There’s No Such Thing As a Tame Tongue

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[0:00] You think about it. Our words, the way in which we communicate with one another, our speech. In a sense, our words are an inescapable part of our lives, whether internally in our thoughts or externally in our words.

We can be social tweeters. We can be lounge chair lawyers. We can be opinionated critics. But at the same time, we can be motivational speakers. We can be encouraging colleagues.
We can be uplifting, supporting friends. So is it just then a matter of balance? Can our speech be good or bad, depending on how we use it, how we control it?
Does it really matter if we control it? Can we even control it? We're going to be looking this morning, as Ralph just read, at James chapter 3, verses 1 to 12.
But as we begin, let me just give you a quick background to the main points of what James has been writing up to this point. James is a fantastic book in the Bible. So much good, solid, biblical advice for believers that we simply don't have time to cover it all.
[1:05] But let me offer a quick synopsis of what he's been saying. So he's primarily writing to believers everywhere. We see that in verse 1 in his words, to the 12 tribes scattered amongst the nations.

And he has really strong, sound, heartfelt words to speak to them. He consistently refers to his hearers as, my brothers, or the translations might render it, my brothers and sisters.
That all-inclusivity. The message is to us as believers this morning. As relevant then to those that he wrote to, just as relevant now to us this morning. Perhaps one of the central themes of James is this.
That true believers in Christ will live in a certain way. So how does James lay this out for us? Well, we see that true believers can be joyful in the face of trial.
Because testing develops perseverance, which grows the mature Christian. What else? We see that believers are not just listeners of the word. They do what it says. Because they don't show favoritism.
[2:06] They demonstrate their faith in their action. And those are just a few. And I really encourage you to get stuck into James in your own quiet time. But for now in chapter 3, James comes to us with quite a stark and hard-hitting indictment on our speech.

Let me say this as it's something I really feel we need to take on board as we begin this morning. What James has to say will not necessarily sit well with us. But nonetheless, it is vital for our growth as believers that we hear what the Lord would speak to us through James' words.
Let me pray that the Lord would open our ears to hear and our hearts to respond to his word. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word.
We thank you for its instruction, for its direction, the challenge it brings to us to live holy lives in response to your call. Help us to see clearly the truths of what you would speak to us this morning. Please soften our hearts that we might put off our pride and every notion of independence from you. Help us to cling to your words. We want to focus on you. Pray that you will forgive us our sinfulness for the evil words we've spoken, the evil thoughts we've harbored in our hearts.
[3:21] Teach us and challenge us to live the holy lives that please you. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen. If you've closed your Bible, I might encourage you to open it again to James chapter 3.

And in these few verses we're coming to look at now, the central theme... Ah, down. Is it right? There we go. The central theme that we're going to be looking at as we come to James chapter 3 is this.
The great potential of words for evil and inconsistency in the life of the believer. Let me repeat that. The potential of words for evil and inconsistency in the life of the believer.

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And James, as we'll see, is going to do this in three stages of the next 12 verses. First of all, we're going to see an introductory warning. Secondly, we have an incendiary explanation.
And finally, an immense call. Let's get stuck in. First of all, we have an introductory warning. James writes in verse 1 of chapter 3, Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.
[4:37] We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. Now you might be sitting there thinking, Well, I'm not a teacher.

How does this apply to me? Or to others like me? But James isn't limiting his warning to merely teachers, as we'll see. Some say perhaps he's writing concerned about those who are seeking the status of teacher for the authority or the standing in the church.
Now we're not explicitly told that, and that may well have been the case. But I think when we consider the text as a whole, we begin to see that James is more leading us into his discourse about speech, rather than it being just a lone rogue verse, just kind of sitting there for no reason. He's leading us in with his talk about the tongue. The implications are far more reaching in the congregation. So let us all, teachers or not, listen to what he has to say.
Not many of you should presume to be teachers, he writes. We'll see throughout the course of this morning that we must tame the tongue, yet we cannot do so.
[5:48] Certainly then for anyone who would stand up in front of a crowd to teach from God's word, they need be very cautious. They need to guard their speech carefully. So often when we speak, our words can become so careless.

You may well have heard it said that we have one mouth and two ears, so we should do twice as much listening as we do speaking. But yet I know how often I fall short personally, and I know if you're honest with yourself, you'll probably admit the same.
We rarely come away from an argument with a friend or a loved one, a brother and sister in Christ, and when we realise where we went wrong, we wish we could go back and say more. More often than not, I think we wish we'd said less.
We might think too of how influential the words of a person in authority can be. A persuasive person can convince others of anything, even if it's a lie.
A quick wish and a humour can raise the spirit and elicit a laugh, but used incorrectly, and it can cause hurt and upset, even unintentionally so. I know this for myself, and perhaps it's an Irish trait in general, but how often do we kind of excuse a slip of the tongue or a hurtful word as, oh, it's just all in the name of good banter, you know?
[7:04] And the problem of the public misuse of words then can be all the worse in a church context like this, where those who teach are expected to be models of good and upright Christian living. And so James says, they will be judged more severely.

And he includes himself in this bracket, even as he writes. He recognises, and indeed so should we, that we who teach will be subject to judgment for what we say.
Let me pause there just for a moment and clarify what I feel James is talking about when he means by judged. Is it by others or is it by God? Is it now in the present, or is it kind of now then at the future judgment?
Well, ultimately I think we can say that this judgment comes from the Lord. God will hold each of us to account for what we say. Yet in a sense there's a greater responsibility placed on teachers for their words because of the effect that it can have.
They will be held to account for what they've taught, whether it's in accordance with God's word or not. And as we've seen, even briefly at this point, the great potential that words can have, we recognise how seriously God takes such a matter.
[8:14] Let's move on in the text. He goes on to tell us then why we should not presume to teach in verse 2. Why? Because we all stumble in our sin. And where better do we see this happen than with our tongue, with our speech?

Maybe that's in the words we speak, or even in the inward words that we speak in our minds, our thoughts. Our speech or our tongue serves as a permanent reminder each and every day of our own sinfulness, of our inability to change ourselves.
We can't pretend that we're sinless, where, in many cases, the evidence against us is clear from the moment that we open our mouths. James goes on to tell us that if anyone's never at fault in what

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they say, then they're perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.
If they can control their tongue, well then surely they can control every part of their bodies. For each one of us, though, we know how difficult it is to control the tongue. Even the most well-spoken Christian you know will probably admit to that.
We're all imperfect in this area. James calls us to tame our tongue, yet for so many of us, our speech is so often our undoing. So we see here James' introductory warning.
[9:27] Don't presume to teach and so incur judgment on yourself, because we know we all stumble. We're all imperfect. We fail to control our tongue. James already highlighted at the end of chapter 1, verse 26, what true religion looks like if we're living for Christ.

He writes, if anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself, and his religion is worthless. So if we think ourselves religious, if we think ourselves really following and living for God, and we don't keep a tight rein on our tongue, well then James says we deceive ourselves, we fool ourselves, our religion is worth nothing.
James' warning touches all of our lives. It's not merely helpful advice to those who would teach, nor is he directing his warning at them alone. No, James directs his warning at each of us. Each of us fails to control our speech.
Let's unpack a little bit more now about what James would say about the tongue. Why is it such a big problem? So we come to the next stage, an incendiary explanation.
So having introduced the idea of speech or the tongue, he gets deeper into its very nature. He brings to us, and quite vividly, a fiery description of the tongue and its potential for great evil.
[10:43] Let's have a look. We're going to see three illustrations that James uses. He compares the tongue to a horse's bit, a ship's rudder, and then the spark that starts a raging inferno.

Verse 3 reads, When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Small things produce big results.
Something small as a bit in the mouth of a horse can be used to turn the animal itself. Such a powerful animal, bent to the will of its rider by something so small. And like the tongue, it rests in the mouth and controls the larger body.
James has us then consider the rudder of a ship in verse 4. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so small and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.
Again, James shows us the big results produced by something small. Whether you've ever been on a boat before or not, you can probably appreciate the metaphor. Even though the ship is driven by the wind, the pilot controls the rudder and directs it wherever he wants to go.
[11:53] The small part of the ship turns and directs the whole vessel. Much in the same way as the tongue has similar influence over the whole person. You might think today maybe of the steering wheel in a car.

Small member of the car's anatomy but yet controls the whole vehicle and is directed by the will of the driver. So as the bit, the rudder, the wheel directs the larger body, the tongue directs human life.
Now, perhaps this question has been brewing in your mind as you're listening. Each of these metaphors have a third party. Someone controlling the bait or steering at the helm. But who's controlling the tongue?
Well, we know from Scripture that our tongue is controlled by our will, by our hearts. Scripture teaches us that from our hearts comes forth our speech. Let me offer a quick illustration that might help us to think of this.
Say we are annoyed at a friend, a spouse, or maybe a child because they broke a promise or they forgot something we asked them to remember. In that moment, we snap.
[12:59] We snap at them. We say something unkind. Without thinking. Maybe we go further than that and we act on it. Maybe we go and gossip. We share the failings of others with our confidants just kind of for the pleasure of a bit of juicy gossip.

How quickly do we step over the line from seeking support to entertaining gossip? We run the person down. Maybe we actively punish them with distrust or disdain.
Do we see the influence of the tongue, something so small, but yet with the uncontrolled potential for great evil? And if we haven't got a glimpse yet, we will in the next few verses from God's Word.
Let's push on to the next of James' metaphor, the next stage in his incendiary explanation. Verse 5 reads, Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

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Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. Now James goes on to really hone in on the danger of the tongue. The tongue, though a small part of the body, a small insignificant part in terms of its size, it makes great boasts.
[14:13] It builds itself up, makes itself bigger, more impressive. It boasts and brags, gorging itself on more and more pride. See the picture James is painting for us here.

Certainly not one of sweet and delicate innocence. In fact, more the extreme opposite. But there's still more. He calls us in the second half of verse 5 to consider something, something that really focus our minds on the right track.
Because, well a bit is not dangerous in the horse's mouth, nor is a rudder really, but a fire. This is a danger I think we can all relate to. The tongue, he explains, is like a small spark that results in a huge forest fire.
Again, for the third time, something small producing grace, and in this case, tragic results. If anything, at this point, we see the influence of the tongue in our lives.
As the bit directs the horse, as the rudder steers the ship, so too our lives are directed by our tongues. But what is it about our tongues that has this potential for evil influence over our whole lives?
[15:23] Well, I'll let James explain in verse 6. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

What a damning statement about our tongue, our speech, the way we communicate. It's a really hopeless situation that James puts forth. If we thought we could control this fire by ourselves, or maybe put it out or dampen it by our own good efforts, well, then I think we're sorely mistaken.
It's like trying to control a raging inferno, James would say. There are three things that we should notice briefly about the tongue from this verse and help us to get a feel for the real heat of what James has to say.
First of all, the character. A world of evil amongst the parts of the body, James says. A world of evil. Not just a small, insignificant part.
Not half good and half bad. No, a world of evil. This is the stark, intense reality of our tongue's character. Secondly, the influence of the tongue.
[16:40] If it weren't enough to reveal the depth of our incapacity to change ourselves and control our tongues, James goes even deeper. He refers to the tongue's influence. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire.

The cycle of evil rolls through the life of the person. The fire grows and grows. For ourselves, maybe we say someone is untrustworthy because we think it.
But when we think it, sorry, when we say it, we think it all the more. So we think, oh, that person's untrustworthy. But when we voice that, we think it more. And so you see how the cycle continues. And it does that all the way through life, creating new evils as it goes. And thirdly, the allegiance of the tongue. We've seen that this evil flows from the sinful heart within each of us.
But James adds a little bit more here at the end of verse 6. He finishes with, it is itself set on fire by hell. Now, some of the commentators would differ slightly on the interpretation of this, but let me offer a brief comment.
[17:47] I don't think he means in this instance that it's damned for destruction, but rather, I think he nails the tongue's colors to the mast and reveals its allegiance. If we were to wonder why the tongue has such great potential for evil, why it causes so much trouble for us and the world around us, well, I think then James explains, the fiery potential it has, the evil it can harbor, spits forth from hell itself.

So do we see the danger we have resting between our teeth? The great potential for evil in our Christian life? Remember that James is writing to believers here to inform them, to warn them of the great danger.
So be aware. We must wake up and realize this morning. Are we aware of our tongue's ability to stain us, to pollute us, to corrupt us?
James continues in verses 7 and 8. He writes, all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue.
It's a restless evil full of deadly poison. Sadly ironic, is it not, that all kinds of wild animals have been tamed by mankind, but no man or woman can tame the tongue.

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[19:06] Perhaps you've been to the circus or an aquarium and you've seen animals tamed and controlled to respond to command. Wild animals like bears, lions, orcas, dolphins, most of them able to kill and destroy us with ease, but yet these have been tamed.

But James says that no one can tame the tongue. And why? He writes, because it's a restless evil full of deadly poison. It's volatile, unstable, at best, maybe half-tamed, but yet liable to break out at any moment and unleash that evil.
None of us can force it back to line. No one amongst humans with our sinful human nature can control it. Yet it must be tamed.
Who then can tame it? Well, here's where we hit the wall, I think. The tongue has great potential for evil in the life of the believer. So it must be controlled.
It must be tamed. James says we must do something that we cannot do. And so we come to our third and final point this morning. An immense call.
[20:19] Lastly, and more briefly, James highlights the absurdity of our thinking if we believe we can master the tongue by ourselves as he turns towards our attitude to God.

From verse 9, reads, with our tongue we praise our Lord and Father and with it we curse men who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing.
My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs?
Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. Do we see the absolute hypocrisy that our tongues produce? The core of this passage in verse 10 sums up James' message to us this morning.
Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. One minute, even here in church, we're worshipping the Lord with our words, with our thoughts, and the next moment, we're cursing those made in his image.
[21:27] Maybe this is not so outwardly obvious. Let us think on it for a moment. Let's say perhaps you're singing praises to God as we finish up in a few moments, and two minutes later you're entertaining the thought of maybe bringing up that embarrassing instance with someone just to maybe slide them off or harm their feelings, even all in the name of good banter to get a laugh out of people.

Or maybe perhaps slandering someone to their face because they really annoyed you. Or going and gossiping to someone else about it behind their back. one minute out of the same mouth come praise and cursing to our Lord and Father, and the next cursing those made in his image.
My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both salt water and fresh water come from the same spring? Or can a fruit tree bear fruit different from its nature?
Well, no, that's ridiculous. It's inconsistent. But that is the way of the tongue. That's how we can be in our worship. And so James drives his point home.
In a sense, we can almost feel him chiding us with this impossible, with this immense call. This should not be. This cannot be. He highlights our inconsistency, even when he and indeed we know that no one can tame the tongue.
[22:51] But yet the need remains. We need to watch our words. We've seen the great potential of something small to have huge and disastrous results.

So we must be wary of what we say, what we think. We must do this, but we cannot. No human can. So are we excused on this basis?
Well, no. If we're honest with ourselves before God's word, then we're in a hopeless state this morning. Engulfed in the fiery flames of our own sinful words and our thoughts.
Day by day, those thoughts and words reflecting perfectly to the world around us the sinfulness of our hearts. We cannot control that which we must.
Now, James does not leave us with the kind of ending that we'd like to hear at the end of these verses. It doesn't resolve the riddle for us in this passage. If you thought at the end of this sermon I'd kind of dish out a top ten tips to a tamed tongue, well then I'm sorry because I don't have them.
[23:54] And James doesn't give them at this point. On the basis of our own human efforts, if we focus on that, well he leaves us in this tension. We've seen this morning that we're hopelessly incapable of taming the tongue by our own efforts.

But brothers and sisters, what else does scripture teach us? Where is the good news for us in the face of such an indictment? Well it's this. At the very heart of the gospel is the fact that we are in an impossible situation until God shows up.

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We cannot tame the tongue, we cannot save ourselves. Yet as sinful human beings we find our only hope in the one who is without sin, in Jesus Christ. For each of us here this morning we need to admit that need of a savior.
On the one hand we could deny our sin, we could claim that we're better or maybe no worse than others. We can claim that our good words and thoughts outweigh the bad ones.
We can claim our own righteousness. But again, this should not be. This cannot be. There's a better way we can respond.
[25:04] Our righteousness has been revealed to us. We need to believe in God's only son, in Jesus Christ, and daily cling to him as our savior. Come to the Lord.

Ask his forgiveness for the failures of our speech. And once we submit to the fact that he alone can do what we cannot, then we are ready to face the failures of our speech which reflect the failures of our hearts.
Let me just offer a few words of application as we close. When we come to a book like James, it's very important that we use gospel lenses as we think on what the Lord speaks to us.
Where the likes of Paul or John might include little nuances to Christ or little kind of gospel truth nuggets as they write. James does things a little differently. He kind of assumes that we know and understand the gospel.
So we're seeking to live for Christ. That's a given for him as he writes. So if we forget that or if we don't take that into account when we read the book of James, we can just end up with trying to live morally by our own efforts.
[26:09] Which when it comes to the tongue, we realize that we can't even do that. But thank the Lord as always. His word does not leave us without a lifeline.

Just a few verses later in chapter 4, James writes, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves then to God.
Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn, and wail.
Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up. We need to humble ourselves in this area before the Lord, that he would bring the change that we so desperately need.
We need to submit this area of our lives to him. Then we can resist the temptation to use our tongue for evil before we speak. Let us pause and think.
[27:13] And let us resolve in his strength alone, and I cannot emphasize that enough, in his strength alone, brothers and sisters, to use our tongue for good and not for evil, to bless and not to curse, to lift one another up, not put one another down, to speak words of kindness and not to gossip.

gossip. And when we slip up, which we will, we'll let us come and ask his forgiveness time and time again, and let us get up again and pursue by his strength the holy lives that he's called us to live.
Let us pray. Amen. Heavenly Father, from our own mouths come praise to you and cursing of our brothers and sisters.
This should not be. We recognize our total and our complete inability to reform ourselves and to change our sinful ways by our own efforts. We stand guilty and without excuse.
Please forgive us. we've seen this morning the great potential of our tongues for evil and inconsistency in our lives as believers. We cannot control our tongue and we are inconsistent in our worship of you.
[28:37] This should not be. Please help us. We are lost and without no hope. But into our hopelessness you have spoken these words. This shall not be.

We thank you, most loving Father, for sending Jesus Christ. We thank you that when we trust in him as our saviour, we receive your loving mercy. We thank you then that you love us as your children, flaws and all.
In his name, Amen. I believe we're going to sing as we close, but I'm just going to get that ready. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
[29:38] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Japanese principles planilton can steal lic centered Jesus grained ground in honor.

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Thank you.
Thank you.
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