach God’s Word. We’re to *practice* what we *preach*. Our character should coincide w/the principles we put forth. Again, not sinless perfection, but we should be growing in that godly direction.)

Now; I want to be very clear that there’s nothing wrong w/having it in your heart to want to teach the word of God! If God has placed an unction in your heart, that’s wonderful! But often, people have some other motive or incentive for seeking the platform. They’ve not stopped to count the cost in teaching the *word* of God having not been gifted nor *called* of God to such an office... & It’s the people who *suffer* for it. Therefore, *they* will be *accountable* for it... Think of the damage that can be done by a teacher who stands before you unprepared, unstudied, or unequipped for the task. They’re seeking to represent God, but have never been called *by* God...

People trust their pastors to help establish the course of their life... Meaning, they trust you to teach them & guide them in the truth of the ways/word of God! If you point them in the wrong direction... God will hold you accountable for that! Think of all the cults, the various “isms” of the world or even Christians who are brought under the sway of an eloquent, articulate, perhaps entertaining individual...

² [The New King James Version](#). (1982). (Lk 12:48). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

& They're led to believe the most outlandish, bizarre things... by men who misrepresent &/or distort the truth of the Word of God. The teacher of the word of God isn't to stand before others so as to stroke their own ego... but to *equip/edify* those before whom they stand (to their *eternal* benefit) & *glorify* God.

& Listen, though we're speaking here w/the emphasis upon the ministry of the pulpit. Let's not limit the admonition to the position of a Sr pastor. What about those who teach home Bible studies? Men's/Women's studies? Youth groups or C.M.? How many people will sluff off responsibility if they're teaching kids because... well... they're kids. I can kind of mail it in or make it up if I don't know... be careful. If God will hold us accountable who teach people w/critical thinking skills, how much more those who teach those who are prone to simply trust you because you're the grown up? (Just something to think about).

Seems like an appropriate time to remind ourselves of the exhortation that Paul sent to Timothy, *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."*³

"For we all stumble in many things." That's not to excuse it, or justify it, but James does acknowledge the truth of it. We all sin & fall short of the glory of God... If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves & the truth is not in us (1 Jn 1:8).

& If you don't stumble in word... you're a perfect man, completely spiritually mature. What does it mean to "stumble in word"? It could be reflected in what we say of ourselves, through boasting or exaggerating or selective reporting... We stumble in word through criticism or gossip, slander, or anger. We stumble in word through flattery or cruelty or insincerity when trying to gain favor.

Your tongue will tell on you, it will expose the inner character of who you really are. Jesus said it like this, *"For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."*⁴ *The mouth will make known what's happening in our heart. Words so often serve as the revelation of our inner character. I don't think any of us would like an mp3 file to replay for everyone everything we've spoken over the last month or so... Our tongue will tell on us.*

There's only 1 Man who's ever walked the topside of this earth who never stumbled in word & was able bridle (control) His whole being... The Perfect Man, J.C.

Vs 3-6

³ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (2 Ti 2:15). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁴ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Mt 12:34). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

I trust that you're picking up on the pattern in the book of James that offers an exhortation followed by a practical illustration.

He's emphasizing the weight of responsibility regarding the words we employ. How that the tongue is much smaller than so many other parts of your body (your biceps or your leg muscles, your hands, or feet) but it contains much more power than any of the others. The tongue may be small, but it's powerfully influential. & He points to 3 examples of otherwise small things that wield tremendous power, power to direct & power to destroy.

He says, "Consider the bit in the horse's mouth." We put this little piece of material (metal or whatever) in a horse's mouth & can direct this massive beast in any direction we choose. This little rudder on the back of a ship can direct the entire ship, even in the most adverse conditions, against winds & waves. This little component setting the course & the direction that affects & influences the lives of others.

Think about the influence that the tongue has over the lives of others. A judge says, "Guilty" or "Not Guilty" & impacts the destiny & entire trajectory of the person standing before them, their family & many of their friends in a single moment of time. The President speaks a few words (signs a few papers) & we're a nation at war. His words will set the direction of millions of lives. A single, "yes" or "no" from the lips of a parent can alter the course of their child's life.

We tend to think that our words aren't that important. But never underestimate the guidance that you give, the influence you wield w/the words that you speak or choose not to speak. The wrong word can send a listener spiraling down the wrong path. A deliberate lie can change the course of a life, leading it to destruction... Something as small as the tongue has tremendous power for good or for evil. David (the sweet psalmist of Israel) said, *"I will guard my ways, Lest I sin with my tongue; I will restrain my mouth with a muzzle, While the wicked are before me."*⁵ He didn't want to misrepresent the Lord around the unbeliever. Engaging in those inappropriate stories or jokes at work... It can set someone in a direction, solidify them in their minds that somehow, we're no different than they are...

But a word spoken in due season. A word of encouragement or compassion can direct a soul out of sin & into salvation.

⁵ [The New King James Version](#). (1982). [Ps 39:1]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Jesus speaks to a woman at a well (Jn 4) & changes her life (& many people from her city's lives) forever. Peter preaches the gospel on the Day of Pentecost & 3,000 souls came to salvation through faith in J.C. (Acts 2). The tongue has the power to direct.

Of course, if the tongue is like a bit in a horse's mouth, or a rudder on a ship, it warrants the question: who (or what) holds the reigns, who (or what) steers the rudder? Some people have no hand on the reigns at all, they just say whatever comes to mind... Others may allow emotions, or their carnal nature to dictate what they say...

James is going to point us to the Spirit of God having *His* hands on the reigns, controlling the "rudder". Again, David prayed, *"Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips. Do not incline my heart to any evil thing,"*⁶

Not only can the tongue direct, it can *destroy*. James likens it to a little flame that sets an entire forest on fire. How many families, or church bodies have been engulfed in the fires of gossip, hearsay, or heated words? Proverbs 16:27-28 says this, *"An ungodly man digs up evil, And it is on his lips like a burning fire. A perverse man sows strife, And a whisperer separates the best of friends."*⁷ The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity.

As a kid, maybe you heard the phrase, "Sticks & stone may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Sounds good, it's not true. A bone will heal & things can return to normal. The bitter pain of a hateful/hurtful word spoken against us can last a lifetime. A neglectful word of sarcasm or criticism can leave a lasting injury... The opposite is also true. A well-timed word of encouragement or compliment can inspire someone for the rest of their lives... Scripture says it like this, *"A wholesome tongue is a tree of life, But perverseness in it breaks the spirit."*⁸ & Again, *"A soft answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, But the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness."*⁹

The tongue is a fire... Let me give you one more. *"Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death, Is the man who deceives his neighbor, And says, "I was only joking!"*¹⁰ This is the person who gives no regard to the destructive power of the tongue...

Not only is the tongue powerful, it's perverse... "a world of iniquity". It utters profanity, blasphemy, criticism, cruelty & lies. It's no wonder the Bible warns us that in the multitude of words, sin is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips... is wise. (Prov 10:19)

⁶ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Ps 141:3-4). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
⁷ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Pr 16:27-28). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
⁸ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Pr 15:4). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
⁹ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Pr 15:1-2). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
¹⁰ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Pr 26:18-19). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Vs 7-8

It's an incredible thing. Man has been able to tame & take control of virtually every kind of beast, or bird, reptile, or beast. They used to use pigeons to carry messages, there are lion tamers, people train falcons to hunt, whales, dolphins & seals to do all kinds of stunts. Dogs, parrots, elephants, ... on & on. But no one can tame the tongue... think about that. Easier to control a killer whale than it is to tame the tongue.

It's an "unruly" (unable to be controlled) evil, full of deadly poison. It's loaded w/venom & set to strike at any moment. Many times, the wickedness lies in the fact that someone w/malicious intent will inject just a little bit of poison in an otherwise benign conversation hoping that it will eventually find its target & wound the person they're wanting the news to reach &/or do damage to... The poison of the tongue will murder a person's reputation, (we call it character assassination) through slander & the spread of misinformation.

"No man can tame the tongue." But don't despair, what's impossible w/men is possible w/God. For w/God *nothing* will be impossible. It's kind of crazy to think about but essentially what James is saying is that only God can overcome the uncontrollable tongue. For the fruit of the Spirit is ... self-control.

(Now James points out the inconsistent character of the tongue).

Vs 9-12

From the highest calling to the lowest evil, the tongue can utter them both. We can bless & praise our God & Father in one breath, & curse the very ones who've been made in His likeness w/the next.

Peter is a prime example of the inconsistency of the tongue. In one moment he confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. In another moment he's denying that even knows Jesus 3x's... The same apostle (John) who exhorts us as little children to love one another, wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village! **Our tongues are instruments of inconsistency & James says, "My brethren, these things ought not to be so." We shouldn't be speaking one way at church & another way at home or at work or at the gym...**

He says, "You don't see a spring sending out fresh water & salt (or bitter) water from the same opening do you?" "You don't see a fig tree bearing olives..." How is it then that our speech can be filled w/blessing & cursing? How is it that we edify & insult w/the same tongue?

We send forth fresh & bitter water from the same opening... It's that battle between the flesh & the spirit...

But the general exhortation is this. We bear the fruit of the nature we're born with. An olive tree will bear olives. A fig tree will bear figs. If you're born of the flesh (a natural birth) your life will show the fruit of that. If you're born again of the Spirit of God, (a supernatural birth through faith in J.C.) your life will bring forth the fruit of *that*. – Close

The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart... If you're spewing raw sewage out of your mouth, it's because there's a lot of junk in your heart. Our mouth makes known what's happening in our heart. We need God to do a work *in our heart*. For w/the *heart* one believes unto righteousness & w/the mouth confession is made unto salvation. The mouth will reveal what's happening in our heart.

If you know the Lord, perhaps today would be a good day to ask God to wash & cleanse your heart, to renew the fire of your 1st love relationship w/Him. Be more carefully considerate of the words you choose to use. Watch what happens when you start uttering words like, "Please, thank you, yes/no sir (or ma'am)" try saying, "I'm sorry" or "forgive me" try these words, "I love you." You might be surprised how your situations might transform.

If you don't know the Lord, today would be a good day to ask Christ to come into your life & give you a brand new heart. To create in you a clean heart & renew a right spirit w/in you. Turn from your sin, trust in Jesus & come alive... in Him.

Prayer points:

God we ask that You would get a grip on our heart & tame our tongues by the power of Your Spirit. That we would use our words to edify others & glorify You. Give us greater sensitivity in the way we use our words & have Your way in our lives.

It's interesting how often I'll talk to someone about the Lord & they'll tell me that they need to get some things worked out before they come to Christ. That's like saying you have to get well before you go to the Dr. You don't change, then come to Jesus. You come to Jesus & He changes you from the inside out. God loves you, Christ died for you, come to Him & leave here a new creation.