

# The Taming of the Tongue (1)

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[ 0 : 00 ] I don't know if you've ever seen the slogan, guns don't kill people, I kill people. Perhaps you have, perhaps you haven't, but the point is that guns in and of themselves, so these people claim, aren't dangerous, rather it's the people who have the guns who are dangerous.

You can choose to agree or disagree with that point of view. What may or may not be true of guns is most certainly true of the power of human speech.

Words kill. In 1839, the English author Edward Lytton penned the words, the pen is mightier than the sword.

Words either spoken or, in Lytton's case, written down, are far more powerful than swords or guns, for good or for ill.

To rephrase the slogan, guns don't kill people, our words kill people. In Scotland, we have very tight gun control laws, and rightly so, but the altogether more dangerous weapon of the human tongue, the words we speak, requires no license and is governed by no law.

[ 1 : 24 ] In James chapter 1, verse 26, James writes, If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, he deceives himself, this person's religion is worthless.

Having spent the whole of chapter 2 focusing on how the Christian must not separate faith from works, James now returns to this principle of controlling one's tongue.

He wants us to understand that this is the prime example of how a Christian's faith is to be expressed and exercised in the way he or she uses their speech.

Now, before we get into the nuts and bolts of James' argument here in James 3, I want us to link together what he said in verse 1 with what follows. Let me remind you that in verse 1 he wrote, Not many of you, my brothers, should become teachers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

The primary means by which teaching is delivered is by speech, and so it's natural that James should focus the following thoughts on the words we speak.

[ 2 : 44 ] It may be, as some commentators suggest, that all the way through chapter 3 he is still speaking to the church's teachers, warning them against the foolish use of words and the explosive impact upon the church of careless speech.

That may be true, but it's not the whole truth, because James' words challenge us all. All of us can either build each other up or tear each other down with our words.

And so this evening, as the first part of two sermons devoted to the taming of the tongue, we want to focus on verses 2 through 6, and we want to do so under two headings.

First, the tongue in control in verses 2 through the first part of verse 5, and secondly, the tongue in combustion in the second part of verse 5 and verse 6.

Let me remind you of James' central contention all the way through this book. Faith without works is dead, and that his primary concern here concerns the work of our speech.

[ 4 : 01 ] In other words, the good news of Jesus must translate into good words for Jesus, lest our faith in Jesus is of no value at all.

Let's begin then as we think about the tongue and control in verses 2 to the beginning of verse 5.

The tongue in control. James, just like his brother Jesus and many other Jewish rabbis of the day, heavily relied upon illustrations to drive home their points.

His point here concerns the pursuit of perfection in the Christian life, verse 2. Perfection is not unspotted moral perfection, as in never doing anything wrong.

After all, James says in verse 2 that we all stumble in many ways. Rather, we are to think of the way James uses perfection in terms of maturity in the Christian faith, roundedness, the end product of a life devoted to God.

Here then is the primary mark of Christian maturity, that a man or woman of God is in control of their speech and is not allowing their speech to be in control of them.

[ 5 : 24 ] The last thing we want is that classic Oliver Hardy line, when having been drawn into another catastrophe, he says to Stan Laurel, that's another fine mess you've got me into.

Most everything in the Christian life is about control, and especially this, the mark of our maturity being the way we express our faith in the words we choose to use and the way we choose to use them.

I think that's the difference between the bare use of word and tongue in this passage. Bare word has no tone, no intonation, and can turn even the most innocent thing we say into something dark and suspicious.

The tongue, by contrast, encapsulates not just what we say, but how we say it, because it's sometimes how we say something that tears another person down, and not just what we've said to them.

So control both, James is saying to us. Not just what you say, but how you say it. There's the path to maturity in the Christian life.

[ 6 : 43 ] Rigid and strict control of what we say and how we say it. Now, James uses two illustrations from the world of his day to reinforce his point about controlling our tongues.

He uses one from the world of riding horses and the second from the world of sailing ships. When I was a student in Free Church College, I remember being warned against the use of too many illustrations in a sermon, because often people will forget the point you're trying to make, but will remember the illustration.

Well, just for any who are kind of slow like I am, to get James's point, it's this. We need to be in strict and rigid control of these small members of our body, the tongue, and not to be controlled by them. It is all about self-control and faith-driven works being expressed in faith-driven words. Control, control, and more control.

That's the point of these illustrations. First of all, then, there's the illustration of bits and horses. Bits and horses. In verse 3, we read, If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

[ 8 : 12 ] Now, in the ancient world, the horse was an image of power. Solomon, to his considerable detriment, acquired thousands of horses. Cavalry was the military equivalent of an armoured division.

Until relatively recently, the presence of cavalry largely dictated the outcome of a battle. Those huge battle horses trampled everything under their feet, bearing terror with them.

Their riders were armed to the teeth, and cavalry swept all before it. And yet it was all dependent upon a small piece of metal inserted into the horse's mouth, the bit.

That bit was attached to the bridle, and by the use of reins, the rider could force that mighty battle horse into obedience, to guide it in the direction he wanted it to go.

Without the bit in its mouth, the horse might just as easily have turned on its own troops, and would certainly have been no advantage in battle at all. So here you have this small piece of metal, maybe that size, by which a mighty war horse is controlled, by which it is forced to obey, and it is driven in the direction the rider wants it to go.

[ 9 : 42 ] And yes, I know we can talk about relative size of the bit compared to the size of the horse, but lest we forget James' main point, this is all about control.

What controls the horse? The bit controls the horse. In the same way, the tongue either controls us, or we control the tongue, one or the other, but not both.

Wars are won and lost on account of how well the cavalry are trained and marshaled. Wars in the Christian life, the fight for unity in the church, and the pursuit of holiness in the individual Christian's life is won or lost on account of how well we keep our tongues under control.

And we can choose to allow our tongues to run away with us, to get us into that long and hardy, that's another fine mess you've got me into.

We can allow our tongues to slander others, to gossip about others, to tear them down. We can use our tongues to spread false doctrine, to spread rumours, to discourage others, to break the unity of the church.

[ 11 : 03 ] Or we can strictly and rigidly control our tongues and build one another up in the faith, speak the truth about Jesus in love to one another, and encourage one another.

We can control the tongue or be controlled by the tongue, one or the other, but not both. The tongue is the bit in your mouth which can drive you to disaster or guide you to safety.

And James is saying to us, will you just control yourself and your tongue? The bit controls the horse, not the other way around.

Rudders and ships. That's the second illustration. Rudders and ships. Now James is using illustrations which the people of his day would have readily understood. These were days of trade and commerce where grain and many other commodities were shipped from one part of the Roman Empire to another.

As a consequence, the Romans had their equivalence of giant oil tankers. And these huge ships were guided by small rudders. They might be driven by strong and hard winds and yet using the rudder, the ship, and I quote from the passage itself, is guided wherever the desire of the pilot wills. [12:35] Now compared to the whole ship, the rudder is absolutely tiny. And yet it's that tiny rudder which controls the whole ship. Just as the rider controls the direction of the horse using that bit, so the pirate controls the direction of the ship using the rudder.

And again, we're in the territory not so much of the size of the tongue compared to that of the whole body, although that's certainly a factor, or even the impact that the tongue has upon the whole body, although again that's most certainly a factor here, but our need to control the tongue.

The horse is controlled by the bit in its mouth, and the ship is controlled by the rudder on its keel. If the rudder is driven by hard winds with no influence at all from the ship's pilot, the ship will founder on the rocks and go down.

In the same way, the tongue controls us or we control the tongue, one or the other. There's no third course. The ship stays afloat only as it is directed.

The church stays afloat and unity is preserved only to the extent that each member controls their tongues. And the point is this, we can be controlled by our tongue or we can control the tongue, one or the other, but definitely not both.

[14:16] The tongue is the rudder of your ship which James is commanding you as the pilot to control. Again, using this illustration of the rudder and the ship, it's like James is saying to us, will you not just control yourself and your speech?

The rudder is to control the ship, not the other way around. We want to be very careful when it comes to these illustrations of the horse and its bit and the ship and its rudder because the main point here is about control.

We must control the tongue or the tongue will control us. The mark of maturity in the Christian life is that we don't let our tongues run away with themselves, but we control what we say and how we say it.

Just think for a second of the fine messes you've got yourselves into by the inappropriate use of your speech. I've got myself into more than I can possibly count but I trust that the grace of Christ is working in me and in you in such a way that we're getting into less trouble than perhaps we used to. Let me suggest that one of the best examples of this is, and this is just one example, one of the best examples of this is when we never say no. Someone asks us to do something for them and we unthinkingly say yes and someone else asks us the same thing and we say yes to them and then another person and we say yes to them and then another after that before we know where we are we've said yes to too many things and we end up being unable to do any of them.

[16:07] We've allowed our tongues to direct the course of our lives rather than soberly thinking about whether we have the capacity to do all these things before we speak.

I remember the late Dr David Ford, one of the most mature Christians I ever knew and how whenever I asked him if he could do something for me he would always say to me and it was irritating at the time but now I understand why he would always say to me well I'll get back to you the next day I'll get back to you tomorrow about that he would always give himself space to think about it he did not let his tongue control him one of the fruit of the spirit is self control it takes self control to be kind and loving peaceful and humble but it also takes self control to control our tongues isn't it telling that when it comes to the purity of our Lord it was said of him there was no deceit in his mouth nor guile in his tongue which means that as gospel people the spirit of Jesus encourages and enables us to control the tongue and models for us the life of Jesus himself in what it looks like to control our tongues

Phil Stogner taught me something which I'm finding increasingly helpful as time goes on he taught me to say to myself wait wait w a I T to ask myself why am I talking a good idea and a good first

step to controlling our tongues the tongue and control and then secondly the tongue and combustion second part of verse five into verse six the tongue and combustion you know if you don't find these words scary you need to go back and read them again James says behold how great a fire is set alight by such a small fire and the tongue is a fire it's a world of unrighteousness fire may fascinate us but only because it terrifies us in equal measure these verses provide us with all the reason we need to control our tongues to control that bit in the horse's mouth to control that rudder on the ship's keel because that tongue which is a fire can set the entire course of your life ablaze many forest fires are caused by by a very small spark someone throwing away a cigarette just a tiny stub and yet it can cause a fire which can destroy tens of thousands of square kilometres kill tens of thousands of wild animals and burn hundreds of homes to the ground and all because of the stub of a cigarette we call something that is that is easily set on fire highly combustible and of all the members of our body the tongue is the most highly combustible both at risk of being set on fire and setting the rest of our lives on fire and so as we close this evening

I want us to consider the two elements of the tongue's combustibility first the tongue is demonic and second the tongue is destructive the tongue first of all is demonic the beginning of verse 6 we read the tongue is a world of unrighteousness and then in the end of verse 7 we read it is set on fire by hell actually in the original language as opposed to the tongue being called a world of unrighteousness it's actually got the definite article there the world of unrighteousness as if to say that all the unrighteousness found in this world can be found first in our tongues there is nothing unrighteous in this world but that it does not at one point or another pass the tongue after he died frankly ghoulish scientists preserved the brain of Albert Einstein because there they thought was a world of scientific brilliance literary experts sometimes speak of a particular book or poem concerning a world of learning military experts talk of a battlefield as being a world of pain and the tongue is a world of unrighteousness smallpox is a deadly virus responsible for the death of tens of millions of people throughout the years thankfully smallpox was eradicated and yet vials of that smallpox are still held in secret laboratories all it would all it would take is for one of these small vials to be stolen and then broken on a busy

London underground and the evil of smallpox would rip through our world again within these tiny small vials held in secret laboratories is a world of death and our tongues are worlds of unrighteousness one word out of place one word said in the wrong way and fellowships of God's people can be torn apart and where does this all come from according to James the tongue is set on fire by hell set on fire by hell the fire of hell stokes and burns in the uncontrolled tongue of a man the devil sneers when when he hears us tearing one other down and he laughs when he hears us gossiping and spreading rumors in the heat of the moment we make a rash and unwise promise it commits us to a course of action which damages our Christian profession and the

[ 22 : 32 ] Christian lives of our friends it has come from hell itself if any one member of our bodies is prone to the suggestions of Satan it is our tongues there are times are there not well I found this in my own life anyway I'm sure you have as well there are times when they're not when when having said something very hurtful and destructive we say to ourselves why did I say that indeed why did you say that could it be that for a brief moment you lost control of the bit in the horse's mouth and the rudder on the ship's keel and the devil took control of them instead just like Satan can plant a temptation in our minds can he not also plant a word in an uncontrolled mouth and therefore perhaps when we're praying the Lord's prayer our father who's in heaven lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil could we not be praying first and foremost perhaps for

God to set a guard over our lips to deliver us from Satan's influence over our tongues now why am I saying this is it is just to scare us no no it is to reinforce as James is saying here in James chapter three our need to control the tongue and not to allow the tongue to control us brothers and sisters this is how dangerous our tongues are they are highly combustible and the devil in hell loves nothing more than fire now this is why we need to control ourselves by the spirit and to put our faith in Christ into practice by expressing ourselves in gospel words in a gospel way the tongue is demonic but then secondly the tongue is destructive it's destructive James uses two words to describe the tongue's destructive impact he says it stains the entire body it sets the entire course of life on hell on fire rather the tongue stains the whole body it spoils everything an uncontrolled tongue is like is like a rotten apple if left with other apples it will spread its canker to the whole barrel when I was when I was young you know and that wasn't that long ago really it wasn't very fashionable to have rips in one's trousers

I know things are different now but but not when I was young a little rip in the wrong place i.e. a place that couldn't be patched by your mum and the trousers were useless all they were good for was to be thrown away or used as rags now they could probably be sold for more than they would have been had they had no rips at all but not back then well an uncontrolled word an answer given in impatience and unkindness it's a rip in the trousers it's a rotten apple in the barrel stains the whole stains the whole body never mind the rest of the body it can be absolutely perfect but if the tongue is uncontrolled everything is spoiled and everything is stained I've known many many many fine Christians and fine Christian ministers to boot but they just cannot control what they say and how they say it and because of that they're rendered pretty useless because their words destroy their witness and their reputation their words set the entire course of their lives on fire they stumble from one disaster to another disaster it was said of one recent American president not Donald J. Trump but one before him that he only ever opened his mouth to change the foot he had put in it we call people who love fire pydomaniacs very often pydomaniacs are utterly oblivious to the damage they're causing and the danger to life and limb their fires cause and we who fail to control our tongues do not realize the damage we are causing think of the damage Peter caused to the cause of Christ by denying his Lord three times think of the damage he had caused by promising to give anything she wanted to his wife's daughter if she would but dance for him think of the times in your life when you've done serious damage to yourself by the things you've said make no mistake as we'll find out next week our tongue should have a health warning on them saying highly combustible very dangerous we all need to know this of all the members of our bodies the tongue is the most dangerous and therefore must be controlled most rigidly and strictly if we are Christians this evening we have the promise of Christ to forgive all our sins of speech and word and we also have the Holy Spirit in us to effect change and transform our tongues from being set alight by the fires of hell into being fountains of the grace of God and mercy to us and to the world around us remember how dangerous the tongues tongue is guns don't kill people our words kill people that is why this evening all of us from the youngest to the oldest need the grace of Christ father you know or I don't buy them they don't