

## **TAMING THE TONGUE**

**James 3:1-12**

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What children's rhyme does this picture remind you of? 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' We used this little rhyme, as kids at school, to act tough when others would call us names. We would chant it against the verbal bullies. 'Words will never hurt' we said. But deep down we felt the pain. We were only acting tough. The reality was 'Sticks and stone may break my bones, but words can also hurt me. Stick and stones break only skin while words are ghosts that haunt me. Pain from words has left its scar, on mind and heart that's tender. Cuts and bruises now have healed, its words that I remember.' Or, to put it more simply and very accurately, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will only cause permanent psychological damage.' Yes, even as kids we understood what James makes clear in our text. That the tongue is very powerful. With words we can make friends and give praise, express love, learn and grow. With words we can also crush and ruin and destroy.

James in our text is dealing with one of the three tests to assess the authenticity of our faith (James 1:26-27) *"Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."* James dealt with how we are to care for others in chapter 2 as he wrote against 'favouritism'. He has also shown how we demonstrate our faith by what we do. There must be integrity between the two. Now in chapter 3 he is dealing with 'taming the tongue'. He jumps into his subject abruptly by saying (James 3:1) *"Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."* The point about teaching is that it is a ministry that most involves speaking. The words of the gospel teacher are vitally important. Because as James pointed out (James 1:18) we become children of God *"...through the words of truth."* So, if the gospel teacher or preacher speaks wrongly, they can be a stumbling block to another person's faith and eternal life. That is serious. That is the great responsibility of preaching and sharing the gospel. That's why I am so careful in preparing my sermons. I am answerable to God for what I teach. James makes it clear, that what we say, the use of our tongue, is very significant.

It's a pity we do not always see it as the Bible does. We, in our society, can be so loose with words. Not just the swear words that easily fall out. But the lack of care in what we say and how we say it. That is so evident in the social media. The unthoughtful words expressed on Facebook or Twitter, the trolling for all to see is horrifying. To keep up content in the 24-hour news cycle we see the media filled with gossip, hype, scandal and innuendo. It seems no one really stops to think of the effect of their words. But the Bible worries much about our speaking. Isaiah, seeing God in the temple, is very aware of his sin. The first thing he says is (Isaiah 6:5) *"Woe is me. I am ruined. For I am a man on unclean lips."* Paul in Romans 3:13,14, pointing out our sin, quotes the Psalms *"Their throats are open graves, their tongues practice deceit, the poison of vipers is on their lips, their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."* It's like the tongue is a barometer of our sinfulness. On the more positive side, Peter also quoting the Psalms, writes (1 Peter 3:10) *"Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech".*

So, we can understand James' main point in our text, that bridling the tongue is the key to Christian living. As he writes (James 3:2) *"We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check."* So, taming our tongue is not just one of the things we need to be careful of as Christians. James here is saying it is the key thing to work on. If we control our tongue, we have gained control over our whole life. He makes that point clear with his illustrations of the bridle and the rudder. (James 3:3&4) *"When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or 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"*. Note how James emphasizes with the 'bit' you 'can turn the whole animal'. Again, see his emphasis, the ships as 'so large and driven by strong winds' but 'are steered by a very small rudder'. James then makes his point (James 3:5): *"Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts."* Let me put what he is saying like this. If you go to the switch board for a building, there are many switches on the board for the various light and power outlets. But there is also the main switch by which you control the power for all the other switches. If we turn off the main switch all the other power outlets are affected. James' argument is this. We have many sins, *"...we stumble in many ways"*. But if we can control the tongue, we are dealing with the master switch.

Now we can see this better when we realize that for James the tongue' refers to more than speaking out aloud. It was common for the Hebrews to mention a part of the body, the offending part, as a way of speaking of the whole person. So, speaking of the

tongue is also referring to our thinking. By the tongue we form words. These words formed by our speech are symbols of meaning. Whenever we think, or plan, pray silently, feel angry, unspoken words are buzzing through our head. We are talking it through in our minds. We think in a particular language. The spoken words on our lips are the result of the unspoken words in our minds. So, if we can control our speaking, that is, we control our whole thinking process, we keep our whole body in check.

To demonstrate the power of the tongue, (James 3:5) that it *"...makes great boasts"*, James says *"Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark"*. We in Australia know all about that. We know the devastation caused by a loose match or a cigarette thrown from a car. With the drought we are facing a terrible bush fire season. We have already had major fires in NSW in the middle of winter. So, it is with the tongue. Its affect can be devastating. How many lives have been damaged, ruined, because of a loose word or that deliberate put down? It may seem a little matter, those words we speak. But many a child has had their spirit crushed by harsh words of criticism. How many relationships, friendships, marriages, even churches have been broken by the bitter words that were uttered? We probably did not intend such devastation when that child was yelled at. Or when we shared gossip over coffee or shared criticism in our social groups. But Satan uses our tongues as a favourite way of crushing faith and hurting a church. As James points (James 3:6) *"The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, set the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell"*. Here again we see James' main point. The tongue is the focal point for evil in us, and 'corrupts the whole person'. What we say is the outward exposure of the evil thoughts, the words in our minds. What James means is that as our words deeply affect others, so it has a terrible effect on us. Our negative talk stains us. Our bitter thoughts can build to resentment, rage and hatred. The tongue is the enemy agent that is within us. In fact, the fire of the tongue is 'itself set on fire by hell'. It is the instrument of the devil.

It is no wonder that James can state (James 3:8) *"No human can tame the tongue"*. God has given the human race dominion over the earth. And so (James 3:7) *"All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind."* But we cannot tame the tongue. Don't we know it! So often we try hard to watch our words. We remind ourselves to 'put our brain in gear before we let the tongue in motion'. And the next thing we know we have done it again. We have 'opened our mouth just to change our feet'. As James notes, (James 3:8) *"The tongue is a restless evil"*. He means it is always liable to break out. We wish many a times that we could take back what we said. Not only the words that slipped out. But also, the ones we carefully planned and later realized they were wrong and devastating.

Now here we notice a problem. Taming the tongue is the key to controlling our lives. But James has admitted that (James 3:8) *"No human can tame the tongue"*. That's frightening. But here we see the hint to the answer to our problem. 'No human can tame the tongue'. But God can. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God regards those who believe as perfect. Thus, he can reside in us with his Spirit. When we think of the Spirit, we think of Pentecost when the disciples were filled with the Spirit. What was the first effect? Their speech! They spoke in other tongues or languages. The gospel was preached, and thousands saved. So, by the grace of God the untamable is tamable. We can have a new start. But as Christians we face the fact that it is just that, a start. We are not finished. We need to work constantly and consistently with the Spirit. For as we know, because we do it so often too, (James 3;9,10) *"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."* This inconsistency is like a deadly poison. It kills off the good we want to do. That is why James says so strongly (James 3:10) *"This should not be."* It is unnatural. (James 3:11) *"Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?"* No! It is either the one or the other. But let us suppose it were possible. Or let's say two sources come to one outlet. Then drinking from it, the salt or brackish water would be what we tasted. It would not just taste fresh. We would be left with a bitter taste. It is always the polluted water that prevails, not the clean water. So also, with our words. It's the bitter words that linger. As someone once said, 'A dozen encouragements are washed away with one criticism.' So as Christians we will want to praise God with our lips. We will want to tell of God's grace and share the wonder of the gospel. We will want to encourage others with God's love. But the witness and encouragement can so quickly turn sour when we utter inappropriate words. How can we help stop that happening? Well, again, what James says here gives us the clue. He reminds us that human beings *"...have been made in God's likeness"*. Any person you come across bears the image of God. If we bad mouth them, we bad mouth God. So, if we love God, we will love others. If we honour God, we will honour others. When you speak to another person, treat them with respect, and grace because of God.

Finally, James writes (James 3:12) *"My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."* James turns around his main idea that the tongue is the key to Christian living. Control the tongue and you control your life. It's also the other way around. Want to know what your life is like? Listen to yourself. As Jesus said, *"By their fruit you will know them."* You might remember me quoting John MacArthur, 'The tongue is not the only indicator of true spirituality, but one of the most reliable'. The tongue, unhindered, gives an accurate

test of what is really going on in our lives. If you want to know how Christian your life is, listen to yourself. If you were to record yourself for a day, and then listen to it, what would you hear? What does it say about you and God? Perhaps we need to use our tongues to come in repentance before God. If we have been talking lots about money and making it big, do we need to confess to God we have misplaced our security in money, rather than him? If we have been speaking harshly in our homes, in our marriages, do we need to confess we have not submitted to one another out of reverence for Christ? If we have been gossiping, speaking ill of others, or been inappropriate on social media, do we need to confess our words have not been 'seasoned with grace'? What do our tongues tell us about our faith?

I want to leave you with some advice when speaking about others. Ask yourself these three questions. 1. Is it true? 2. Is it necessary? 3. Is it loving? Is it true? Do you really know all the facts, the circumstances? Or is it rumor and gossip? Even if it is all true, is it necessary to speak about it? Will it help them? If it is necessary are you saying it lovingly. Is it an act of love and grace? If for any of the questions you say 'no', then don't talk about it. May our tongues bring much praise to God for Jesus. And may our words bring hope and encouragement to each other.