

Taming the Tongue

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- [0 : 00] Today's text is James chapter 3 verses 1 to 12, which I will read now from the English Standard Version. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.
- 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.
- If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also.
- Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.
- So also the tongue is a small member. Yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!
- [1 : 06] And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.
- For every kind of beast and bird, of 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. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.
- From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not be so. Does a spring pour forth from 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.
- [2 : 21] James chapter 3, that's verses 1 to 12. In this relatively short epistle, James repeatedly mentions or refers to the mouth or tongue.
- As I was preparing for this message, I was surprised to discover that in the first chapter alone, James addresses its use four times. They are easy to overlook.
- The first mention was an encouragement on how to use it. He says in James chapter 1, verse 5, If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach.
- And it will be given him. The second mention was in the form of a prohibition. We read in James 1, verse 13, Let no one say when he is tempted, I am being tempted by God.
- For God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. The third and fourth occasions were both admonitions. James 1, verse 19, Know this, my beloved brothers, for every person, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.
- [3 : 34] And in James 1, verse 26, If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.
- Thus, in James 1, verse 26, the apostle first mentions the bridling of the tongue, as being the evidence of genuine saving faith. Again, our sermon series, taken from the epistle of James, is faith and works.

And more specifically, the relationship between faith and works. And what is that relationship? How can we know that we have a genuine saving faith?

In chapter 1, again, verse 22, James 1 introduces for us the relationship between faith and works, when he says, But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

Today's sermon text, the first portion of chapter 3, deals with the tongue in an in-depth manner. And from it, we will discover that genuine faith is made evident by the manner in which the tongue is used.

[4 : 49] This morning, I will offer four reflections that are derived from the text concerning the tongue. They will be careful attention.

The tongue needs careful attention. The tongue, it stares the entire body. The tongue, it is dangerous of fire.

And the tongue, it ought not to be duplicitous. Reflection 1. Careful attention is needed. Not many of you, James chapter 3, first two verses, Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is the perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

What exactly is James getting at here? Not many of you should be teachers, is what he says. If you're anything like me, and grew up in a church like I did, you probably spent your whole life avoiding what I am doing now.

[6 : 05] That is, standing in front of adults so as to teach and give instruction. Think of it. James warns that many of us should not do the very thing that I am doing now, because those who do will be judged with greater strictness.

But notice, James absolves no one of being judged with strictness, but merely says that those who teach will be with a greater strictness.

Before I go any further, I want to submit to you that everyone is a teacher of some kind, and to some degree. Everyone speaks from the vantage point of things that they believe true.

Ideas that they convey in conversation continuously. Absolutely no one is exempt. Our deeply held beliefs are revealed by the things we say, and the things that we do.

As parents, we teach our children. As administrators, we teach those we administrate over. As friends, we speak of things that we think and believe true.

[7 : 24] Teaching is entirely unavoidable. James warns that we will be judged strictly. And for that one who teaches as I am doing now, there is a stricter judgment.

But what is that measure? What is the standard from which comes a strict judgment? Clearly, James is addressing the church.

And clearly, he is addressing the matter of teaching the word. From the very beginning of time, God spoke everything into existence.

By his word. And from the very beginning of time, his spoken word has been under attack. How specifically was it attacked, one might ask?

By a cunning and a suggestive talk. Did God really say? And therein came the suggestion, the idea, that what was understood was not what was spoken.

[8 : 36] When we typically think of the conversation between the serpent and Eve in the garden, something is generally missed that I wish to draw you to the forefront of your mind.

And something that I think is key to the text. Let's go to Genesis chapter 2 for a moment so as to make the connection. Genesis 2, 15.

Starting in 15 to 18. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work and to keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man saying, You may surely eat of every tree in the garden, but of the tree of knowledge and of good and evil you shall not eat.

For in the day you eat of it, you will surely die. Then the Lord God said, It is not good that man should be alone.

I will make him a helper fit for him. In the event that you missed it, please notice, when God took the man, Adam, into the garden and gave him the command, Eve had not been created yet.

[9 : 44] So in order for Eve to have known what God had said, Adam presumably conveyed the command of God to her.

Look again at the suggestive nature of the serpent's question. Hidden behind the, Has God said? Is a, Is a, How can you possibly know what God said if you were not there?

And so goes the reasoning of everyone who lives in denial of the spoken word of God. Brothers and sisters, God has spoken in his word.

The word was spoken through Moses, the prophets, and the apostles. The word came in person and lived among us. In the words of John, we beheld his glory.

None of us has either seen nor heard directly from Moses, the prophets, the apostles, nor Jesus. However, we now know that God has spoken because we were told by trustworthy eyewitnesses who under the inspiration of God wrote it down.

[11 : 04] And as Eve was held accountable for the spoken word given to Adam, so are we, so, so are we to be judged by the word made known to us.

By it, we will be strictly judged. And those who teach will be judged more strictly as James says. Sadly, we completely ignore the fact that God has spoken to our own peril.

Worse, because many do not pay careful attention, there is this ill-advised desire to become teachers. What is James getting at here when he says that not many of us should be teachers?

He is saying that careful attention is needed so as to be sure that what is spoken by the teacher reflects accurately what God, what was spoken by God.

A doer of the word needs to first know and understand what it says so that he or she may live rightly before the Lord.

[12 : 15] the apostle Peter puts it this way. As each has received his gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace.

Whoever speaks, whoever speaks as one who speaks the very oracles of God, brothers and sisters, when we speak, we should speak as though we're speaking the very words of God.

The absolute worst use of the tongue is its active engagement in the distortion of what God has said. Such distortions can come in two ways.

First, by adding things that God has not said. Second, by taking away from the things that he did say. While we are far from perfect and indeed stumble in what we say, we ought to stare clear of leading anyone astray with our tongues.

Genuine faith is on display, therefore, when one gives careful attention to what the scriptures declare. Reflection two.

[13 : 32] The tongue staves the entire body. If we put bits, I'm reading verses 3 to 5a, If we put bits in the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

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 to rest.

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts great things. In verses 3 and 4, the tongue is compared to a bit in the horse's mouth and the rudder of a ship.

Both of these devices need someone to stare and chart a course. The tongue in similar fashion requires a pilot.

someone to control the direction in which it is to go. It cannot be left to itself because it is very capable of making great boasts and quickly gets the entire body into trouble.

[14 : 50] How many countless times can you remember when the tongue, be it yours or someone else's, led you down a path of destruction?

How many times have you been told lies that lead you to places where you never intended to go? How many times have you struck a deal that resulted in being set back for weeks, months, years, decades, or possibly to the point of no return?

Perhaps even in despair. For thirty pieces of silver, Judas betrayed our Lord.

With his mouth, he struck a deal to get rich. And in the process, in the process, set the stage for Jesus to be crucified. For Judas, this resulted in a remorse so great that he took his own life.

perhaps you are experiencing divorce because of a path started by the tongue, a consequence that resulted in the fatherlessness of your own children.

[16 : 09] The tongue, as stated by James, makes great boasts. What can possibly be worse than the tongue forfeiting its very own soul by the sin of apostasy?

In a world where deception abounds, the mouth plays the leading role. There is great wisdom in those simple words of that favorite children's song, Oh, be careful little mouth what you say.

and as with the rudder and as small as it may be, the tongue sets the course for one's life.

The ones whose faith is genuine, is diligent, and holds a steady course of obedience to the Lord. Obedience to the word.

Reflection number three. the tongue, it is dangerous, a fire. How great a forest fire is set ablaze by such a small fire?

[17 : 24] And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among its members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

For every kind of beast and bird, of 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.

Left to itself, the tongue will set everything on fire, because the tongue itself is a fire.

It consumes, spoils, stains, and sours everything it touches. Think with me for a moment. Imagine the havoc that is being wreaked right now, this very moment, by false doctrines being perpetuated in pulpits.

False doctrines that mislead the people into thinking all manner of things untrue. How else would people who in the coming day will be surprised to hear the words, depart from me, for I never knew you, if not for having the false assurance of salvation.

[19 : 02] Sunday after Sunday, easy believism is being promoted, giving people the false notion that a prayer rendered in sincerity is the very means by which one is redeemed, as though genuine faith is not affirmed by what a person does or how one lives.

Many church are being taught things that are unbiblical. Worse, in some cases, things are taught and promoted that run completely contrary to what the scriptures actually teach.

The tongue is a restless evil, evil, and it is filled with deadly poison. It is dangerous, and it is often wielded as a weapon of mass destruction.

Brothers and sisters, James tells us that the tongue is a fire, a world of righteousness, and it is set on the fire by hell itself.

In his book, *The Message of James*, J.A. Motcher writes, tiny as the spark is, once it is fanned into a flame, and the flame takes hold, then it keeps spreading till all is ablaze.

[20 : 28] So the tongue is a power of evil, for evil. Absolutely no one is immune, including pastors, preachers, and teachers.

you would do well to read the scriptures and not simply listen and believe what I or any other preacher may be saying.

Be diligent and search the scriptures to see if what is being said is in fact true. Do the work in verifying that what it says is right.

After all, one day you and I will stand before the holy and the righteous judge, and he will pass judgment with all strictness.

We humans, all of us, or I shouldn't say all of us, but humans have tamed practically all the animals. But the one thing that escapes our ability to tame is our own tongues.

[21 : 43] It is a restless evil full of deadly poison. That sounds like somewhat a hopeless predicament to be in. However, James says that no human can tame the tongue.

But what is impossible with us, we know is possible with God. Sadly, most of us do not even read or listen to the word, and as such, are completely incapable of knowing even what it says, thus forfeiting the ability to be the doer of the word.

Those whose faiths are genuine are actively engaged in preventing all such bias. they are actively engaged in knowing what the word says.

And my final reflection, the tongue ought not be duplicitous. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. my brothers, this ought not be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?

[23 : 14] Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives or grape vine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. Let's face it, our tongues are far more duplicitous than we care to think.

Oh, how easy it is for any one of us to come to church, sing the praises unto our Lord and Savior, exalting His name in praise and worship, while at the same time harboring ill feelings toward those who worship right alongside us.

Those who are made in the image of God. with our mouths, we speak pleasantries to others when face to face, while at the same time speaking ill in their absence.

So easy it is to belittle, disavow, dishonor, slander, and criticize.

James says that this ought not be because a spring does not bring forth fresh and salt water.

[24 : 35] In the words of Peter, those with a genuine faith are to make every effort to add to their faith knowledge, virtue, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly love, and love.

When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, he said that it was to love the Lord with all our hearts, mind, and strength. And then he added that the second was like it, that we should love our neighbors as ourselves.

There's no separation of the two. Jesus wasn't even asked what the second commandment was. He just asked what the greatest one was.

But he added the second one. And still we find ourselves having less than noble thoughts concerning those whom we live with and encounter every day.

As I close these reflections on today's text, I leave you with some final thoughts. words. Who expects anything but figs from a fig tree?

[25 : 50] Who expects anything but grapes from a grapevine? Who expects to drink salty water from a fresh spring? James 1.18 says, Of his own will he brought us forth, that is God, by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

What then ought God to expect from those whom he has brought forth by the word of truth? Ought he not, or ought we not be his first fruit?

Ought we not speak and live truth since we were brought forth by the word of truth? Genuine faith is made evident by the manner in which the tongue is used.

So we ought to speak that which is true. those who have genuine faith, they pay careful attention to what the tongue says.

They are well aware that the tongue stares the entire body. They know how dangerous and lethal the tongue can be, and they work to prevent it from being duplicitous.

[27 : 26] many people claim to believe and yet have dead faith. That is, a faith that has had no impact on their lives.

They affirm what is true, or perhaps even made a profession of faith, faith, and yet Jesus remains not their Lord.

Be warned, such faith cannot save you. Genuine faith bears fruit, and it is made evident by what a person does, thinks, and talks about.

Let us pray. Amen. Father, we acknowledge that we often stumble in speech, saying the things that we ought not.

We recognize that you alone have the power to tame it. We pray that you would continually endow us with your sustaining grace, so that we might honor you in everything that we say.

[28 : 44] May our tongues accurately reflect all that you are, and the truth of your revealed word. Help us, Lord, to speak only as one who speaks the very words of God.

In your precious and holy name, amen.