

# Taming the Tongue

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning again, welcome to Church of the Advent. My name is Jeff, I'm one of the pastors here. A warm welcome to you, especially if you're new or this is your first time joining us.

We'd love to meet you after the service and get to know more about you and hear more of your story. So please come say hello after the service. In the summer and fall of last year, 2023, during the Writers Guild strike in the entertainment industry, five of the late night TV show hosts, Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, Seth Meyers, John Oliver, and Stephen Colbert, these five TV show hosts got together and started a podcast.

Maybe a few of you may have heard of it. The podcast is called Strike Force Five. The idea is that while their shows were off the air due to the industry strike, that they would get together and do a show and talk and produce some content.

And then they would donate all the proceeds from the sponsors of the podcast to people who worked on their show and were out of work because of the strike. And it was a cool idea. And this past week, I started listening to it and I started listening to the first episode.

And interestingly enough, in part of the first episode, these five late night TV show hosts started talking about, I just came up in conversation, what they wanted to be when they were kids, what they wanted to be when they grew up, when they were kids.

[ 1 : 41 ] And interestingly enough, four of the five hosts said that when they were kids, they had the thought about someday working in a church as pastors or priests.

I've actually heard Jimmy Fallon on a number of occasions actually tell a story about how he, for a while as a kid, thought about being a priest. John Oliver, who's British, who grew up in the UK, said that he told his dad one day that he wanted to be a vicar.

And John Oliver's dad said to him, no, you don't. You just want people to listen to you. And I think that's pretty appropriate given what he does for his vocation today.

This is an interesting data point, I think for a lot of reasons, that four out of five late night TV talk shows, all at one point when growing up, thought about going into ordained ministry.

That's pretty fascinating. In many ways, being a pastor or priest is very far, very different from being a late night talk show host. But there's at least one thing that they have in common.

[ 2 : 46 ] And what they both have in common is they both involve a lot of speaking. They both involve a lot of talking. And if I had to guess, I would guess that these talk show hosts, very on in their life, understood something at a very young age.

They understood something about the power of words, about the ability for words to influence and shape people in the world around them.

The power of words is what our New Testament passage, James chapter three, is about this morning. In this passage, James is talking about about the power of the tongue, the power of speech, the power of words, and also the need for the tongue, the need for our words to be mastered and tamed and healed.

And so that's what we're gonna look at this morning. We're gonna look at the power of the tongue and the healing of the tongue. The power of the tongue and the healing of the tongue. In the first several verses here in James chapter three, in verses three through six, James gives us a series of illustrations to talk about the power of the tongue.

So in verse three, he compares the tongue to the power of a bit over a horse. A bit is that piece of metal that is put into the horse's mouth and attached to the reins so the rider can direct the horse.

[ 4 : 15 ] In verse three, he says, if we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. In verse four, he compares the tongue to the power of a rudder over a ship.

Verse four, he says, look at the ships also. Though they are so large and driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. And then in verses five and six, James compares the tongue to the power of a small fire over a forest.

He says, how great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire. And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set up among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life and set on fire by hell.

Strong words. All three illustrations hang together in what James says in verse five. So also, the tongue is a small member and yet, it boasts of great things.

Although the tongue is a small thing, it has a powerful effect in the world. It has a powerful effect on our lives and in the lives of others.

[ 5 : 28 ] You can accomplish a lot of good things if you channel the power of a horse. If you, you can travel long distances, you can plow a field, but you can also use a horse to trample somebody.

You can accomplish a lot of good things if you channel the power of a ship. You can cross oceans. You can transport goods and grow an economy. You can also run a ship aground. You can accomplish a lot of great things if you channel the power of a small fire.

You can bring warmth on a cold day. You can cook a meal, but you can also set a forest on fire. Our words are the same way. They can be used to bring life and flourishing into the world.

They can be used to build someone up, to encourage them, honor them, comfort them. They can be used to teach a congregation or a small group or a class in the truth of God's word.

There's lots of ways we can use words to bring life to other people, but can also have the opposite effect. Our words can be used to harm and to hurt others as well.

[ 6 : 37 ] Not to build somebody up, but to tear them down. Not to encourage somebody, but to discourage somebody.

Not to honor somebody, but to dishonor them. Not to heal, but to destroy. And this is why James has an incredibly sober tone in this passage, and his words are full of warning and caution about our speech.

If our words are not harnessed and controlled, they can be like a fire that can set our relationships and our families and our workplace and our churches ablaze.

And so because the tongue has such great power, we all need to master it. We all need to have self-discipline over it. Now notice, in verse one, that James says, one of the first applications given the power of the tongue is to teachers and pastors in the church.

In verse one, he says, not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. He's not talking about the ultimate day of judgment, but he's referring to the fact that those who teach and lead in the church will one day have to give an account to God for whether they were faithful to teach sound doctrine and shepherd those under their care faithfully.

[ 7 : 57 ] Listen to the words of Hebrews chapter 13, verse 17. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account, as those who will have to give an account.

And so how does this relate to what James is saying in this passage about the power of the tongue? Well, as those in authority, the words of pastors and teachers and leaders have a powerful impact on the lives of others, on the lives of those they lead.

Not only are teachers in the church called to rightly handle the word of God, they are also called to live up to that teaching with their lives. This is why Jesus so many times in the gospel has strong words for the Pharisees, the scribes and the Pharisees who take great pride in their knowledge and their teaching and yet don't follow through, who don't live up to that in practice.

And those who teach, those who lead, are especially prone to sins of the tongue because they spend so much time talking.

My professor from Covenant Seminary, Dr. Dan Doriani, a New Testament professor, puts it this way. He says, teachers are especially vulnerable to failures of speech because their role demands that they speak so much.

[ 9 : 24 ] More words mean more errors. As we grow accustomed to public speaking, we can become careless. When asked to offer an opinion, we tend to comply even if we don't have the qualifications or expertise.

Humor can be a dangerous gift. It pleases the crowd, but can easily wound or mislead. Too many laughs come at someone else's expense.

More words mean more errors. The encouragement to exercise caution over the tongue and self-discipline with our words is first and foremost directed at people like me, at leaders and teachers and pastors in the church.

But it also applies to everyone. If you notice what comes next in verse two, James says, for we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

Listen, do you want to live a life of self-mastery? Do you want to live a life of discipline in various areas of your life? Do you want to be a more disciplined person?

[10:43] Learn to come control your tongue. James says, if you can control your tongue, you can control your whole life. If you can master your words, you can master your whole life.

Why? Because the tongue has incredible power. It's like a bit in a horse's mouth. It's like the rudder of a ship. It's like a small spark in a forest. It can do amazing good. It can also do great harm. And therefore, it's absolutely critical that we master our tongue, that we practice self-discipline over our words, that we become aware of our worst and most common tendencies and impulses, our particular sins of speech.

Given how powerful the tongue is, where and when do you need to speak less? Where do you need to practice more restraint and self-discipline with your words?

We would all do well to apply James' encouragement two chapters earlier in James 1, verse 19. Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

[12:00] Where do you need to speak less? But also, given the power of the tongue, we could also ask the flip side question. Given the power of the tongue, where do you need to speak more?

Where do you need to speak more with words of life and hope and encouragement and comfort? Where are you holding back? Who in your life today or this week needs to receive an encouraging note or email or text from you?

How can you blow wind into somebody's sails through your words? Now, having said all that, if we just stop there, in verse 6, we would miss something really important because we would miss what James shows us next, the connection between the tongue and the heart.

If you're going to master your tongue, you need self-discipline, but self-discipline alone isn't all you need. You need to address actually what's going underneath, what's going on underneath at the heart level because the tongue is connected connected to the heart.

And that's what James looks at next in the next five verses. And so we want to look at the healing of the tongue. The healing of the tongue. Next in verse 7, James continues with these words.

[13:22] He says, for every kind of beast and bird, a reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil full of deadly poison.

You would think that wild animals would be way more difficult to tame than something like our tongues. But James says, we've tamed every wild animal and yet no one can tame the tongue.

Why? Because the tongue is connected to the heart. Because it's a restless evil. It's full of deadly poison. What does he mean? Well, he tells us in verses 9 and 10, with it, we bless our Lord and Father and with it, we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

For with the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. When it comes to our words, there's this deadly irony that we can bless God with our mouths, that we can pray to him with our lips, we can sing to him in worship, and yet with the same mouth, we can slander other people's reputation, we can tear other people's down, we can spread false information, ruin other people's reputation.

And James says, when we're doing this, what we're doing is we're actually cursing other people. We are cursing, we are bringing a curse onto someone who is made in the image and the likeness of God.

[14:55] And when we curse someone made in the image of God, we are also cursing God himself. When is a time recently when you said something that you shouldn't have, where you regretted it later?

Maybe it was gossip, maybe it was boasting, maybe it was slightly distorting the truth to make yourself look better, maybe it was criticism that wasn't completely fair that hurt somebody.

And what these verses in James would lead us to ask is this, what was in your heart that caused you to say that? Was it anger?

Was it bitterness? Was it jealousy? Insecurity? Pride? Fear? See, when anger or bitterness or insecurity or fear become words, especially words that harm other people, what we're doing is that we are trying to resolve what's in our hearts.

We're trying to resolve our own negative feelings by transferring them onto somebody else. I feel angry so I'm gonna talk negatively about somebody else so I can feel better, so I can feel less angry.

[16:20] I feel insecure and therefore I'm going to tear someone else down so I can build myself up. What we are doing is we are seeking our own healing by cursing other people, people made in the image of God.

And this is a deadly cycle that all of us perpetuate to some degree. It's a cycle that James says can spread like wildfire and destroy relationships and workplaces and communities and churches.

Verse 11, James continues the connection between the tongue and the heart. He says, does a spring pour forth the same opening both fresh and salt water?

Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. If you're paying attention, you notice that there's echoes of Jesus' words in Matthew 12 where Jesus says to the Pharisees that a tree is known by its fruit.

For out of the abundance of the heart, out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. And this is the thrust of what James is getting at. He's getting at the heart just as a fresh spring, water spring can only bring forth fresh water just as a fig tree can only produce figs.

[17:47] So our words reveal who we truly are. Our words reveal what's truly in our hearts. You wanna know who you truly are? This afternoon, hit record on your smartphone and just leave it on all week.

And let it record everything you say. And then after a week, play it back. That's what's in your heart. That's who you truly are. Years ago, Pastor Jack Miller, who also taught at Westminster Seminary for another years, created and taught a class called Sonship.

And it's a class that maybe a few of you have heard of. It's a wonderful class. And one of the points of this class called Sonship is to help people understand that how we grow as Christians is that we have to understand the gospel more deeply.

That the same gospel that saves us is also the same gospel that transforms us. And if we want to grow, we have to continue to understand the greater depths of the gospel. That we may say we believe in the gospel, that we're a sinner saved by grace, but in practice, there's actually lots of ways in which we actually don't believe and live out the gospel.

And so one of the exercises of the Sonship class is called the tongue test. The tongue test. And Jack Miller would encourage people to do these six things over the course of a week.

[19:12] He would tell the class, number one, for a week, do not complain or grumble. Number two, do not boast about anything at all.

Number three, do not gossip or repeat bad information about somebody else. Number four, do not run somebody down even a little bit. Number five, do not defend or excuse yourself no matter what. Number six, do always affirm other people. Now how many of us think we could pull that off this week? I think I'd probably fall short.

I think the reason why if all of us went home and tried that this week is we'd quickly find it to be very difficult is because there are places in our hearts that haven't been formed yet by the gospel.

The person who's able to do all of these things has a heart that truly believes the gospel deep down. In Jesus, they know they're so secure they know they don't need to defend themselves.

[20:16] In Jesus, they know that they are already loved and that's where they get their identity and so they don't need to tear others down in order to feel good about themselves. In Jesus, they see that the gospel has humbled them so much that not only should they not boast, but they can't boast.

see the ultimate way to heal your heart and as a result to use your words to heal other people is through worship.

It's through worship. It's in seeing the beauty of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the living word of God. He is the very speech of the living God.

He is full of grace and full of truth. His words always and only healed people. He always blessed people who cursed him.

He always prayed for people who hated him and more than that, the one who never cursed anyone became a curse.

[ 21 : 26 ] He became a curse and that's what happened on the cross. That's what Galatians chapter 3 verse 13 says that on the cross Jesus Christ became a curse for us in our place and it's because Jesus became a curse for us that we are healed, that we're forgiven, that we're accepted, that we're loved and because of what he did for us, because he became a curse for us, we can see that our hearts will never be healed by cursing other people.

our hearts will never be healed by transferring our anger, our bitterness, our jealousy, our insecurity onto somebody else.

Healing will never happen that way. Why? Because taking on a curse is only something that the perfect word of God could do.

It's only something that Jesus Christ could do. He's the only one who could take on the curse for our sin and at the same time bring healing to the world. And that is the beauty of what he did and that is why he deserves our worship and that is what will truly heal our hearts.

When that starts to sink in, it humbles us because we realize that we can't boast about anything. It makes us secure and we realize we don't need to defend ourselves.

[ 22 : 58 ] We don't need to transfer our anger or our insecurity onto somebody else because we know that we're loved. And because we know we're loved, we don't need to tear others down, to build ourselves up.

And when that starts to change your heart, when that starts to change you, that is what will lead you to have mastery over your tongue.

that is what will lead you to have discipline over your words. It's the power of the gospel. It's the power to heal the heart. It's the power to tame the tongue.

Listen, do you want to change the world? Do you want to change the world? Practice these six things for one week. Don't complain or grumble.

Don't boast about anything at all. Don't gossip or repeat bad information about somebody else. Do not run somebody down even a little bit. Don't defend or excuse yourself no matter what.

[ 24 : 00 ] And do always affirm other people. And when you fall short, and you will fall short, let it lead you to examine what's in your heart, what's going on in your heart.

Let it lead you to examine how your tongue is truly connected to what is going on underneath. And as you examine your heart and bring your heart before God, let it lead you to worship Jesus, the true and perfect word of God.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, we praise you and thank you that you are the word of God who came down from heaven to bring healing to the world by becoming a curse for us.

And Lord, I pray that you would do your work in us to heal the places in our hearts where there's anger or bitterness or insecurity or pride or jealousy, Lord.

And I pray, Lord, that would bring forth fresh spring water that out of the abundance of our hearts our mouths would speak and that we, through our words, would bring life and encouragement and hope and healing to a lost and broken world.

[ 25 : 23 ] And we pray this in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.