

## That Viperous Tongue

James 3: 5-12

I don't know how many of you have ever spent time around farm animals, or perhaps have pets of your own. One trait that's shared among pretty much every four-legged critter is that they're happy to see you when they see you. Watch a farmer start walking to the gate of the cow pasture sometime - especially if he's feeding them - and you'll probably see a couple of these really large animals bounding across the meadow. Horses are the same. Sheep don't even need food, they just love the farmer. You may remember that Mary's little lamb: "everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go." That's just farm life. Or even home life. If you have a dog, you know when you come home from work that you're not getting past your front door before the dog is all over you.

One time, there was a farmer named Jephthah. He wasn't always a farmer, though. He used to be a soldier. A general, in fact - but he had been stripped of his position and run out of town because the people were suspicious of his heritage. So he had become a farmer.

It came to pass that the nation was again under attack, and the people were afraid - they didn't know how they would meet this army in the field. So they sent envoys to Jephthah and said "Will you lead our forces?"

Jephthah said "You did me wrong all those years ago - that's why I'm herding cattle. Why should I help you now?"

The people answered “That’s why we’re here now. If you lead this battle and we win, you shall be King.”

Pause now and imagine, if you can, the change of life this would represent.

The redemption of his honor, restoration and glory among the entire nation, and to be leader over them all. From farmer to Pharaoh! All depending on the outcome of this battle.

So as Jephthah was approaching the battlefield, he made a vow - a promise to the LORD, in hopes of gaining favor to win the battle and secure his own future.

He said:

*“If You indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands,  
then, it will be! - that, whatever comes out of the gate of my dwelling to meet me  
when I return in peace from the people of Ammon,  
shall surely be the LORD’s -  
and I will offer it up as a burnt offering.”* (Judges 11:30-31)

Jephthah won the battle. “A very great slaughter,” we’re told.

Jephthah is now King. His honor is restored.

He again is no longer a farmer but a soldier - a “mighty man of valor” in the eyes of the people!

He has only to fulfill his vow and then he begins his new life.

So he goes home.

... and the first thing out of the gate to meet him  
crushed his heart,  
swept away all trace of glory and honor,  
turned his future to ashes,  
because the first thing out of the gate to meet Jephthah was his daughter,  
his only child,  
dancing and playing tambourines to celebrate her father's victory.

But he had made a vow.

He told his daughter: "*I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it.*"

His daughter answered:

*"My father -*

*if you have given your word to the LORD,*

*do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth,*

*because the LORD has avenged you of your enemies."* (v35, 36)

Jephthah's hopes, and pride, and sense of honor, blinded him to the careless words he spoke -  
and it cost him dearly.

In our passage today, James would remind us of this.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that God has been using the coronavirus to great effect in  
shaking and waking our nation from complacency and self-absorption. Our normal ways of

doing things, of living our daily lives, these have been swept aside. In their place, amidst uncertainty and great concern, we now have elements of discord. Conversations have turned from the topics of faith, friends and family; and given way to fear, friction and even falsehoods.

We have all, in very recent days, heard of rumors and outright lies regarding political figures, scientific findings, or social events - with no shortage of speculations of how we may be affected personally, nationally and as a church.

And, human nature being what it is, it is sure that there are professing Christians among those who - willingly or otherwise - are actively contributing to these conversations - and not always for the better.

The Apostle James has a vital message for us - a message for us in this hour, for us to hear in this moment.

God is using these events to refine His people - and the Lord is not slack in applying the rod of chastisement to His church. The Lord will accomplish His purpose - which is to conform us more and more into the image of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Remember now that Jesus said: "*I am the way, the Truth, and the life.*" (John 14:6)

So it follows, then that If we are being conformed to the likeness of Christ, then we must - at our very core - "be" Truth, just as He is. Truth must be in our minds, Truth must be in our vision and Truth must be on our lips.

James, remember, is writing to a church that is scattered and in turmoil - living afraid for their future in strange lands and new cultures, among different people with different ways, unsure of even the most basic necessities.

Yet in chapter one, James says these circumstances are to be considered : “pure joy!”

In chapter two, James shows how we are all in unity, all in the same boat, and “showing no partiality” - because we are all the same partakers of the mercy of God in Christ, and;

In chapter three, James includes himself among us as he begins the chapter by speaking of our need to pay close attention to our conduct, because

*“... we all stumble in many things.”*

So James is leading us in examples of thought, and examples of action - which Christians should welcome as part of our maturing walk:

*“...that we may be partakers of His holiness.”* (Heb 12:10)

Yet there is another example James would bring to our attention - that of our speech.

So in that same spirit, with the Lord’s hand of providence instructing us:

- in things we have forgotten
- things necessary for our growth
- things useful in our walk

... James is continuing to bring up some most important truths which maturing Christians must all learn.

And now, for the first time, James is giving us a warning, so we would be wise to heed it.

Have a look with me as he shows the dangers first in verses 5 and 6, where James tells us that:

### **1) The tongue is a fire,**

Next, verses 6 through 8 give a strong warning that

### **2) The tongue cannot be tamed - and it is deadly!**

and lastly, in verses 9 through 12, James exhorts us all to examine ourselves because:

### **3) The tongue reveals the state of our hearts**

There's lots to cover, so let's get right down to that first one in verses 5 and 6, where James warns us firstly that:

#### **1) The tongue is a fire**

Do we all recall how houses were built in Biblical times? Remember how bricks were made? Spin up that classic, Cecil B. DeMille's "Ten Commandments" and you'll see how they tread the clay with their feet, throwing in straw to give it a fiber that binds the bricks and brings strength. Then, to build a house, we learn from Genesis 11 that:

*"... they had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar." (Gen 11:3)*

So understand that what the Bible is telling us here is that basically every house in the land was built with straw-filled clay fire logs stuck together with tar.

Now ask yourself how care-ful, how attentive you might be regarding fire if you lived in a house made of fire logs and tar.

Are you beginning to understand the danger hidden in James' comment that:

*"...the tongue is a fire"?*

Hear first James' warning about its method:

*"... the tongue is a little member, and boasts great things."*

Right from the beginning, we're seeing ambition, we're hearing of boastfulness, and it can all be described in a single word: Pride!

It's no wonder then that James says in verse 6 that the tongue:

*"... is set on fire from Hell!"*

... because Pride is Satan's original sin, and expresses itself in a thousand different sins!

"... *a world of iniquity!*", James says.

The sin of ingratitude, the sin of discontent, the sin of ambition, the sin of rebellion, all of these have their root in that first sin.

A "little member" makes "great" boasts - boy, doesn't that ring a bell?

When **we** feel those things -

when **we** feel under attack, or undervalued, or - under condemnation, yes?,

under condemnation for our unrepented sins and our willful actions,

Do we then drop the knee,

turn to the Lord in repentance

and ask for forgiveness and guidance in Christ through the Holy Spirit?

Or ... do we boast?

Are we laying out a big show,

hoping to de-tract and dis-tract attention so we feel better about ourselves?

Are we glorying in the back-patting from other members of our social circles,

hoping that the world - or maybe the Lord? -

won't cast attention on those sins of ours which **we** see, the things **we** fear, the things we're secretly ashamed of?



That's certainly one reason we might be tempted to boast, wouldn't you say?

James knows this, and is trying to warn us from the very first not to give it the least amount of leeway:

*"See **how great a forest a little fire kindles!**"*

It will consume all it touches. It will not stop. It will burn down everything you have.

It will not only damage and destroy you, but everyone near you, all that is around you and - hear this now - everything inside you. Hear James again -

*"The tongue **is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body.**"*

It is placed specifically - "so set" - that it is able to defile the whole body.

And, of course, "the whole body" is not just you,

no, brother; no, sister,

look beyond yourself and realize that

your tongue can also burn down "the body of Christ."

If you are heard boasting, or engaging in

obscene talk (Colossians 3)

filthiness or coarse jesting (Ephesians 5)

or even commenting or forwarding or giving that thumbs-up

to whatever things you hear on social media or from friends or family,

know for a certainty that,

when your words come to light,

Paul's condemnation from Romans 2 lands squarely on us when he says

*"The Name of God*

(that's Jesus, I hope you understand)

*"The Name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you!"*

Because of me - and we know it!

We will be rightly condemned by the Spirit,

we, God willing and grace providing,

we will be rightly ashamed of our speech and conduct,

we will be humbled by our inconsistency, but

- here's an important part that Satan is counting on, listen closely here -

we will be fearful of stepping out in Christ,

stepping out **for** Christ, in the future

because we have failed Him in the past -

and perhaps even more so because those failures were made public.

James knows this is a concern, do you see?

All through his letter, James has been showing how our actions **display** our faith - they

demonstrate

what we believe

what we value

what we fear

... and he knows the danger of thoughtless speech, all too well.

James himself mocked his brother Jesus, saying

“Why not go up to Jerusalem for the Passover? Put on a big show, if you want everyone to believe you are who you claim.”

Those words defined James, as the Scriptures note:

“ *For even His brothers did not believe in Him.*” (John 7:5)

James knows, very personally, the soul damage of thoughtless words.

Let me pose a very timely example, which I can relate from personal experience.

Let's say, in your house,

you live with your spouse,

or perhaps also near or even with your 70-something year old parents

(one of whom has a bout of pneumonia in December)

or maybe your 4 year old kid that just got over that case of bronchitis last fall.

Now let's say that you wake up at 2 am with a sore throat and the shaking chills.

... let me ask - what do you do now?

Are you going to just sit in the living room watching TV with everyone else, jamming your hand in the popcorn bowl and saying “it’s no big deal” - “it’s a hoax?” - “it’s a conspiracy?”

Or are you going to go into a separate room and wall yourself off from everyone, while the rest of your family wipes down the entire house with bleach or hydrogen peroxide and you all pray sincerely that it spreads no farther than you?

James says the tongue is no less dangerous, no less ... ***infectious***.

Once you turn it loose,

“... *it sets on fire the course of nature,*”

in other words, “it runs the full distance.”

Rounds the bases. The whole nine yards.

There’s an application we can take from this first section, one we should consider strongly.

We must work diligently to make this part of our core understanding of “The Way Things Really Are.”

We Christians must recognize:

**Your tongue has great potential to be your enemy.**

It has no filter, and it certainly owes you no loyalty.

Remember once more who your tongue obeys:

*"... it is set on fire by Hell." (v6)*

**Your tongue has great potential to be your enemy -**

it can be the very mouth of the enemy!

Satan himself has a loudspeaker, an intercom, wired right into your face.

It just can't wait for you to drop your attention long enough for the Devil to spew out some message that ruins your faith, undermines your walk, sows doubt in the world - your world!! - sowing doubt about Christ in you, about if you truly belong to the Lord.

King David let his mouth lead him astray.

It cost him his testimony, his kingdom and his beloved son Absalom.

So we need to listen, and think as David did, when David seriously prays:

*"Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth,*

*Keep watch over the door of my lips." (Psalm 141:3)*

Because David discovered the truth -

**Your tongue has the potential to be your enemy.**

That logic brings us straight to James' second point in this passage. He makes it in verses 7 and 8, and that's where we learn the truth - the Truth! - that:

## **2) The tongue cannot be tamed - and it is deadly!**

James says:

(read 7-8)

See, James knows that first thing you're going to think, following his warning.

You're going to say to yourself,

"Okay, tongue is a fire. Got it. I can handle it. I've got a fire pit. I've built campfires. I know what I'm doing."

James says "No. No, you really don't."

James lists the entire catalog of God's creation, did you see?

*"... for **every** kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents,*

*and of things in the sea*

***is** tamed, and has **been** tamed, of mankind ..."*

Everything man sees, he has tamed.

A person would not be without reason to think that yet one more thing would be brought under his control -

- but they would be wrong, as James continues - he tells us:

*“ ... but the tongue, **no** man can tame-  
it is an unruly evil...” (v8)*

Do you see here that you're already defeated?

Do you see James' warning, how you have already underestimated your foe?

Hear it again:

*“ ... it is an unruly **evil**...”*

It's not enough that James says it is unruly,  
the Greek *akatasketos* meaning “unable to restrain,”  
you can't hold it back,  
but no, that's not the important part.

We read that bit and think the tongue a wild animal, but James tells us it's far, far worse than that - see that James says it is an unruly

**EVIL.**

The tongue is not wild, the tongue is not unthinking, the tongue is not just randomly flapping in your head.

No, the tongue is not only

*“set on fire by Hell,”* (v6)

but James is telling us the truth that the tongue is literally an enemy spy in your camp, consciously seeking and seizing opportunity to attack and undermine the person and work of Christ every. single. time. you open your mouth...

... and you need to consider this enemy agent is in the “control room” of your head every time you consider opening your mouth to speak.

Consider the very word itself: “Conversation.”

Con: Latin for “against.”

Verso: Latin for word - the Word.

- Ation: A suffix denoting an action, state or result.

Quite literally the definition means, “Action against the Word.”

Now are you hearing what James is saying?

*“Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth.”*



Can you see why Paul - one of the most skilled and highly-trained theologians of his day - says of himself:

*"I am determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."* (1 Cor 2:2)

Now do you better understand the nature and danger of the tongue?

James wants us to do so - and he's not done yet.

No, see, James finishes the three in verse 7.

he shows the tongue is a fire that will burn your world,

he shows the tongue can be an uncontrollable enemy spy of evil in your camp,

and now we discover that the tongue is:

*"...full of deadly poison."*

Like an asp or an adder, it can strike before you even see it's there, and inflict a mortal wound on anyone within reach.

A harsh word spoken to a spouse, an angry rebuke at a child,

a thoughtless rant or re-tweet on your social media account perhaps?

... and the damage is done!

You've set a venomous snake loose in your home, it's already struck, the poison is coursing

through the blood, and you may not even realize anything is amiss until that relationship is dead  
- because of what *you* said.

In his “Exposition of the Epistle of James,” Thomas Manton says, and I quote:

“A wicked tongue is venomous and hurtful.  
as Bernard observed, it killeth three at once-  
- him that is slandered, his fame by ill report;  
- him to whom it is told, his belief with a lie;  
- and himself, with the sin of detraction.  
*‘A good name is a precious ointment,’*  
and a slanderous tongue is *‘a deadly poison.’* “

Do you hear what James is telling you about that tongue that’s in your head?

What can we do about this? How do we apply this warning to our lives?

Scriptures say that we would do well to:

**“Examine who our friends are - and who we are to our friends.”**

In short: “Clean house.”

By which I mean this:

If you knew a copperhead was loose in your house, would you remain sitting comfortably on

your couch, watching a show or scrolling through your phone?

No, I tell you, you would be lacing on your highest boots, with a broom in one hand and a bucket in the other, shoving furniture around as you desperately sought out this danger in your home.

Now imagine if a friend shows up and says

“Oh, snakes? That’s nothing to worry about!

See, I brought mine over so they can mate!”

... and then turns over a box to dump three more out on the floor as they slither away and run loose in your home.

What would you think then?

1 Corinthians 15:33 says:

*“Don’t be deceived: Evil company corrupts good habits.”*

That word “habits” in the Greek is actually “*ethos*.”

The *ethos* of a thing is what you believe, how you frame your perspective,

the Bible is telling you that your companions will literally corrupt and change your good ethos to a wicked one.

Stated bluntly,

if your communications and personal interactions of recent days and weeks has been filled with people telling falsehoods, spreading rumor, inciting hatreds - stoking fears instead of grace and

peace - then you are fighting an uphill battle and you know what you need to do about it.

We can't get a clear view of our battlefield when it's clouded with the brightly-colored smoke of lies. We need to remove ourselves from those wells of poison.

We need to clean our metaphorical house.

Psalm 1 warns us:

*"Blessed is the man  
who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,  
nor stands in the path of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of the scornful..."*

Are we walking in the counsel of the ungodly?

Are we living our Christian life based on what the World thinks is "compassionate" or "reasonable" or "loving," rather than on Christ's words: "Follow My commands?"

Are we standing in unison with sinners, supporting *their walk, their way, their path*; rather than boldly proclaiming there is no other Way to the Father but through Christ?

Are we comfortably taking our ease and sitting with those who scorn the gospel?

Proverbs 22:10 says:

*“Cast out the scoffer, and contention will leave,  
Yes, strife and reproach will cease.”*

We need to :

**Examine who are friends are - and who we are to our friends.**

This brings us to a third point from James, from verses 9 and 10 he shows us the biblical truth of how:

### **3) The tongue reveals the state of our hearts**

let's read verses 9 and 10

(read)

Immediately we see the conflict at work in our hearts and in our lives.

We bless our God and Father - because we have been given all good things and we have His favor!

Then we curse men, who are made in God's very image, because...

why?

... because they think differently than we?

Act differently?

Vote differently?

Because we're saved and they're not?

Have you ever thought about that word - "curse?"

*kataraoimai*?

Do you know what it means?

Very literally, it means "to pray against."

And don't we do that?

Don't we pray against people?

That's human nature, you know. We do that from our fear, from our lack of confidence in the Lord's providence, don't we? Remember David praying against Ahithophel's counsel in 2 Samuel?

We pray against a person, or a situation, or a circumstance - and doesn't this just prove our very fear - our deep-down belief that God is not the guiding hand in all this?

Doesn't this show how we forget - as Pastor Pat has just recently preached - that "*all things work together for the good of those who love God?*"

Can we step out from that position of fear, of doubt and disbelief?

James says "*My brethren, these things ought not to be so!*" (James 3:10)

Imagine how you would act if we truly believed it is all, even now, still for our good?

Imagine if we would speak if we had every confidence in knowing that all things are ours in Christ?

Imagine how we would walk if we were eager to follow the commands of Christ when he says in Matthew 5:

*“Love your enemies.*

*Bless those who curse you.*

*Do good to those who hate you.*

*Pray for those who spitefully use you, and persecute you.” (Mt 5:44)*

And why should we do this?

Should we do these things because of our testimony to the world?

That’s an effect - a good and powerful effect - but that’s not the reason.

No, the Lord says we are to do this:

*“ ... that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” (Mt 5:45)*

As the old saying goes:

*“Children of the King should speak the language of the court.”*

This brings us to our application - it’s more of an exhortation, but it’s most timely in these days and it’s this:

## **Our speech should glorify God.**

Our speech should glorify God for many reasons - and in many ways.

We should glorify God in the proclamation of the Gospel, as we earlier heard of Paul:

*“I determined not to ‘know’ anything among you  
except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” 1 Cor 2:2*

We should glorify God among the world by displaying maturity in the conversations we have,  
as Paul warns in Titus 3:9:

*“... avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions and strivings about the Law,  
for they are unprofitable and useless.”*

Our speech should glorify God among our brothers and sisters, as Paul commends Timothy:

*“... be an example to the believers in Word,  
in conduct, in love,  
in Spirit, in faith, in purity.” (1 Tim 4:12)*

And lastly our speech should glorify God among the world, who are watching and listening,  
because they know the truth of Christ's words when He says:

*“A good man, out of the good treasure of his heart, brings forth good-*



*and an evil man, out of the evil treasure of his heart, brings forth evil -  
for out of the abundance of the heart,  
his mouth speaks.” Luke 6:45*

And these are all reasons that:

**Our speech should glorify God.**

As a final note in this section, something beautiful.

In the upcoming verses, James is about to - once again - hit us with some examples of envy and self-seeking and boasting. They're convicting, without a doubt, and James intends for them to pierce the heart and conscience of each and every believer.

But James intends for us first to remember that we are, all of us, believers - and we are all together. Did you see it?

Let's read verses 9 and 10 one last time.

*“With it” - that is, the tongue -*

*“ ... with it, **we** bless our God and Father,*

*and, with it, **we** curse men,*

*who have been made in the similitude of God.*

*Out of of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing.*

***My** brethren, these things ought not to be so.“*

James knows this struggle as well as any of us.

See how James identifies with us!

See him showing us this is **his** conviction as well,  
coming next to us to encourage and support us?

James invites us to fight for holiness and sanctification alongside himself,  
encouraging and challenging himself as much as any believer who reads his words,  
so that we become those mature Christians he has spoken of throughout this letter.

What a refreshing passage - the very brother of Christ has locked arms with you and me,  
asking our help as we step together towards greater holiness and maturity.

In closing - Lamentations says:

*“Let us examine our ways, and test them,  
and let us return to the LORD.”*

Shall we trust in the promises of God - that in truth,  
all things do work together for good, for those who love God?

Shall we believe that in our hearts, so that our mouths speak that truth?

Shall we step out in faith,  
replace fear with the love of Christ,  
and speak out for Christ in areas of our lives?

Blessings to those who curse?

Good to those who hate?

Prayers for those who persecute?

We know that only the Prince of Peace will bring lasting peace to our world -  
so let's become those spokesmen of Christ,  
those mighty ambassadors of the King -

and in so doing, tame:

that viperous tongue!

Amen!