

Taming the Tongue

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[0 : 00] I'm going to pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight this morning.

! O Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen. We're going to talk today about the tongue, about speech. We're going to talk about what comes out of our mouths.

Do you know speech is a wonderful gift, is it not? When you think about it, that we can move our tongue and shape our mouths and breathe out and speak sounds. And sounds travel and they make their way into your ears inside you so that while I stand here and you sit there, we can communicate deeply.

It's amazing. Most of us speak about 16,000 words a day, Google told me. Some a touch more, some fewer. We chatter, we talk, we have songs.

All around us as well, there is speech. We listen. I was sitting in my study on Friday morning with my window open, I'm just over the road, and I heard break time in the playground here at the school, shouts and squeals and laughter as boys and girls speak together.

[1 : 11] You get a call on your phone, you sit on the bus and everywhere around us tongues are moving, you hear the sound of speech. I saw a video a while back of a three-year-old boy who was born deaf.

And he'd never heard the wind in the trees, never heard his parents' voice, nothing, until he was given a special auditory implant. And the moment they turn it on is stunning.

The first thing he hears is his dad's voice, saying, Grayson, it's daddy. And his eyes grow round and enormous. He's kind of overwhelmed as he points at his dad.

Speech is wonderful. Speech is a characteristic of those who've been created in the image of the God who speaks. Do you know this?

Our God opened his mouth and said, let there be light and spoke creation into being. And he makes us as human beings in his likeness. He breathed the breath of life into the first man and then spoke to him.

[2 : 13] And we've been created to be like God, to speak and to listen to him and to one another. We're wired up to know and be known through words of truth and goodness and honesty.

Speech is God-given. It's wonderful. So important. And so James would talk to us today about the tongue.

This letter of James we've been reading, we've said all the way through, it calls us to lives of consistent commitment to God.

He is a good heavenly father. He is 100% devoted to those who love him. And he would have us relate to him with unflinching love and loyalty.

Not tinker with him on the edges of life, but be totally devoted to him in every aspect of our lives. And not least with the created gift of speech that he's given us.

[3 : 15] If you've got James 3 open, just back a page in chapter 1 and verse 26. James made one small comment about our speech to make us sit up, I think. Chapter 1 verse 26.

Those who consider themselves religious in a relationship with God and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves. And their religion is worthless.

Well now in chapter 3, James expands to teach us about our God-given tongues, our speech and the words that we say.

With these verses open in front of us, first thing, this morning from verses 1 to 5 about the tongue, our tongues are powerful.

Look, verse 1. Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. It might be in the churches he's writing to, there's

kind of loads of people itching to get on their feet and teach others and teach others about God.
[4 : 24] Which sounds good, we should encourage that surely. But he says no, not many of you should become teachers. So if you're someone who opens your mouth and presumes to teach people about God as a preacher, in Sunday club, around the breakfast table, we will be judged more strictly, James says.

That is, when we stand before God on the future day of judgment, every single word that we have spoken, he will expose and examine with special, particular attention.
I wonder if you can imagine that. Having your every word weighed by Almighty God. That is how it will be. It will be like that for me and for others.

Why this special, strict judgment for those who speak? The answer is that the words we say have such a powerful effect.

Look, verse 2. We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, mature and whole. Able to keep their whole body in check.

[5 : 45] I wonder if it means this. First off, if a church minister, if a pastor, speaks faithfully, truthfully, clearly and honestly from the scriptures, the whole church body wonderfully will be kept in check and directed rightly.

If a minister is at fault, sloppy in their teaching, if they entertain, if they manipulate, if they twist God's words, a minister can lead a whole church away from God.

Words are very, very powerful. And so God will expose teachers, me, to strict judgment as a result. But not just teachers.

Because as James goes on here, he broadens out to say to all of us that in each of our lives, what we say has a massive impact on the whole of life, on our whole body. And it's like with horses, verse 3.

When we put bits in the mouth of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. I'm not very horsey. I had to look it up. The bit is the thing that the horse bites on.

[6 : 58] Connected to the bridle and you hold that. You put the bit in the horse's mouth. It's very small. The horse is very big. But through the bit, you direct where the horse goes.

Our tongues are like that. Very small. About 0.4% of your body weight. But able to affect your life. For good or for ill.

Or, verse 4, take ships as an example. Ships are very large and driven by strong winds. But they are steered by a very small rudder. Wherever the pilot wants to go.

That's true. You turn the little rudder just a little bit. The whole ship is controlled. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body. But it makes very great boasts.

Super small, this. But so very powerful. Is that true? Like, positively.

[7 : 59] It only takes two small words. I will. And you are married for life. The direction of your life changes. Positively, it only takes three small words.

I love you. To turn someone's week around. With a child in your family. Just a few years of appropriate daily words.

Of love and discipline and care. To set the course of their whole life. Our God-given tongues, our speech, can bring about big changes. And massive good.

But that's not really where James is going in these verses. Because you see, secondly now, in verses 5 to 6. Our tongues are deadly.

Small, powerful, deadly. Look at the imagery change here. The tongue is a small part of the body.

[8 : 59] But it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. I've only ever seen it on TV.

But imagine a huge forest of dry wood in the baking sun as far as the eyes can see. And then the camera zooms right down and into a little tiny spark.

And then whoosh. The speed and spread as the woody forest catches light. Deadly. Verse 6.

The tongue also is a fire. A world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body. Sets the whole course of one's life on fire.

And is itself set on fire by hell. That is a stark verse. Fire, evil, corrupts. Fire, fire, hell.

[9 : 57] To force us to see the so often deadly destructive nature of the words we say. Fire, the tongue is a fire. Speech burns and destroys.

Some of us may have felt this most painfully in evil words spoken to us. If, in the playground years ago, or more recently, someone looks you in the eye and tells you you're a loser.

You are thick. You're fat. That hurt may damage you for much longer than a physical bruise. Were a parent or a partner to tell you that you're stupid, or shout at you viciously, or verbally beat you, it can burn you awfully.

Sometimes shape the course of your whole life. What comes out of other people's mouths can burn us. At the same time, we will know how to damage other people by what we say.

Where, rather than speaking kind, honest words demonstrating that we love our neighbour, we know how to lie, gossip, snipe, exaggerate, dominate, bash, name-call, slander, lash out.

[11 : 24] There's all kinds of ways you can do harm to other people by what you say. And in my experience, the older you get, the older you get, the more expert you can become at it. Labelling people.

She's a tricky person. He's Jewish. She's a climate denier. He's just a left-wing idiot. Gossiping. Have you heard what he's up to? Exaggerating. You're always like that. You'll never change. Just plain nastiness.

You're a waste of space. I don't know why I'd get into a relationship with you in the first place. The tongue is a fire. Do you know that? Have you experienced that?

Tiny words come out. It's just a spark. And you can't take them back and they hurt and burn and destroy. Other people's words burn us.

[12 : 26] We burn others. Thirdly, the words we say can do damage to ourselves too. Think about this for a second.

When you tell little lies to someone close to you, you have to tell more lies to keep yourself from being found out. And one lie builds on the next and it screws you up and stresses you out.

Another example. Speak falsely with twisted words about behaviour that displeases God and it will mess us up.

Forgive me for just skating over this, but in society at large. Instead of killing the baby inside, call it a termination. Different words.

Instead of assisted suicide, call it assisted dying with dignity. Maybe more low-key and personally.

[13 : 31] Instead of calling it greed, smile and say, I'm just tidying up the plate. Instead of calling it hoarding your cash, just say, I'm being prudent.

Instead of biting mockery, call it banter. And the words we say as we twist things, they will stain us and corrupt us.

More generally, I think the more I rattle on in my speech about me and my problems, the more I say bad things to other people and about other people, the more I boast about myself and gossip about others, it will shape my life.

I will trap myself into really believing that I'm the right and important one. And James says that that kind of thing is hellish.

See this verse? The tongue is small and deadly. Verse 6, it sets the whole course of one's life on fire and is itself set on fire by hell.

[14 : 43] I preached on these verses 10 years ago. I didn't notice the very end of verse 6, which is that behind it all, there is Satan, the devil, the abusive and murderous father of lies, who loves to get hold of our tongues and set them on fire that we might burn and be burnt.

If you're able to do this, think back over your last 24 hours or this last week, or maybe a moment in the past six months. Do you know something of what James is talking about here?

I bet you do. I bet you do. Our speech, what comes out of here, the tongue, is deadly and fiery and destructive. Which is so scary, really.

Because thirdly, from verses 7 to 8, do you see this? The truth is, our tongues are untamable. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, says James, but no human being can tame the tongue.

It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. Do you think that's true? We can tame wild horses. Well, I mean, I can't, but mankind can tame wild horses.

[16 : 10] And after thousands of years of progress in our super advanced 21st century, we can tame all sorts of creatures and creation.

We can. And yet this tiny bit of flesh in here, you can't control it. And washing your mouth out with soap and water, as my grandma used to say, it won't work.

There's an unstable evil about our speech, the tongue. James says it's swollen, full of deadly poison, and spews out hurt.

I mean, do you recognise that about yourself? That in your own mouth, this thing, it's not pure, but is swollen, full of deadly poison, and in danger of spewing out hurt.

Here's the last thing in these verses, point four. Our tongues expose our hearts. So as this little section draws to a close, in verses nine to 12, like kind of like a surgeon with a scalpel, James cuts into us deeper.

[17 : 26] And I think it's hard to escape his conclusion. What do we do with our tongues? Look at this, verse nine. 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. See what that's saying? You're in church on a Sunday morning, the music playing, with your brothers and sisters, you sing out loud, all creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and with us sing, go praise him, hallelujah, and you smile because God is so good, and you praise him.

And then two hours later, in the privacy of your own home, to someone made in God's likeness, I've just had enough of you now. You're a waste of space, get lost. loving and praising him one minute, then turning and cursing one of his creatures the next.

James says, my brothers and sisters, that should not be. There's something deeply wrong about being like this. And the problem is within.

In Matthew 12, verse 34, Jesus says, out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. So in the Bible, in reality, our mouths are connected to our hearts, the centre and wellspring of who we are.

[19 : 04] And what comes out of our mouth exposes the kind of heart we have. Question, verse 11, can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?

No, they can't. Not possible. My brothers and sisters, verse 12, in the natural world, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs?

I normally ask Kate about these kind of horticultural things, but the answer is, no, they can't. Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. So what is going on in my heart as I bless God and then from the same mouth I tongue-lash and curse and criticise others?

The answer is, my heart is not right. As one person writes, salt water has a salt source. bitter words from a bitter heart.

Unloving speech issues from a heart where the love of Jesus is a stranger. And this is where James 3 is pushing.

[20 : 20] I am, and many of us are, Christian believers. Just like those to whom James is writing, he's writing to believers in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

Just like them, our God has shown us grace and loved us and made us his own. And yet I'm still sick inside. My heart impure.

Because I'm double-mindedly, half-heartedly devoted to him. Amen. And we're talking this morning about the tongue, about our speech.

See what we've said so far? Speech is a wonderful, God-given gift. Given to us so that you and I made in the image of God that we might speak words of truth and goodness and honesty to our God and to one another.

It marks us out from the creatures, we who are in the image of God. We're meant to speak as human beings. We're meant to grow into maturity and become whole in our speech.

[21 : 32] Like Jesus. We're meant to become like Jesus, the perfect man who the Bible says committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth.

Imagine meeting him and talking to him, knowing that Jesus never belittled anyone. He never lied. He never exaggerated, never gossiped, never verbally abused everyone, but whose word was pure and straight and true.

How refreshing, how beautiful to be like that. Think, imagine a church and a world where every word spoken is good like his.

and yet instead of this, says James 3, our tongues are a fire full of deadly poison we manipulate and burn and abuse and curse.

What must we do this morning? What must we do when the word of God exposes us in this way? Some of us will call ourselves Christians this morning, others of us not yet.

[22 : 52] But what must we do this morning if we realise I have spoken wrongly in my life, I have burned others and I am sick within.

What must we do? The answer is, this runs all the way through James, this is the point of James, we must turn to and we must run to the God who gives us grace.

If you've got James 3 open, in a couple of Sundays we'll arrive in chapter 4 and the central commands of this letter to sinners, to double-minded, half-hearted Christians.

Let me read from verse 4, sorry, chapter 4, verse 6. He gives us more grace. That is why scripture says God opposes the proud but shows favour 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 and purify your hearts you double-minded.

[24 : 03] This is what we must do. We whose tongues can be set on fire by hell. We must come and submit ourselves to God. Lord, we come before you in humble submission.

We want Satan to get behind us and get away from us. We come near to you, Lord. Show us your favour. We are sinners in the words we've used and the hurt we've caused.

We repent. We wash our hands and our tongues. We purify our hearts. Have mercy on us and give us more grace, we pray. That's what we must do.

And we must do that because we're commanded to and because this is what the Bible promises us here. Chapter 4, verse 10. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.

We have a God who shows us grace and lifts us up and he does it through the Lord Jesus Christ, our perfect saviour, who died for our sins through Jesus, through whom we find grace to cover the sins of our tongues.

[25 : 21] Jesus, through whom we find the grace that will change us, that our hearts might be truly purified. That through his grace towards us, our tongues might slowly become more and more like the tongue of our saviour.

It's the promise of the gospel. Not just forgiveness, but change. Not just our sins covered, but growth in Christ-likeness. So that as we humble ourselves before our God, he will change us. He is able to do that. And to make our tongues and our speech bit by bit increasingly mature and complete and good. So that in our families and in our church and in our world, we might speak well and truly.

And so be people who grow into being those able to bless and not burn. Do you not want that for yourself and for our church?

I'm going to lead us in a prayer. Let me leave a moment of quiet just as we reflect ourselves on the words of James 3.

[26 : 39] And then I'm going to pray. Almighty God and Father, we do come before you this morning in humble submission.

we want Satan to get behind us and get away from us and get away from our tongues.

We draw near to you, Lord. We pray that you would show us your favour. Many of us have been burnt by the words of others.

Many of us have burnt others in the words we have used and the hurt we have caused. We repent. We turn to you in sorrow, our God, washing our hands and purifying our hearts. We pray that through the merits and work of your Son, Jesus Christ, you would have mercy on us and give us more grace.

[27 : 59] Lift us up, we pray, purify us and change us that our words may become increasingly like the words of our glorious and wonderful Saviour.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.