

James 3:1-18

"Taming The Untamable Tongue"

It's a tough topic to tackle...the tongue. It can get us into so much trouble; we can open our mouth & in an instant everything can change. Bad situations can be made better, & otherwise benign situations can go horribly, irreversibly awry.

Perhaps you've heard the story of the man who'd been out on the pier fishing all day to no avail. As evening began to set in a couple of women walked by & as they did he finally landed a catch. Naturally it wasn't much to brag about & so one of the women took it upon herself to rebuke the fisherman for reeling in such a small fish. She's all, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself for so cruelly catching this poor little fish?" The man (being already discouraged) didn't even look up, "Maybe you're right," he said, "but if the fish had just kept his mouth shut he wouldn't have been caught."

So often that's the story of our lives isn't it? If we would've just kept our mouth *shut*; but too often we *open* our mouths & invariably seem to ensnare ourselves.

It's an anomaly of sorts really, the capacity that lies w/in our tongues. We can use our tongues for their highest created capacity. We can lay our prayers *before* God, bring our praises *to* God; but too often rather than using our tongues for praying & praising *God*, (or preaching the gospel) we use them to poison, pervert & pollute *man*.

Our tongues can build up, or they can tear down, encourage or discourage, heal people or hurt people, lead people to trust *in* Jesus, or turn people forever away *from* Jesus. What awesome responsibility lays w/in this little 2 oz. member of our bodies. Is it any wonder that David cried out, "*Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips.*"¹ The bible exhorts us to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15) to speak the things which are necessary for sound doctrine (Titus 2:1), to let our speech be w/grace, seasoned w/salt (Col 4:6).

Yet how many times our tongues are used (as the bible points out) as instruments of deception & destruction? Our tongues devour, they're sharp swords, they break bones, backbite & flatter for our own personal gain.

We live in a country bent on exercising the freedom of speech (which typically means the right to brainwash our culture toward liberalism [they're definitely not interested in a biblical world view]). People have the right to say what they want to say, the problem so often is what they want to say! Yet the bible is clear, "*In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, But he who restrains his lips is wise.*"²

¹ The New King James Version. 1982 (Ps 141:3). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

² The New King James Version. 1982 (Pr 10:19). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Ok, James has been speaking of the reality of a dynamic, life changing, soul saving faith. His emphasis in Ch 2 was upon the works which saving faith will produce in a person's life. **The overflow of saving faith will be displayed in walking in those good works which God has prepared before hand that we should walk in them. It's not about what we say, "I believe", but about what we show, the fruit that comes forth from our lives.**

But here's the deal, saving faith won't only make a difference in the course of our works, but also in the corruptible words that so easily spill out of our mouths.

Now we were tipped off to the fact that James would be talking on this topic back in the 26th Vs of the 1st Ch as he brought up the concept of "bridling" our tongues. Here in Ch 3 he expands on what that looks like & how saving faith will change not only our conduct, but our conversations as well...notice.

Vs 1-2

"Speaking of the tongue," James says, "Let's talk for a minute about teaching God's Word." Now just for the record, the bible is clear that we *will all* be called to give an account for how we handle this little member called "the tongue" on the day of judgment. Jesus said, **"But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment."**³ **Of course Jesus wasn't condemning small talk or casual conversation. The idea behind "idle" words is "worthless" words, "crude" or "raw" words that don't help in anyway but more so are a hindrance rather than help.**

As we were saying a minute ago the power of speech is one of the greatest powers God has entrusted to us. We can build a man up, or ruin his reputation & assassinate his character...The ability to speak words is the ability to influence other people & accomplish incredible tasks, but so often it's something we take for granted.

Here James is placing us in check w/that as it pertains to teaching the word of God. As we teach God's Word we have a responsibility to rightly divide God's word & accurately portray God's heart. Now listen, this doesn't simply apply to the pastor, you might teach in the children's ministry, a men's/women's study, a home fellowship or whatever. If you're not taking the time to be properly prepared you're running the risk of misrepresenting the heart & mind of God to those whom you may be ministering to.

Some of the things that people teach in the name of God's word is absolutely staggering, yet people give heed to the platform & those teachers will be held accountable for the influence that they're wielding in people's lives.

³ The New King James Version, 1982 (Mt 12:36). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

It's amazing how many people (being self proclaimed teachers of the Word) are in reality incredibly *ignorant* of the Word & they don't handle it accurately, nor w/integrity of heart. James reminds us that to whom much is given, much more is required.

Now we should also point out that James isn't seeking to discourage those whom God has called to teach from teaching. He isn't trying to send such shivers down your spine that you refuse to engage people through the word of God. However we should approach the responsibility soberly & be careful to represent the Lord accurately.

We've already established the fact that in the multitude of words, sin is not lacking. So the more I teach, the more likely I'm gonna be to err *here*, or misrepresent the Lord *there*, but as teachers, the tongue is the tool of our trade & it's imperative that we master the tool of the trade. Not through silence, but through control & carefully cultivated thoughts that translate to words.

There's a Quaker proverb that says something to the effect of, "Of your unspoken words you are the master; of your spoken words you are the servant, & of your written words you are the slave." Which is to say that before you say it you have time to think it through, but once it leaves your lips there's no turning back, & once you write it down its etched in stone.

Yes it is an incredible privilege to teach the Word of God, people allow you the platform that helps mold their mindset & shape their lives, yet if you lead them the wrong way...James informs us that we will be held accountable for that.

"For we all stumble in many things", well we could certainly spend some time on that fact couldn't we? Brings to mind another great application of our tongue, that of confessing our sin☺! We all stumble, we all struggle, we all sin, falling short of the glory of God in many things. (James isn't justifying that btw, simply acknowledging reality). However the most volatile/unstable area in which we stumble is found in our mouths.

"If you don't stumble in word, than you're perfect, & have the capacity to exercise complete self control." So James gives us a means through which we can measure spiritual maturity; do you want to know where you're at (maturity-wise) spiritually speaking? What kind of control do you have over your mouth? If you don't stumble in speech, you don't use foul or unfitting language, or use your tongue as a sword, you never bite at another person or say something negative, than you're moving on toward spiritual maturity. (Sort of adds sobering perspective doesn't it?)

You see our tongue is a badge of identity that we wear.

It can tell me where you're from geographically, whether you're educated or hillbilly ☺, cultured or crude, believer or blasphemer, the tongue tells all (no pun intended ☺).

Vs 3-6

Have you discovered that James has a problem telling us how he really feels ☺? Here's the point, the tongue is incredibly small, yet incredibly influential. It's like the bit to the horse, the rudder to the ship, & the spark to the forest. It turns the entire course of things much larger than itself.

Think about a bit or a rudder, they're both small by comparison but in order to steer that which they're designed to control they have to overcome contrary forces. The bit has to overcome the wild nature of the horse, the rudder of that cruise ship that weighs some 70,000 tons or more has to overcome winds, waves & currents. **The human tongue has to combat contrary forces as well. There's an old nature in you that wants to drive you off course, cause you to run wild (so to speak). Circumstances that make you want to say things you shouldn't say. Sin on the insider, pressures on the outside, all seeking to gain control of your tongue.**

But the bit & the rudder have w/in them the power to direct, to affect the lives of others. A horse or a ship that's careening out of control could mean injury &/or death to pedestrians or passengers. **The words we speak have a direct affect on people's lives. A judge says, "Guilty" or "Not guilty" & someone's destiny is potentially altered for life (not to mention the impact on that person's family/friends)! The President of the U.S. says a few words, signs a couple papers & we're at war. What did Solomon say? "Death and life are in the power of the tongue," Prov 18:21**

It's like a little fire, that kindles a great forest; does irreparable damage, tears apart families, churches, destroys lives, wrecks marriages...

Vs 6 says, "The tongue is a fire". Never underestimate the power of your words. A fire that's harnessed & in its proper place does tremendous good, brings life, it warms our homes, cooks our meals, lights our way. **Jesus speaks to the woman at the well (John 4) & her life along w/an entire multitude in her city was changed forever. Peter stands up on the Day of Pentecost & 3,000 people enter into everlasting life in Jesus' name.**

But a fire out of control it's incredibly destructive. James says that the tongue is a "world of iniquity", powerful & perverse. Filled w/unrighteousness & wicked intent; it defiles the whole body, sets on fire the course of nature (or the entire circle of life) & is set on fire by hell! The course of nature is the "wheel" that's set in motion @ birth & brought to a close @ death.

The tongue sets fires all throughout the course of life, does incredible damage, inspired by hell itself. The point being that destructive words are Satanic in origin not godly, the Lord inspires the good & perfect, words that build up & edify, words that tear down & destroy are inspired (ultimately) of the enemy of our souls.

It's interesting that James says that the tongue is so set that it defiles the whole body. Of course Jesus said, *"Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man."*⁴ He said, *"...whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man,"*⁵

So in reality our words bear witness to what's in our heart & *that* is what it comes down to isn't it? The heart of the matter is *always* a matter of the heart. The tongue is really neither friend *nor* foe, it simply delivers the dictates that come forth from the heart. It displays the sin of the human heart.

A gossiping tongue, (like starting a forest fire of destruction) is only bearing witness to a contentious & ill willed heart that desires to do someone else harm. Proverbs 26, *"As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, So is a contentious man to kindle strife."*⁶ & Again, *"A lying tongue hates those who are crushed by it, And a flattering mouth works ruin."*⁷ Set on fire by hell...

The uncontrolled tongue has a direct pipeline to Hell! Which flows both ways (btw). Irresponsible talk comes *from* hell & it helps *fill* hell... How many people do you suppose may be in hell today thanks to the way some professing Christian was speaking, profanity gossip, slander, criticism? Totally turning off any interest in Jesus they may've otherwise had...

Vs 7-8

We spend the 1st 2 yrs or so of our lives learning to speak & the rest of our lives trying to learn to shut up... But we just can't seem to pull it off, can't tame the tongue. When it comes to animals & fish & birds, hey, just go to the circus, go to sea world. *The animal world can be tamed by the human world. But the tongue is a restless evil, it's unruly (refuses to be ruled), full of deadly poison.*

⁴ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Mt 15:11). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁵ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Mt 15:17-20). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁶ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Pr 26:21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁷ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Pr 26:28). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Loaded w/the venom of hate & character assassination or gossip. The bible says, *"A fool vents all his feelings, But a wise man holds them back."*⁸ Notice the inconsistency of the tongue...

Vs 9-12

James says, "Nothing else in nature is as inconsistent as the human tongue." You don't have saltwater & freshwater coming forth from the same source, you don't have figs coming from grapevines or poisonous mushrooms coming from pear trees. Nature is consistent that way. But our tongue is capable of the sweet sounds of worship & praise to God in one breath & then the bitter reality of yelling at our spouse or our kids on the way home from church...

He's sort of scratching his head, "I don't get it, how can 2 diametrically opposed positions spring forth from the same source?" It's a mystery, the flesh & the Spirit at war w/one another... We should be consistent in our speech...

If saltwater means the spring is bad, & no fruit means the root is bad, how then can our tongues produce both praise & poison, praise & pollution, praise & perversion? Our tongues ought not produce inconsistency, we need to be cleansed of our sin, brought under the control of the power of the Holy Spirit... If a man can sing like an angel on Sunday & talk like a demon on Monday... there's something amiss there, the bible calls that hypocrisy.

It's interesting that when Jesus healed the mute in Mark Ch 7, He touched his tongue... When Jesus touches your heart, He touches your tongue as well. What did Paul teach us concerning the fingerprint of salvation in a man's life? *"...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."*⁹ The heart & the mouth work in tandem, they are as one...

Vs 13

So we're getting the idea here that works & words should be consistent; it's wisdom. Now wisdom isn't intellectual understanding, it's not measured through obtaining a degree it's seen in deeds. Wisdom isn't acquiring truth in a lecture; it's applying truth in life. Godly wisdom is displayed in meekness, it's those who let their light so shine that people see their good works & glorify their Father Who is in heaven.

Vs 14-16

⁸ The New King James Version. 1982 (Pr 29:11). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁹ The New King James Version. 1982 (Ro 10:9). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

In Vs 13 we see “good conduct” & “meekness of wisdom”, in Vs 14 its bitter envy & self-seeking, one is heavenly, the other is earthly, sensual & demonic.

James says that it’s fairly obvious where the root of each one lies. The wisdom of this world (earthly), that is sensual (of the flesh) & demonic, results in confusion & an ungodly course of action (every evil thing will be there).

That’s not to say that the wisdom of this world/the flesh/the devil won’t get things done; it simply means that the ultimate fruit is confusion & an ungodly course of action, it’s a worthless result; good for nothing (ultimately/eternally).

Vs 17-18

(Btw you might note here that true peace & righteousness go together, something this world doesn’t understand, you can’t know true peace apart from righteousness reigning, [& that involves J.C. now doesn’t it?]).

But these Vs (Vs 17 in particular) should be underlined in your bible. James gives us another means of measurement. You can run any conversation, teaching, word of instruction or course of action through this grid & easily discern its source. If there is envy, self-seeking, strife, confusion, contention (things of that nature) in what’s being said, the instruction I’m receiving or whatever, than you can know that it’s worldly/demonic reasoning & as a result ungodly/unfruitful. (If you’re looking for advice or seeking to make a decision run through the check list here in James 3:13-18)

If there’s purity, peace, gentleness, righteousness, & mercy involved; you’re seeing the fingerprints of God in a given situation. If there is strife, if it causes division, I don’t care where you’re getting your advice; it’s not from the Lord I assure you of that. True wisdom is full of love, it’s giving, willing to yield where there is purity & righteousness; it’s consistent w/the heart & holiness of God.

Now what is the seed that we sow that yields this kind of harvest? Peace. Of course it’s hard to *practice* peace if you can’t at least *speak* peaceably.

Comes back to taming the tongue doesn’t it? Something *no man* can do. Look back at

Vs 8

Here’s what I want to leave you with. What’s impossible for man is completely possible for God. Man cannot tame the tongue, however the power of the Holy Spirit can. Only a regenerate tongue, in a redeemed body (a tongue that God has tamed), can be controlled by His Spirit & used for His glory.

If Christ can touch your heart, He can tame your tongue... Amen? Amen...

Prayer Points:

God we want to be peacemakers, not peace breakers... We realize so much of that lies w/in the words that we choose to employ. **Lord You have made us new, teach us to put off concerning our former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to deceitful lusts.** That no corrupt communication proceed forth from our mouths but what is good for necessary edification that it might impart grace... to the hearer.

Lord You've touched our hearts, touch our mouths, may they be in harmony bringing glory to Your name. May we operate in the wisdom that comes down from You, in purity, peacefulness, gentleness & willingness to yield; not insisting on our own way, but yielding Lord to Yours. We don't want to be hypocritical, but true to Your word & Your ways...

Perhaps you're here & you're in a place whereby as you survey your life you realize God doesn't have your heart, much less your mouth. God wants to heal your heart & make you brand new. Right now you're all too aware of the pollution that's in your life, God wants to purify you, give you a new heart, use your mouth to bring Him glory. So if He's speaking to your heart today, open the door, surrender unconditionally & He'll be the Lord of your life.