

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 3-8-15 AM NOTES  
"TAME YOUR TONGUE!"  
JAMES 3:1-12  
#10 in Series, "James: Practical Wisdom"

"The tongue is *you* in a unique way. It is a tattletale that tells on the heart and discloses the real person. Not only that, but misuse of the tongue is perhaps the easiest way to sin. There are some sins that an individual may not be able to commit simply because he does not have the opportunity. But there are no limits to what one can say, no built-in restraints or boundaries."

—John MacArthur

**Psalms 106:32-33 (NIV)** "<sup>32</sup>By the waters of Meribah they angered the Lord, and trouble came to Moses because of them; <sup>33</sup>for they rebelled against the Spirit of God, and rash words came from Moses' lips."

**Isaiah 6:5 (NKJV)** "So I said: 'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I *am* a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips...'"

**Matthew 12:34b (NKJV)** "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."

**Matthew 12:36 (NKJV)** "But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment."

I. The Power of the Tongue (v. 1)

**2 Timothy 2:15b (HCSB)** "...correctly teaching the word of truth."

II. The Possibility of the Tongue (v. 2)

**James 3:2b (HCSB)** "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a mature man..."

**Matthew 12:34b (NASB)** "For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart."

III. The Pictures of the Tongue (vv. 3-5a)

A. The Bit in the Horse's Mouth (v. 3)

B. The Ship and the Rudder (vv. 4, 5a)

IV. The Potential of the Tongue (vv. 5b-9)

A. The Potential to Corrupt (vv. 5b-6)

**Psalms 52:2-4 (HCSB)** "<sup>2</sup>Like a sharpened razor, your tongue devises destruction, working treachery. <sup>3</sup>You love evil instead of good, lying instead of speaking truthfully. *Selah* <sup>4</sup>You love any words that destroy, you treacherous tongue!"

**2 Corinthians 10:5b (NKJV)** "...bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ".

B. The Potential to Contaminate (vv. 7-8)

V. The Purifying of the Tongue (vv. 9-12)

## AN ACTION PLAN TO CONTROL YOUR TONGUE

1. Allow the Holy Spirit to Fill Your Life

**Ephesians 5:18 (NKJV)** “And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit.”

2. Ask the Lord to Enable You to Talk Less

**Proverbs 10:19 (NKJV)** “In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise.”

3. Commit Your Speech to the Lord at the Beginning of Each Day

**Psalms 141:3 (NKJV)** “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.”

4. Confront in Love and Refuse to Listen to an Untamed Tongue

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 3-8-15 AM

“TAME YOUR TONGUE!”

JAMES 3:1-12

#10 in Series, “James: Practical Wisdom”

The theme that runs through the book of James is that real faith, saving faith, biblical faith changes a person’s life. Counterfeit faith is just pious talk without a pattern of good works to back it up or give evidence of it. In chapter 1, we saw that real faith is manifested in how we deal with trials and temptations. In chapter 2 we saw that real faith is characterized by good works, and not just mental assent to certain facts. Today, in chapter 3 we are going to see that real faith affects your tongue – the way you talk.

I am convinced that the easiest and most common way that we sin is with our tongue (I am using “tongue” in this message to refer to our words). In the Scripture there are many negative words used to describe the tongue – wicked, deceitful, perverse, filthy, corrupt, flattering, slanderous, gossiping, blasphemous, foolish, boasting, complaining, cursing, sensual, vile, and a host of other words! Two of the 10 Commandments deal with the tongue. In Proverbs 6 there is a list of 7 things the Lord hates and 2 of them relate to the tongue. Each of the 5 chapters in James has something to say about our tongue or speech. John MacArthur has some insightful comments about the tongue and why the Bible has so much to say about this powerful weapon that can be used for good or evil. “The tongue is *you* in a unique way. It is a tattletale that tells on the heart and discloses the real person. Not only that, but misuse of the tongue is perhaps the easiest way to sin. There are some sins that an individual may not be able to commit simply because he does not have the opportunity. But there are no limits to what one can say, no built-in restraints or boundaries.” [John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: James*, page 144].

Do you remember the Unabomber? Between 1978 and 1995 this Harvard educated man sent packaged bombs to universities, airlines, and other places. When people opened up what they thought was a normal

package, it exploded in their faces. Our words generated by the tongue can be like those bombs in how they affect lives. There are a lot of verbal Unabombers dropping word bombs that do major damage in lives. Many times husbands and wives drop word bombs on one another and cause permanent damage to their marriage. Instead of treating her with love and gentleness, he uses words to wound her and scar her. Instead of treating him with respect and kindness, she drops word bombs of ridicule and belittlement accompanied by constant complaining. How many children have been wounded by word bombs from an untamed tongue such as, “Can’t you do anything right?” or “You’re stupid and you’re never going to amount to anything” or “I wish you’d never been born”. Oh the power of the tongue! All of us have experienced being encouraged and wounded by words. Many of us can recall both hurtful and encouraging words spoken to us 20, 30, 40, or more years ago. Words are powerful! For every single word in Adolph Hitler’s autobiographical manifesto, *Mein Kampf* that laid out his political ideology and future plans for Germany, 125 people died in World War II!

In the book of Proverbs – another book of wisdom, the tongue is close to the top as the number one topic that is dealt with. Even biblical heroes struggled with taming their tongues. Moses struggled with angry words. **Psalms 106:32-33 (NIV)** “<sup>32</sup> By the waters of Meribah they angered the Lord, and trouble came to Moses because of them; <sup>33</sup> for they rebelled against the Spirit of God, and rash words came from Moses’ lips.” In **Isaiah 6:5a (NKJV)** Isaiah speaks of his struggle with his tongue. “So I said: ‘Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I *am* a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips...’” Peter often spoke when he should have remained silent and even cursed the Lord with his words.

Perhaps the reason that the Bible says so much about our words is that our words reveal what is in our heart. This truth is central to understanding this passage. In the quote used earlier from John MacArthur, he called our words the “tattletale that tells on the heart and discloses the real person”. The Bible says in **Matthew 12:34b (NKJV)** “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” Our words are not to be treated by God as trivial. As we move from faith and works in chapter 2, let’s look at faith and our words in chapter 3. It is as if Dr. James is saying to us, his patients, “stick out your tongue so we can examine it and discern the state of your spiritual health.”

## I. The Power of the Tongue (V1)

Since the teacher’s work is performed primarily through the use of the tongue, a controlled tongue is essential for a teacher. A little background will help us better understand this warning that James gives. He is not trying to talk people out of proclaiming God’s Word! In Jewish culture, the most respected person was the Rabbi. They were held in high esteem. People sought to serve the Rabbis. It was considered an honor to do something for a Rabbi – such as carry a load or assist them in any way. A lot of people wanted to be a Rabbi. It seems that this desire carried over to those who taught in the church. The making of disciples involves teaching and in Hebrews 5:12 the writer of Hebrews rebukes his readers for not yet becoming teachers after a period of training. So James is not trying to talk people out of teaching God’s Word, but he wants them to know what a serious responsibility it is to do so.

There are two dangers that teachers of God’s Word need to be aware of and to avoid at all costs. First, there is the danger of teaching our own opinions and prejudices and distorting the meaning of God’s Word. Teachers must have a commitment to teach God’s Word truthfully and accurately. Our words must not misinterpret God’s Word. That is a heavy responsibility! The second thing that must be avoided is a teacher contradicting with his life what he is teaching with his tongue. The more light, the more truth we have, the higher is our responsibility to apply it. Teachers have a higher accountability because they have been given more light. That responsibility scares me. I get to spend 25-30 hours a week studying God’s Word. Because of that privilege, I will be held to a higher accountability. Before I preach I most always have to spend some time repenting and praying for God’s power to obey the truth’s I am teaching. I have a great fear of ever playing the hypocrite. John Calvin, one of the reformers preached in a church where the pulpit was high up in the building. He said it would be better to fall from the pulpit area and break his neck than to fail to apply what he was preaching to his own life. Certainly, no teacher is perfect, but teachers must be quick and genuine “repenters”. In addition, they must take care to, as Paul said in **2**

**Timothy 2:15b (HCSB)** "...correctly [teach] the word of truth." It is one thing to sin with the tongue in everyday conversation. It is a sin at another level of consequence to not take seriously the teaching of the Word of God and treat sin lightly or to treat the accuracy of what is being taught lightly.

We see clearly the power of the tongue especially when it comes to teaching.

## II. The Possibility of the Tongue (V2)

The key word in verse 2 is "perfect". This Greek word translated "perfect" (*teleios*) has two possible meanings. It can mean absolute perfection, without any sin or failure. That is probably not the meaning James is referring to since we know that as long as we have this flesh we will not reach perfection. If simply not speaking wrongly would make us come to sinless perfection, the deaf and mute person would be without sin. The Greek word can also mean complete or mature. The HCSB says, "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is **a mature man**..." I think this is obviously the intended meaning. In other words, spiritual maturity is tied to a controlled tongue. What is it that controls the tongue? It is the heart. **Matthew 12:34b (NASB)** "For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart." Heart as it is used here is referring here to the soul – the mind, emotions, and will. As we allow the Holy Spirit to fill our heart, reign in our emotions, control our will, and guide our mind, we will speak with our tongue that which pleases God and keep growing in spiritual maturity. Do you want to grow in spiritual maturity and Christ-likeness? Then allow the Holy Spirit to fill your heart and then He will control your tongue. James is saying that if your tongue is under the Holy Spirit's control, the rest of the body can be brought under control. That's what those words, "able also to bridle the whole body" means. The word "bridle" is translated "control" in the HCSB. When the Holy Spirit controls the part of your body that is most vulnerable to sin (the tongue), then controlling the other areas of life will follow.

## III. The Pictures of the Tongue (V3-5a)

In these verses, James gives us two pictures or illustrations of the power of the tongue.

### A. The Bit in the Horse's Mouth (V3)

This illustration is especially appropriate because the bit actually lies on the horse's tongue. When the bit is attached to the bridle and reigns the rider can make the horse obey. As the rider pulls back on the reins, the bit presses against the horse's tongue. The rider who controls the horse's tongue controls the horse's whole body. In fact a hundred pound woman can control a 1,000 pound horse with a 2 pound bit. A horse controlled by a bit can be of great use for riding or pulling a carriage or plow, but without a bit, that same horse can cause great damage. Even so, when our tongues are under the Holy Spirit's control, we can be useful in the work God has given us to do, but when the tongue is out of control we only do damage.

### B. The Ship and the Rudder (V4, 5a)

Some of the ships in the first century were fairly large. The ship that Paul was on when he was being taken to Rome held 276 people (Acts 27:37). Even on today's super-sized ships, the rudder is relatively small. Yet it is the rudder that determines the direction of the ship. The illustration of the ship and the rudder is the same as the bit and the horse – something very small can control something very large.

During WW II, the mightiest German battleship, the Bismarck, sank because its rudder was immobilized. Germany launched the Bismarck to attack allied shipping. It was intercepted by the British ship, the Hood and the Bismarck sunk it in less than 10 minutes. The British put everything into the counterattack but the Bismarck, only lightly damaged streamed to the safety of harbor. However one small plane dropped a torpedo that struck the Bismarck's rudder. The Bismarck could only go in circles. Within a few hours, dozens of ships and planes brought all their firepower against the Bismarck until it sank. A huge ship that could not be sunk was sunk because of a bad rudder. How many Christian lives have been sunk because of an out of control tongue?

Even though the tongue is small like a bit in a horse's mouth and a rudder on a ship, the tongue can often control virtually every aspect of our behavior. Just as the rider controls the bit and the pilot controls

the ship, the heart controls the tongue and when the heart is controlled by the Holy Spirit, the tongue is under the Spirit's control.

#### IV. The Potential of the Tongue (V5b-9)

##### A. The Potential to Corrupt (V5b-6)

Back in 1969 there was a "contemporary" song that became popular that had a line in it, "It only takes a spark to get a fire going". That song was talking about a spark of God's love. James had a different spark in mind. The tongue when out of the Holy Spirit's control can set off a fire that devastates lives. In 1871, it is reported that late one evening in Chicago Mrs. O'Leary was milking her cow when the cow kicked over the lantern Mrs. O'Leary had set beside her to see what she was doing. The lantern set the hay on fire and Mrs. O'Leary couldn't get it put out. Thus it is reported that the great Chicago fire was started. The facts of the fire are these: 17,500 buildings were destroyed, 300 people died, 100,000 people were left homeless, and it is estimated that it cost the city over \$400,000,000 (1871 \$). Oh how like the Chicago fire is the tongue. Passing on gossip and starting rumors has caused suffering and damage to lives that is beyond calculation. Countless reputations have been ruined by out of control tongues. **Psalms 52:2-4 (HCSB)** "2 Like a sharpened razor, your tongue devises destruction, working treachery. 3 You love evil instead of good, lying instead of speaking truthfully. *Selah* 4 You love any words that destroy, you treacherous tongue!"

Verse 6 is emphasizing once again how the tongue stains the whole body. The tongue is not necessarily more evil than the other members of our body, but speech is involved in most every form of wickedness. Wicked words are attached to wicked deeds. **James 3:6b (NKJV)** And the tongue... sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell." That can also be translated, "sets on fire the circle of life". It probably had reference to the wheels on a Roman chariot. The wheels had a wooden hub on a wooden axle. When the lubrication was gone the friction would set the whole wheel including the spokes on fire. He is saying that an uncontrolled tongue sets all the spokes of your life on fire; it contaminates your whole life. Are you seeing the damaging work of a tongue that is not under the Holy Spirit's control. STOP! Are you thinking of someone right now that you wish could hear this? Maybe its someone who is sort of known as "the mouth of the south"? Don't do that! Turn the spotlight on yourself. Is your tongue setting your life on fire?

James says that the tongue is set on fire by hell. By that he means that it is Satan that gives the tongue its power for evil. The grammar of that phrase, "it is set on fire by hell" indicates continuing action. The tongue is continually being set on fire from hell. The out of control tongue is tied to satanic power. In marriage counseling, over and over I hear things like, "all we ever do is argue". I say, "Well, just stop!" The couple usually looks at me like I have 3 eyes! Why don't they just stop? It is because they don't realize that their speech is under the control of the wicked one and he is implanting those thoughts and words in their mind. It originates from the demonic. The only solution is to look to the Holy Spirit for power to just hush and do as **2 Corinthians 10:5 (NKJV)** says, "...bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ". When we capture the thought that fire from hell doesn't make it to the tongue!

##### B. The Potential to Contaminate (V7-8)

Notice the title of this message: "Tame Your Tongue". Now look at **James 3:8a (NKJV)** "But no man can tame the tongue." There is a dilemma here. With human talent and ingenuity animals from every category mentioned in verse 7 can be tamed. Lions are tamed to allow the trainer to open their mouth and put his head in it. Eagles and hawks can be tamed to land on a man's gloved hand. Snakes can be charmed and sea creatures such as whales and dolphins can be trained. But no man can tame his own tongue. Oh, how we need the Gospel! We need the good news that the one who has saved us from the penalty of sin can save us from the destructive contaminating power of sin over our lives. No man can tame the tongue, but the Spirit of God who dwells in every believer can tame the tongue! James' point here is that while no man can tame the tongue, God can. Because the tongue has such potential to poison and thus contaminate a life, there is an urgency to tame the tongue. Repent of an untamed tongue. Surrender to the control and

empowerment of the Spirit who lives in you. When you fail, repent and resolve in God's power to walk in victory over this powerful tool that dwells behind the double guard of your lips and teeth.

#### V. The Purifying of the Tongue (V9-12)

It was Jewish tradition that every time God's name was mentioned, it was followed by, "blessed be He". Three times a day tradition demanded that Jews repeated a series of benedictions that ended with "Blessed be Thou O God". James points out the contradiction of the blessings and then using the same tongue to bring curses on other people made in the similitude or likeness or image of God. In verse 10 he asks the question as to how such blessing and cursing could proceed out of the same mouth. Oh the hypocrisy of the tongue! In verses 10-12 James says that this hypocrisy is impossible in the natural world.

#### CONCLUSION

The battle with the tongue – what we say – is an ongoing battle that will continue until we leave these fleshly bodies. Let me close by sharing an action plan to enable you to control your tongue.

1. Allow the Holy Spirit to fill your life. The word "fill" (used in **Ephesians 5:18b (NKJV)** "... but be filled with the Spirit") means to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, to be permeated by the Holy Spirit, and to be controlled by the Holy Spirit.
2. Ask God to allow you to talk less. **Proverbs 10:19 (NKJV)** "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips *is* wise."
3. Commit your speech to the Lord at the beginning of every day. **Psalms 141:3 (NKJV)** "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips."
4. Confront in love and refuse to listen to an "untamed tongue".