

TAMING YOUR TONGUE

(James 3:1-12)

INTRODUCTION:

James is going to teach us about the use of our tongue. How do you use your tongue?

Someone has said that great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, and small minds discuss people. The church that James is writing to was full of small-minded people who gossiped about each other and tore one another apart with their tongues. I wonder if we have churches like that today?

We're quick to avoid murder, stealing, and drunkenness, but we often assassinate fellow believers and leave destruction in our wake by the way we use our tongues. Husbands have stabbed their wives with words that are as sharp as daggers and wives have lashed out with tongues that cut and pierce. Parents have devastated their kids by repeated blasts of venom. Children have exploded at their parents with volleys that have leveled the family like a bomb. And churches have been wiped out by wagging tongues that have sliced, diced, and chopped people to shreds.

"Sticks and stones may break by bones, but words will never hurt me" is not true. Words hurt people deeply. We need to learn to tame our tongues. But James says that the taming of your tongue is anything but an easy task! In fact in verses 7 and 8 he writes, **"All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue."**

On a windswept hill in an English country churchyard stands a drab, gray slate tombstone. The death date on the grave was May 24. And if you stoop over and look closely, you will be able to see the faint etchings which read: BENEATH THIS STONE, A LUMP OF CLAY, LIES ARABELLA YOUNG, WHO, ON THE TWENTY-FOURTH OF MAY, BEGAN TO HOLD HER TONGUE.

Is that what you would like to have etched on your tombstone? No. We need to learn to tame our tongues.

James tells us four critical truths about the tongue, which should help motivate us to try to tame our tongue.

THE CONTROL OF YOUR TONGUE IS A MARK OF YOUR SPIRITUAL MATURITY

First, James says that the control of your tongue is a mark of your spiritual maturity. In verses 1 & 2:

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.

James is saying here, "If you want to gage the level of your spiritual maturity, consider your tongue."

When I was a little boy I sometimes would complain that I didn't feel well, especially if I didn't want to go to school that day. My mother would say to me, "Stick out your tongue" and she would examine it. Usually she would say that I was alright. If not, then I usually got a dose of castor oil.

Now, I don't know how a person can tell much about your health from looking at your tongue, but James says that you can tell a person's spiritual maturity from listening to a person's tongue!

He makes this point by speaking first to those in the church who aspire to be a teacher. This is not necessarily limited to those who hold the office of teacher in a church. We all have wanted to use our tongue to teach others. Have you ever said in anger, "I'll teach that person a thing or two?" meaning we want to give them a verbal lashing.

James says, "not many of you should aspire to become teachers because teachers will face a stricter judgment." They will be held accountable to God for what they have said to others in His Name.

If you learn to control your tongue, James calls you a "perfect man." This does not mean that such a person is sinless. But is a very mature person. The Greek term used here describes a completeness and a fullness of character that marks one who is spiritually mature. And the point is that the person who has learned to control his tongue is also the type person who you can be sure will have control over the rest of his life as well. The control of your tongue is a gauge to your spiritual maturity.

This should help motivate us to tame our tongues, if we are interested in being mature.

YOUR TONGUE IS THE MOST POWERFUL PART OF YOUR BODY THAT STEERS WHERE YOU GO IN LIFE

Next James says that your tongue is a most powerful part of your body that steers where you go in life. He makes this point by using two interesting illustrations. In verse 3 he compares the tongue to a small bit in the mouth of a large horse. He writes in verse 3:

Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body.

Some of you may have had experience with this phenomenon. When you ride a horse you can guide that large 1,000 pound animal with a little 4 ounce piece of metal. That is most of the time. Again as a boy on the farm, we had a large work horse. Most of the time I could handle it, but when it came time for him to go home for the evening, he had a mind of his own. Even the small bit couldn't control that animal. Many-a-time and evening you would see a small boy running behind a plow, hollering at the horse, as it continued to drag him and the plow to the barn.

In verses 4, 5 James compares the tongue to a very small rudder on a large ship. He writes,

Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things.

James is referring here to the great ships that plowed up the waves of the Mediterranean Sea in his day. Many of them were up to 1,000 tons. And had crews of up to 600 men. But they were steered by a little rudder about a foot long.

The tongue is the most powerful member of your body that steers where you go in life. If you can control it, then you can control the rest of your body. This should help motivate us to tame the tongue.

YOUR TONGUE HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BE VERY DESTRUCTIVE

The third thing that James mentions is: because your tongue is so powerful it has the potential to be very destructive. Again, he illustrates this point with two very graphic illustrations.

In verses 5 and 6 he tells us:

See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fir, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.

There are some great forests in the America, yet every year thousands of acres of beautiful forest land are destroyed by someone who leaves a smoldering ash in a campfire or carelessly tosses a cigarette out of a car window. From just a little spark an entire forest can be set ablaze.

So it is with words! One word of gossip, one lie, one insinuation, one harsh criticism and the fire can begin. Human hearts, dry from a lack of genuine love then catch fire and the it spreads from heart to heart across a community and then leaves behind it charred and burned reputations, broken hearts and broken homes. And the damage can be severe and extensive!

A young man, ridden with guilt during the Middle Ages, went to a monk, and said, "I've sinned by telling slanderous statements about someone in town. What should I do now?" The monk said, "First I want you to put a feather on every doorstep in town." The young man followed the monk's instructions. Then he returned to see what he was to do next. The monk then said, "Now, go back and pick up all the feathers." The young man replied, "That's impossible! By now the wind will have blown them all over town." Seizing the moment, the monk replied, "So has your slanderous word become impossible to retrieve."

James tells us here that there is a whole world of evil that the tongue can bring to pass. When James says that "the tongue is set on fire by hell!" he means that the ultimate source of that evil can actually be traced back to Satan himself.

Those who spread gossip and slander are used by Satan to cause discord, strife and pain between people. The devil is called the "Slanderer." The etymology of the word 'devil' is slanderer.

My, how destructive the tongue can be. James goes on and gives another example of the destructive nature of the tongue. He writes in verse 7 and 8:

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

When James says the tongue is a restless evil, he is still thinking of the animals referred to in verse 7. Like a lion behind the bars of a cage, it still stalks back and forth-it is restless. You open the door and back it goes back into the wild. That's also true of the tongue. Control it today and it will leap out tomorrow. It can

speak kindly now but it can turn and spit out hatred in a moment. It's a restless evil always waiting to break free.

In addition James says that it is "full of deadly poison." Your words can be like a snake in the grass that sinks in it's fangs and then crawls off. And yet its poison remains to hurt, destroy and possibly even kill. Once the poison is injected it begins to spread and is very hard to extract. That is true of your words. They can be like verbal cyanide.

Knowing evil destruction a tongue can bring should motivate us to tame the tongue.

YOUR TONGUE CAN BE A GREAT CONTRADICTION TO YOUR CHRISTIAN PROFESSION

Fourthly, James says that your tongue can be a great contradiction to your spiritual profession of faith. He writes:

With it we bless our God and Father and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring can yield both salt water and fresh

Is the tongue really that bad? Well, maybe James is only talking non-Christians. Surely Christians would not have this kind of trouble with their tongues! But James is speaking to Christians. He says that he is writing to people says, "Praise God" and call God "our Father", then they curse their fellow man.

What a contradiction. This should motivate us to tame our tongue.

CONCLUSION:

What can we do with our tongues? Our tongues reveal our spiritual maturity. Our tongues are small members of the body, but is the most powerful. Our tongues can be utterly destructive to other people. Our tongues are a great contradiction to our spiritual profession.

These are four great motivations for trying to tame our tongue but back in verse 7 James say the most disturbing truth about the tongue. He says, "No man can tame the tongue." We can tame and train all kinds of animals. We can train

Flipper and Trigger and Shamu and Lassie. We can train falcons to land on our wrists, pigeons to carry our messages, dogs to fetch our papers, elephants to stand on rolling balls, tigers to sit on stools and alligators to turn over and get their bellies rubbed. But James says here that no man can tame the tongue!

What are we to do, if no man can tame the tongue? Are we shut up to live with this wicked little instrument in our mouth? What then are we to do? You must first realize that James' emphasis here is on the words, "NO MAN" And that is true. For no man can tame his tongue. But the good news is that what man cannot do, God can! God can enable you to tame your tongue! How does he do it?

By dealing with the root problem which lies behind the tongue. Jesus tells us in Matt.15:19 that the real problem is not the tongue but the heart. He said, **"...the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man "unclean."** According to Jesus, the tongue is simply a neutral messenger boy that carries the words from the heart. It's the bucket that goes down to the well, dips into what is there and then dumps out of the mouth what it picks up.

And the Good News is that Jesus promises a new and clean heart to all those who will turn from their sin and trust in Him. When a person comes to a vital faith in Jesus Christ that relationship will begin to change that person and to change their speech.

I have seen it happen! I have seen men who were hard and profane talkers, and Jesus Christ has come and changed their hearts and where there was cursing there is now blessing. I have known people whose tongues have been filled with gossip and slander and God has changed their hearts and their heart change has changed their speech. I have seen people who were always critical of others and now use their tongue to encourage others.

As God moves upon a person's heart he moves a upon their tongue. No cruel or unfair words have ever come from a heart controlled by the God of love. No bigoted conversation has ever come from a heart controlled by a God who loves every type of man. No lying speech has ever come from a heart controlled by the God of truth. When God controls the heart, he controls the tongue.

So the question becomes, "Will you give the control of your tongue to God?" It will mean that you will give the control of your heart to Him.