

# The need to control the tongue

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[ 0 : 00 ] Some time ago, a friend of mine was doing driving lessons, and when she sat into the car, the instructor asked her to put her hands on the steering wheel.

And the instructor then said to her, your hands are on the wheel of a killing machine. And when I heard that, I thought, well, that's a bit dramatic, isn't it?

And of course, it is dramatic until you hear a story like during the week where up in Dublin, a man was jailed for driving at 160 kilometers per hour through a suburban residential area.

And the judge said, as he was sentencing this man, the judge said it was by the grace of God he did not kill somebody or maim somebody.

And you realize then that what that driving instructor said to my friend about how you have your hands on the wheel of a killing machine was actually appropriate.

[ 1 : 08 ] Of course, him saying that to her was not so that she would never drive. It was so that she would have a clear understanding in her mind as somebody driving a car, what you want is for it to be under control so that it can be handled safely.

And what you don't want is to lose control of the car and do unthinkable damage. And as James speaks to his readers in this chapter, he wants us to understand not so much about driving but about speaking.

What James has in mind here is the way we use our tongues to speak. He says in verse 2, anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect.

He says in verse 5, the tongue is a small part of the body. He speaks about the tongue in verse 6. He speaks about the tongue in verse 8.

He speaks about the tongue in verse 9. And he speaks about our mouths in verse 10. James wants his readers and he wants us to hear.

[ 2 : 24 ] God wants us to hear. When it comes to speaking, he's saying to us, here's what you want it to be like. And here's what you don't want it to be like.

James is speaking to dear brothers and sisters in the Lord who have turned to Jesus, who trust Jesus, who love Jesus. Like many of us here this morning.

And he is saying to them and to us, here's what we want when it comes to how we speak. And here's what we don't want.

And so let's think, first of all, about what we want when it comes to our words, to our speech, to what we say. In verse 2, James says, we all stumble in many ways.

Anyone who is never at fault or never stumbles in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. James here is making a connection between what we say and our bodies.

[ 3 : 28 ] Or, to put it another way, our whole person. All of who we are. James is making a connection between what we say and who we are.

And what he is saying is that if you can do this, if you cannot stumble in what you say, then you will also be able to not stumble in all of who you are.

And part of the reason he is saying that is because our words, our tongues, are so hard to master. So hard to control. So hard to get a rein on.

That he is saying, if you are able to tame your tongue, you will be able to tame every part of who you are. If you can do this, you can do that.

I remember a few years back, a friend of mine who played the violin learned that I played the piano. And he was delighted with this because he thought we can play something together.

[ 4 : 27 ] And so he suggested this to me and I said, that sounds like a good idea. And then he handed me the music for, I think it was something like Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto for violin and piano.

And I opened the first page and got a slight headache just by looking at the complexity of what was written there. And I realized in that moment, I'm never going to master this.

And to be honest, I'm never going to even attempt to master this. And I suppose what my friend was doing was giving me something with a view to thinking, well, if he's able to master this and play this, then we could play anything together.

Now, sadly, his experiment failed and we never did play together. But what James is saying here is that if you can master the tongue, if you can control what you say, then you can master all of who you are.

Because our tongues are so difficult to master. But there's also a sense in which James is saying that if you can master the tongue, you'll master all of who you are.

[ 5 : 41 ] Because the tongue gives direction. The tongue gives direction. What we say directs our lives, in a sense. When you think of the path that your life has taken and the different roads and avenues and pathways that you've walked down.

And how many of those were as a direct result of the words that you spoke. Maybe in dramatic ways on occasion. I do. Maybe in less dramatic ways, just a word of encouragement to a friend that solidified the friendship and meant that the friendship continued.

Because the tongue directs us, James says. If you can get a handle on it, you will get a handle on all of who you are. If you can get a bridle on your tongue, your whole person follows.

And you see that in the picture that he paints in verse 3. He says, when we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.

Now the bit that's put into the mouth of a horse is small, while the horse is comparatively big. Years ago when Groupon was a big thing and everybody was buying Groupon vouchers, we got a voucher for horse riding lessons.

[ 7 : 08 ] And the horse that was given to me was by the name of Daisy. And I think they named this horse ironically because I think if you tried to push Daisy with all your strength, I don't think Daisy would even know that you existed.

Daisy was a big animal. And I was thankful for the bit that went in the mouth of Daisy because it meant that you could direct Daisy, amazingly, this big, big animal, just by this little bit that went in the horse's mouth.

And James is saying if we can control our words, our whole person, all of who we are, will follow. And he uses a similar illustration in verse 4 as he says, take ships as an example.

Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. I don't know if you've seen many of the big ships that are coming in and out of the port of Cork in recent days.

Some of them are massive and controlled by this little rudder that is comparatively small. And you wonder, how did these big ships end up in Cork?

[ 8 : 22 ] And if you're from Cork, you will say, well, how would they not have ended up in Cork? I can never resist. So the way they ended up in Cork, more in terms of the technicalities of it, was because the captain directed the ship with a rudder, which is amazing when you think the distances that they will have sailed across potentially stormy seas, high seas, big winds, and it ends up right here where the captain wants it.

It's remarkable. Tons and tons of metal directed with this little rudder. James says that's what our tongues are like.

And that's the images that he wants us to have in mind when we think of our tongues, when we think of the words that we speak. We need to realize that they're like the bit in the mouth of a horse.

We need to realize that they're like the rudder on a ship. If we can master this, we can master our whole lives. If we can master what we say, our whole lives will follow where it takes us.

And that is a good thing. It's a good thing to have that bit in the mouth of a horse. It's a good thing to have the rudder on a ship. James is saying this in order to make one point, which is that not many of you should become teachers in verse 1.

[ 9 : 52 ] He says, Why does James highlight, first of all, those who teach the Bible?

Well, part of it is because those who teach the Bible say a lot of words. And the more words that you say, the more possibility there is of stumbling in what you say.

And so as one author puts it, for those who teach the Bible, we don't want to grieve the Holy Spirit. In other words, we don't want to say things that God doesn't say.

Nor do we want to quench the Holy Spirit. In other words, we don't want to not say things that God would or does say in his word. And of course, James highlights this because those who teach the Bible on a Sunday morning, for example, in church or in Sunday club or in a Bible study, they have responsibility not only to give direction to their own lives according to God's word, but also to give direction to other people's lives according to God's word.

And so an idle word in the pulpit is very different to an idle word over tea and coffee. Because more people hear it, because it is more weighty, it comes with more authority, it is saying this is what God's word teaches.

[ 11 : 30 ] And so James wants those who would be teachers of the Bible to realize the weightiness of the responsibility to make sure that their motives are pure and their motives are good.

But of course, James doesn't just have aspiring Bible teachers in mind. He has all Christians in mind when he speaks about how we need to bridle our tongues.

Wouldn't it be wonderful, like the bit in the mouth of a horse, like the rudder on a ship, if we were able to say the right thing every time?

If we were able to say the right thing in the right way every time? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were able to say the right thing in the right way at the right moment?

How often have you said the right thing in the right way at totally the wrong time? Wouldn't it be wonderful to say the right thing in the right way at the right time for the right reason?

[ 12 : 41 ] That your motive in saying it was out of love for the person you're speaking to. That if we have sinned against somebody, that we would go and speak to them and acknowledge that sin in a way that enables them best to hear that confession from us.

Or if we have been sinned against, that we would go, like Jesus tells us, to our brother or sister with well-chosen words that will help them to hear us.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had such control over what we say that we could speak words of encouragement when they were needed, words of wisdom, words of love, words of sympathy?

This is what we want, isn't it? That we would have this control over what we would say. This is what we're aiming for. This is what James is painting for us to move towards as brothers and sisters in Christ.

And then he paints for us a picture that we don't want. He goes on to show us what we don't want. In verse 5 he says, Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

[ 14 : 06 ] Now under control, fire is a good thing. But out of control, fire destroys. It can destroy a whole forest.

If it's not controlled, if it's not tamed, it destroys. And James says, our tongues are the same. And so when we think about our words, this is what we need to think about.

We need to think about a tiny little spark that is fine where it is at the moment. But that little spark set to a forest will destroy it.

We need to think about our words as sparks, as fire that have the potential to destroy if it is not controlled.

James says our words can destroy through what we say. In verse 6 he says, The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil. James here is picking up on the teaching of Jesus, which he very, very often does.

[ 15 : 20 ] And when Jesus teaches us about our words, what does Jesus say? Jesus says, You have heard it say, sorry, you have heard it said, you shall not murder.

And anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I say to you, anyone who says to a brother or sister, Raka is answerable to the court.

And anyone who says, now this is just words, you fool, will be in danger of the fire of hell. Jesus says, The things that come out of a person's mouth, in other words, the words that come out of our mouths, come from the heart, and these defile them.

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, and slander. When James says that the tongue is a world of evil, he's reflecting the teaching of his half-brother, Jesus, Jesus.

James wants us to know that if our words are not controlled, they destroy the whole person. In verse 6, he says, It sets the whole course of one's life.

[ 16 : 35 ] Sorry, it corrupts the whole body, first of all. It destroys all of who we are, because just as controlled words lead us into places where we want to go, uncontrolled words lead us to places where we do not want to go.

They lead us down paths that will end up destroying us if we continue. We think that if we express our anger, then it gets it out of our system.

But actually, if we express our anger in a sinful way, flying off the handle at somebody, it doesn't get it out of our system. And what it does is it strengthens a muscle.

So it's like going to the gym and lifting weights. And what happens is the muscle gets stronger so that the next time you go to the gym, it's easier to lift more weights.

It's easier to go for longer. And when we sinfully express our anger with our words, it doesn't get it out of our system.

[ 17 : 42 ] It just embeds it all the more, makes it stronger. One author has said that when we give expression to our emotions, when we say to somebody, I hate you, it's not only that that is giving expression to our emotions, it's also strengthening those emotions, making them more concrete, more real.

And so James says that if our speech, if our words are not controlled, it destroys the whole person. He says it destroys the whole course of life in verse 6.

And so perhaps you've come across somebody who will use their words to burn bridges. And all around them, there are more and more bridges burned in friendships, in work, in family.

And you long for them to see that they're cutting themselves off, that their whole lives are becoming destroyed by the words that they say, the gossip that they spread, the rumors, the slander, the unkind words, the words of anger.

I read during the week of a court case where somebody said that the statements spoken about them were untrue and they had spread like wildfire. Now the reason that phrase is used is because it spreads quickly, people don't put a stop to it, and because it is so destructive.

[ 19 : 12 ] James says if our words are not controlled, they destroy the whole course of life. And he says the reason for this is because of the source of this kind of talk. The reason that our uncontrolled words will destroy ourselves and destroy our lives is because of the source.

Look in verse 6 at the end of the verse. The tongue itself is set on fire by hell. Lies and gossip and slander and grumbling, they aren't coming from God.

They're not a godly way of using our tongue. James says they're a hellish way of using our tongue. It's the devil who is the father of lies.

And so James says uncontrolled, this is what will happen. Destruction through our words.

C.S. Lewis speaks about this. In one of his books he says, you'll have had experiences.

[ 20 : 22 ] It begins with a grumbling mood and you are still distinct from it. Perhaps even criticizing that grumbling mood.

And you in a dark hour may will that mood. Embrace that grumbling mood.

You can repent and come out of it again, but there may come a day when you can't do that any longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the moods nor even to enjoy it, but just to grumble and grumble and grumble.

And what he's doing there is showing how the words that we speak, if uncontrolled and not reined in, actually end up destroying us.

And we end up nothing more than the grumble or the criticism or the rumor mill. James wants us to not want this.

[ 21 : 28 ] He wants us to think about our words, uncontrolled, as fire. And you remember back in January, the horrific fires that tore through parts of Los Angeles.

One resident said this, I thought we'd be safe here, but with six active fires now burning across the city, nowhere feels safe. So far LA's fires have forced more than 179,000 people, including myself, to evacuate.

Many people I know thought they had found refuge only to have to flee again. You wouldn't wish that on anybody. You wouldn't want that for anybody. And James paints a picture of uncontrolled words so that we might say, we don't want that.

We don't want that in our lives. And so James has these two sides to what he's saying, what we want, controlled, careful words, and then the uncontrolled, not careful words.

What we want and what we don't want as believers in Jesus. And then he says, we have both at the same time going on in our lives. Verse seven, all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue.

[ 23 : 01 ] It's a restless evil full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father and with it we curse human beings who have been made in God's likeness.

Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing my brothers and sisters this should not be so. James has shown us what we want when it comes to how we use our words and what we don't want and then he says, but both of these go on at the same time in our lives.

We praise God, we speak honorable words about God, we glorify God, we say a great God is and then we criticize and dishonor and disrespect people who are made in his image.

And he says, this shouldn't be so. And we agree that it shouldn't be so. We know that it shouldn't be like this. It doesn't feel right, it doesn't feel good, it doesn't feel natural that people who have been bought by the blood of Jesus would have both these realities going on at the same time.

So when he asks these questions in verse 11, can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? Well, the answer is, no, of course they can't, James.

[ 24 : 19 ] Or when he asks, my brothers and sisters, in verse 12, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear fruit or figs? We say, no, of course it can't, James.

And then he says, okay, well, neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. James says, this shouldn't be so.

And if you're sitting here thinking, well, that's not the way it is in my life, please hear what James is saying to you here.

he's saying that nobody can tame the tongue, no human being, that we all do this, even as followers of Jesus, that both of these realities are coming out of our mouths.

And if you're here and you're crushed by this, you're convicted of this reality, of how you've used your words to hurt or to harm others.

[ 25 : 22 ] James knows that, he's aware of that, he's drawing our attention to that, and he's wanting us, in a sense, to despair.

He's wanting us to despair of ourselves. Verse 8, no human being can tame the tongue. If you're a human being, James says, you cannot do it.

Which is amazing because he has just said that we can tame all kinds of different animals. So we have this God-given responsibility to care for and steward creation.

And we can tame animals, even wild animals. And yet we cannot tame the words that come out of our mouths.

No human being, and he chooses his words carefully because he wants us to realize we can only do this with God's strength.

[ 26 : 30 ] Only God can enable us to get a rain on our words. He wants us to despair of ourselves so that we might look to God.

James has already spoken on the subject of words. Back in chapter one, he said, know this, my beloved brothers and sisters, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word. James says we cannot tame the tongue, but James says as followers of Jesus, we can receive the implanted word.

We can receive the word of God, and it is the powerful word of God that is going to enable us to do what we cannot do. It is the powerful word of God that is going to enable us to tame the tongue.

It is as we receive the word of God and allow it to shape our minds and our hearts and our words that we will see progress in this.

[ 27 : 55 ] James wants us to realize, as one author says, that bad things don't produce good things, and so a person who is not right with God and walking daily in his presence cannot consistently speak pure and helpful words.

One who is double minded and inconsistent with regard to the things of God in their heart will be double minded and inconsistent in their speech. But James says, as we allow God's word to do its work in our lives, that our words will start to reflect his word.

God's God. Just an example of this, I was reading Paul's second letter to Timothy during the week, and Timothy is a young pastor and he is facing opposition for the sake of the gospel.

And you'd imagine if that was written in our day, in our culture, that Paul's advice to Timothy would be, you need to be loud, you need to be aggressive, you need to get your opinion out there strongly.

Fight this with fire, Timothy. That'll make your opponents back down. But what Paul says to Timothy is to gently correct your opponents so that they might be granted repentance.

[ 29 : 24 ] Now, you hear that from Paul to Timothy, and by extension to all of us, you hear this note of gentleness. And when you hear that spoken from God, and you realize my words aren't gentle, and then you realize, but I want them to be gentle, because God called for them to be gentle, and he will give me the power, the strength I need to reign in my words so that they might be gentle.

Gentle. Gentle. You see, when we receive the word of God, we're not receiving the word of people, or of man.

We're receiving the word of the one who loves us, and gave his son for us. We're receiving the word of one who is gentle, and lowly in heart.

words. And as we receive his words, it shapes our words, so that we might grow and grow and grow in putting a rein on our tongue, that we might grow and grow and grow in not allowing our tongues, our words, to bring destruction or poison into the lives of others.

us. That more and more, what we say, and how we say it, and why we say it, and when we say it, would reflect the God who has spoken to us.

[ 31 : 07 ] We don't want our words to be uncontrolled fire starters, flames of destruction. We don't want our words to be this salt water, coming out of a fresh spring.

We want our words to be like the bit in the mouth of a horse that is carefully directing it, like the rudder of a ship that will get the ship to the destination that it is destined for, directing our lives in godly ways.

And it's by allowing his word to do its work in our lives, whether we are teachers of the Bible or not, that we might get a rein on our tongues, that we might tame our tongues so that we might praise God and bless others.

Let's ask God for help in doing what he has called us to do. Father, we want to thank you and praise you for the vivid images that James gives us to help us to understand, Lord, the words that we speak.

And Lord, our hearts long for this tamed, controlled use of our tongues that James speaks about. And Lord, we don't want to be using our words, Lord, as destructive forces in the lives of others or in our own lives.

[ 32 : 38 ] And so, Father, we pray that you would help us to receive your word, Lord, to be shaped by your word each and every day this week that we'll be hearing from you as we read the Bible.

And Lord, that more and more our words would reflect your word and your character. In the name of Jesus, amen. Amen.