

The Heart and The Tongue | James 3:1-12 Sermon

Introduction

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue...” so wrote the preacher in **Proverbs 18:21**. He says that the words of the tongue can break bones, and they can be like sword thrusts. And yet, at the same time, he compares the tongue to a tree of life, the words of the righteous to choice silver, and says that they can bring healing to body and soul. It is impossible to overstate the power of the tongue, the danger of the tongue, and the good usefulness of the tongue. We know this in our own lives. Our tongues cause massive problems for ourselves, and massive hurts to others. Other people, through their words, can hurt us deeply, and fracture relationships, causing damage that lasts for years. And yet, at the same time, they can be the most pleasant things we know.

James is writing to people who are using their tongues wrongly. They are believers as Tim has explained before, who need to understand how to live like a Christian. But they are causing division and destruction through the use of their tongues. It's a problem. James knows that it is showing a deeper problem in their hearts.

Let's pray first and then dive in.

Pick up with me in verse 1. James 3:1-18, we'll read the whole thing:

James 3:1-18

¹Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For 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. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴Look 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. ⁵So 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! ⁶And 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. ⁷For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Verse 1

We might be forgiven for thinking at first glance that this chapter is all about the tongue, or all about the teacher; that James' point is basically, your tongue is powerful and dangerous, therefore work hard to control it. What I would like to show you is that this chapter isn't mainly about the teacher, or even about the tongue; and it's not about taming our tongues. It's about the human heart and the way that human beings use their tongues to destroy.

I wonder if you've ever wanted to say to someone, "Just be quiet." Or, in the words of Gandalf, "Keep your forked tongue behind your crooked teeth." I have. I have for wrong reasons and I hope once or twice for right reasons too. And while we might think that James is essentially saying that here, it is undeniably clear that James loves these people he is writing to, warts and all. He is unwilling to just say "shut up," leaving the real problem concealed. And so, James begins this section with the most visible and impactful manifestation of the problem: teaching.

A warning about teaching.

"Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers..."

James is not wanting to discourage teaching for everyone. He isn't an anti-teacher. Instead, James is calling for a certain type of teacher. It's like what Paul says in 1 Timothy 3. If you desire the office of overseer, good, it's a noble task. But, 1 Timothy 3:2-3, what kind of teacher is Paul looking for?

"Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money."

Look down at **chapter 3 verse 13**. "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom." James is looking for these people, not for the who speak with deceit and a forked tongue. James is looking for the sound Christian. The one who is receiving the Word, the one who is continuing in faith under trials and temptations. The one who relies on Christ and humbles himself before God. The one who, **1:26**, does not deceive his heart but instead bridles his tongue.

If this isn't a discouragement against teaching, what is it? James is concerned about crooked teachers. Look at **verse 14**. What does James warn about? Sin in the heart. Boastfulness that is false to the truth, the truth of the Gospel and the truth about where they are in relation to God. Selfish ambition which leads to quick speech—putting themselves forward as those who will lead and teach. Such boastfulness of heart always leads to boastfulness of speech, which in turn leads to division in the body of Christ. In congregations where there is competition in place of love for Christ; where there is ambition, inhospitableness, a love for money manifesting in favoritism, uncontrolled speech, quarrels, there you will find many many wanna be teachers. Not many arrogant people should become teachers, who point to themselves and not to Christ.

These are the sorts of teachers and the sort of teaching James is concerned about. Instead, he wants teacher who, **verse 17**, has the wisdom from above which is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”

Verse 2

James doesn't bring up teachers here without reason. He has a purpose. If you can see the flow: not many of you should become teachers, why? **verse 2**, because “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.” What's the flow: You want to teach? Be very careful. We will be judged for sin and the damage we cause by our sin. We all sin in a seemingly endless variety of ways, and nowhere more prevalently than with our tongues. Furthermore, your control over your tongue reveals your control – not just your words – but yourself.

Verses 3-5a

And that's the point of **verses 3-5** isn't it? **The tongue is powerful**. It directs us. Like the bit in the mouth of a horse which controls the massive animal wherever we want it to go, so also our tongue is our controlling mechanizing – small but mighty. The way we use our tongues determines what we do with the rest of us. A small rudder controls a big ship. Though strong winds and difficult circumstances arise, and though it is a giant ship, it is direct by this one little mechanism. So also, our tongues can be used to determine so much in our own lives and the lives of others—for good or for evil. **Verse 5**: the tongue is small, but it boasts of great things. **The tongue is powerful**. That's the point.

Just in passing, notice what James doesn't say here. He doesn't say that the tongue is inherently evil in these illustrations. He doesn't even say that the tongue is uncontrollable in these illustrations. Like with the bit and the rudder, the rider or the captain controls the horse or the boat, so also human beings are responsible for their tongues. Listen to what Jesus says in **Matthew 12:34**, “...out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” It is the content of the heart that matters, and determines the substance of our speech.

Verses 5b

This is why James moves on from *the great power of the tongue* to **the fiery destructiveness of the tongue**. The big image in this part of the chapter is fire and burning. “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!” James sounds like Smokey the Bear “Only you can prevent forest fires.” And the illustration is clear: like a match in a forest, such a small comment, just a word or two, can cause a big burn among human beings. Hearts touch hearts through the instrument of the tongue. And to James’ readers he says, your tongues are causing massive fires.

Verse 6

The truth is, says James, the tongue *is* a fire. But notice again his focus. “It is a world of unrighteousness.” When James talks about the world, he is talking about the anti-God world. And I think he’s implying what he later says outright in **4:4**, that those to whom he is writing are trying to be friends with the anti-God world and with God. What James wanted them and us to understand is, if you are speaking more like friends of the world, it points back to what is in the heart. Like with the teacher, James isn’t saying we shouldn’t use words. He’s saying that there is a heart problem causing tongues to be used in a destructive and sinful way.

In these verses James really goes after the awfulness of the evil tongue. “The tongue is set among our members”—the image here is of an enemy infiltration into us. The tongue is like an enemy within our own body, an ally of the anti-God world in us. Notice what it does: “... staining the whole body”—James called his readers to be pure and live consecrated unstained lives in **1:27**. Now, he says, you’ve become stained, drenched in the wickedness of this world through your tongues. How does this happen? Jesus’ words again, **Matthew 15:11 and 18**, “...it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person” because “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.” You see Jesus’ point? If you have sin in your heart, that sin is gonna come out of your mouth first, and then, like vomit, its gonna get everywhere else. That’s why it sets the entire course of life on fire. Paul gives a similar volcanic-like description in **Colossians 2:8**, anger that gives way to the explosion of wrath that hardens in malice and covers the landscape in a cloud of slander and obscene talk.

And just in case we didn’t get the point, James adds that it is “set on fire by hell.” James is not saying that the devil reigns over us via our tongues, because hell isn’t the place where Satan reigns. James is saying that the destructiveness of the tongue is a foretaste of the everlasting destruction and condemnation that the devil and sinners will experience in hell. That’s how destructively powerful our tongues can be, and how destructive those to whom James wrote were being.

Verses 7-8

Well that sounds awful. Yet, there might still be hope. After all, surely we can control our tongues and stop being destructive, right? What is James' answer... no. If we could control our tongues like an axe; if we could be trained to use it; if we could discipline ourselves enough to control our tongues, we might be safe. But what does James say?

“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.”

James isn't saying that every animal has been tamed as in like a pet. Instead, James means tame as in under human control, under human dominion. Animals don't win over us. We control them, we confine them, we kill them. It's not the same with the tongue. **The tongue is uncontrollable.** It doesn't sleep. It's like a snake that is always where you don't expect it, ready to strike at any moment, ready to inflict a deadly toxin into all your relationships.

Why can't we control our tongue? It's because we can't control ourselves. Our hearts are desperately wicked. James has already been saying this. **1:26**, the one who doesn't control his tongue does what? “deceives his heart.” **3:14**, where is the problem? “in your hearts.” Listen to what David writes in **Psalms 140:1-3**, and catch the connection between the heart and the use of the tongue. “Deliver me, O Lord, from evil men; preserve me from violent men, who plan evil things in their **heart** and stir up wars continually.” How do they do this? “They make their **tongue** sharp as a serpent's, and under their **lips** is the venom of asps.” The sinful heart that uses the tongue in sinful ways. That's James' big concern. That's the big problem he sees. That's the Bible's big concern when it comes to the use and abuse of our tongues.

Look at these passages for example, and notice the connection between the heart and the tongue—see how closely they are linked:

Proverbs 16:22-23: “The **heart** of the wise makes his **speech** judicious and adds persuasiveness to his **lips**. Gracious **words** are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.”

Proverbs 6:12, 14: “A worthless person, a wicked man, goes about with **crooked speech**... with perverted **heart** devises evil, continually sowing discord...”

Proverbs 15:28: “The **heart** of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the **mouth** of the wicked pours out evil things.”

Proverbs 15:4, 7: “A gentle **tongue** is a tree of life, but perverseness in **it** breaks the spirit. The **lips** of the wise spread knowledge; not so the **hearts** of fools.”

Proverbs 10:20: “The **tongue** of the righteous is choice silver; the **heart** of the wicked is of little worth.”

Can you see the point? Andy Gemmill put it this way: “There's only one thing in the whole of the created order we can't master. A restless evil, full of deadly poison. Which of course means the one thing we can't control in the whole of the created order is ourselves.”

Verses 9-12

And that's what James is saying isn't he? **Our tongue speaks what is in our heart.** The outpour from our mouths shows the reality of our hearts. This is what he said back in **1:26**, “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but **deceives his heart**, this person's religion is worthless.” It's the same connection—if you have an unbridled tongue, it means something is wrong with your heart. It's the same thing in **chapter 2** when it comes to faith and works—you've deceived your heart if you think you're fine and in good standing with Christ, and yet you are treating those made in God's image poorly while professing to trust Him wholeheartedly. James says here, “You think you can speak like the anti-God world and still be fine with God and others? You're wrong. You've deceived your own heart. You are actually making yourselves enemies of God's even if you cannot see it.”

This is why verses 9-12 say what they do—James is showing that your dividedness of speech shows your dividedness of soul towards God and the truth about your heart.

“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 to 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.”

James says, “Look at yourselves. One moment your singing praise songs to God, and the next moment you curse your brothers in Christ, and you dishonor those made in His image. You think that both blessing and cursing can come out of your mouths, and everything can be right on the inside?” In chapter 4, he calls it exactly what it is. Adultery. “You claim to be Christians, you claim to be God's bride, but right now you're identifying with the enemy.” It's so incongruous.

“Doesn't this go against God's creative design,” asks James? “If you go to a spring, don't you expect to find either fresh or salt water? Can there be both fresh and salt water from the same opening—no! Such a thing is preposterous! Do not trees bear fruit according to their kinds like God created them to? Don't you see the problem? Don't you see that what you are producing shows your sin. Don't you know that you are supposed to be wholehearted towards God—a fresh pond that produces fresh water—a good heart that speaks blessing?”

“Why then,” James asks, “why then are you, who were 'brought... forth by the word of truth... a kind of firstfruits of His creatures'—why are you speaking in this way? If nothing else that God has created does this, why are you, who are a new creation in Christ—why do you do

this?” That’s a piercing question. James’ point is this: our sin is much more dangerous and far worse and difficult to deal with than we imagine while we are in it.

Paul says in Ephesians 4, let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, and 5:3, “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place....” Look at our speech, the words we use, the jokes we make. What does our language say about where we are in relation to God? Are we continuing steadfast in faith, God changing us from the inside out? Or are we shaky in our faith. Are we focused on earthly, or unspiritual, or demonic things? Is there filthiness in our hearts that is manifesting itself in the way we speak?

The Only Solution

The question is, what do we do? What is the solution to this problem? The Gospel. James doesn’t tell us how to control our tongues—he doesn’t give us strategies; he doesn’t give us ten tips to speak healthily—he gives to you, and he gives to me, the Gospel. To James, the Gospel isn’t just something you receive at the start of the Christian life and move on, but it is to be received daily in the Christian walk—it’s the wisdom we live by! It’s what we will look at next week—the wisdom from above which causes our hearts to become renewed. The wisdom God gives for faith in Him.

I want you to see this for yourselves. Don’t get overwhelmed. I’m going to put 25 imperatives about our tongues from James (I’ve included the chapter and verse so that you can look these up and maybe find more later; I found a very helpful list from Peter Mead and edited and added some). I want you to see what he is pointing towards in all of them. Think about what James is pointing towards as our hope, and what he is saying our big problem is:

- Ask God for wisdom in trials - for a believing heart (1:5).
- Don’t ask with double-mindedness - wanting God’s help and wanting sin (1:6-8).
- Boast only in our exaltation in Christ or our humiliation in the anti-God world (1:9-12).
- Never accuse God of tempting you (1:13).
- Be quick to hear and slow to speak (1:19).
- Be consistent in your speech (2:3).
- Speak in the consciousness of the Gospel and the final judgement (2:12).
- Don’t deceive your heart when your faith and works don’t match (2:18).
- Don’t speak with a dividedness of heart - bless God curse His image bearers (3:10).
- Don’t claim what isn’t the reality of your heart (3:14).
- Don’t ask God for the purpose of fulfilling your sinful desires (4:3).
- Repent and mourn for sin (4:9).
- Never speak evil of another person (4:11).
- Never boast in what you will accomplish and what your heart designs (4:13).
- Speak as one under the loving providence of God (4:15).
- Weep and mourn over your sin (5:1).

- Don't condemn Christ - those who are righteous in Christ, His body (5:6).
- Never grumble (5:9).
- Never allow anything but total integrity in your speech (5:12).
- Speak to God in prayer whenever you suffer (5:13).
- Sing praises to God whenever you are cheerful (5:13).
- Ask for the prayers for others when you are under God's disciplining hand (5:14).
- Confess it whenever you have sinned (5:15).
- Pray for one another when you are together with others who are in need (5:16).
- Draw others back to Christ from wandering by speaking the truth - restoration language (5:19).

Now, let me ask you a question: what is the focus of our hope in those imperatives? God, and the need for faith in Him. What is the problem in those imperatives? The dividedness in our hearts towards God and His people. James tells us what we ought to be, tells us why we can't get there on our own, and points us to depend wholly on God to solve us. Not just the symptom, but the heart; then the symptom of uncontrolled language will be dealt with over time by faith in Jesus. Jesus is **our only solution**. He draws us back, brings us close, shines in our hearts, invades our hearts and changes the outflow of our tongues! And once we are restored to Him, He calls us to humbly go out and speak words of restoration to those who are wandering.

That's what James has to say about our hearts and our tongues, and about our only hope: the God who would not leave us, but restores us to Himself. Jesus, who came in human form—tongue and all—in the form of sinful flesh and yet without sin; Jesus our Lord, who is undivided in His heart towards His Father, the One who, **1 Peter 2:22**, committed no sin and had no deceit to be found on His tongue, who died the death we divided sinners deserved to die—the death of restless evil doers—so that we too, despite our sinfulness, could in Christ call God our Father, and might through God call others to Christ.

All of you know to some degree or another the burns sinful human beings can cause through their words. You and I both know what it is to experience the flames, and to dish them out. We know what it is to feel despair in our sin, and to feel hopeless in our efforts. And so, I call you, one and all, Christian and non-Christian, cast your soul on Christ, give you heart to Him, holding nothing back, asking for Him, repenting of any dividedness of heart towards God. Repent and seek again the King of our hearts.

And let us go out and say with Paul in **Colossians 1:28-29**:

“[Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.”

Let's pray

Questions to Ponder

- When other people hurt us by what they say, how should we respond, and how should we think about that?
- When we hurt or are tempted to hurt others by what we say, what should we do? How practically can you seek Christ's help in this area this week?
- How can you speak restoration truth to others this week?