

James 3:1-12 Truths About the Tongue (part 1)

This morning is part 1 of two parts on the tongue from the Book of James. And how timely it is! I would like to consider 4 truths from James 3:1-12. Let me go ahead and give them to you: 1) The purpose of the tongue (teaching the truth of God); 2) The power of the tongue; 3) The inability of man to tame the tongue; and 4) The motivation behind the tongue. So let's begin.

1. The purpose of the tongue. Notice first that the tongue is the means for teaching the truth of God. Look at vv. 1-2: **“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.”** We will come back to v. 2 in application next week, but the context is teaching. James himself was an elder and the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. And his primary task was teaching the Word of God. And he refers to himself and others as teachers who will be judged with greater strictness. Oh, the awesome responsibility of teaching the Word of God! Alongside prayer, this is the great task of the elder, even as we see this in 1 Timothy as Paul speaks to both deacons and elders, with the primary difference being the ability to teach. I must confess, I often take such a task for granted. At times I move along week by week even as a robot doing his job, not considering the task set before me! But, I hope I have never taken the Word of God lightly! And if I ever do this, you have the wrong preacher.

These words have been good for me this week! What a beautiful gift, the tongue, with such glorious purposes, to spread the truth of God. But, this truth extends also to every Christian in the New Covenant. Do you remember Jer. 31. Looking forward to the days of the New Covenant and the pouring of the Spirit, he says, **“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD.”** Brothers and sisters, today we are all like the prophets in that, by the Spirit, we know and proclaim what is true, all of us with equal responsibility and spiritual ability to use our tongues to proclaim what is true. In this way, we are to teach the world the truths of God. We must always keep the command of the Lord Jesus before us. **“As you go, make disciples . . . teaching them to obey all my commands”** (Matt. 28:19-20). We teach with our actions, of course. But, we must speak!

There is nothing more important to speech than to speak the truth, particularly the truth about God, who he is, his ways and his purposes, and to use our tongues to give praise to the One who gave us such a gift. In the beginning God spoke and the world came into being. And after Adam and Eve were created, they were not like the animals in their ability to speak and communicate through the use of words. Recently, I read the *Magician's Newpew* with Abigail. And at the end of the book, Aslan sings a song of creation. And everything came into being. And at the end, a group of animals gathered around Aslan and THEY were given the gift of speech. And he spoke of their task and their authority to take care of the world. What a beautiful picture.

One application for us is easy. Never forget or take for granted such a gift and the responsibility that comes along with this gift: to speak the truths of God in this world. Ps. 63:5 says, **“My soul**

will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips.”
And Ps. 119:13: **“With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth . . .”** Let’s move on.

2. The power of the tongue. Look at vv. 3-6: **“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! 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.”** Here we have 3 illustrations of the power of the tongue. The tongue is just a small part of our physical bodies, but consider its power. Think of the large, powerful horse. Put a bit into its mouth, and you can guide it wherever you want. Think of the massive cruise ships and all the people that can fit comfortably on such a ship. And down below is this very small rudder that controls the direction of such a ship. And all the captain has to do is turn a wheel with very little ease. And the ship goes exactly where he wants. And finally, a small spark that sets off such a large fire. Recently, the fires that almost engulfed Australia were set by such small sparks. And the effects are monstrous in size. Such is the power of words, coming from such a small part of our bodies.

In this passage we see the power of the tongue for both good and evil. (Today, we will only touch on how the tongue can do harm. In v. 1 we see that **“we all stumble in many ways”** when it comes to our speech. In v. 6, we see a more vivid picture of the result of words used for evil: **“The tongue is a set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.”** Wow! These are strong words with vivid pictures. When I use my tongue for evil, the fires of hell follow. Let that sink in! The fires of hell are the culmination of God’s final judgment! And the tongue is the spark that leads to this judgment, when used for evil. In v. 6 James uses the word for “hell” is *gehenna*. It is a reference to the place outside Jerusalem where trash was burned around the clock. In the OT pagans would use this place to sacrifice their children, which is also called the Valley of Hinnom (2 Kings 23). This means the can be a dangerous weapon for evil.

Consider some of the ways we use our tongues for evil. We lie, which includes all deceit and twisting of the truth. Prov. 12:19: **“Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment.”** Prov. 17:7: **“Fine speech is not becoming to a fool; still less is false speech to a prince.”** When we speak, may be involved in thoughtless “chatter.” Prov. 29:20: **“Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”** Matt. 12:36: **“But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.”** We see this clearly with Job’s friends. Much of their words fall under false speech, and even thoughtless chatter. He says in 15:3: **“Should he argue in unprofitable talk, or in words with which he can do no good?”** I believe we engage in so much unprofitable speech.

We also use our tongues in arrogant boasting. We see this in v. 5 with James **“so also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.”** Prov. 18:12: **“Before destruction a man’s heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor.”** We use our tongues to gossip. Prov. 10:18: **“The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, and whoever utters slander is a fool.”** We see this especially come forth as we question motive and presume to know the heart of

another person in their use of words. And when we do this, evil comes forth. And I would say here that slander is especially harmful to the body of Christ. How often do we question motive, especially in the social media environment? We read something we disagree with. This happens all the time. This is ok. For we will not all agree. But, when we think we know the heart of a person behind what they are saying, and then make it public, we slander. And this brings GREAT discord among the body of Christ. This is more destructive to the body than just about anything I can think of. And God hates it. Prov. 6:16-19 says, **“There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.”**

Let’s consider further social media exchanges within the context of the tongue. Social media is an extension of the tongue. It is words used to communicate. And it is certainly not wrong to unfollow someone you disagree with, especially those outside our body. But, what about those inside our body? Has this happened with us? I honestly do not know. But I hear about it happening all the time. But I wonder how often it happens not merely because you disagree, but even more deeply, you unfriend someone because you think you know their motive. Brothers and sisters, may social media not be a place as an extension of the immature use of the tongue, which is evil. This seems to be the context of the book of James (not social media), but quarreling and fighting over various issues. When disagreements happen on social media among mature believers, we must realize how difficult it is to communicate compared to face to face. When we sweep things under the rug in the body of Christ, and not try to communicate face to face and do unto others as we would have them do to us, we do the very same things the Corinthian Church was doing when they disregarded one another in the Lord’s Supper. Now, you might say, *“Jon, you’ve gone too far here. You don’t understand.”* I don’t think so. But if you do, please come and talk with me.

At the end of the day, as we talked about last week, we do not love our brother or sister when we question their motives without asking them and seeking the matter out further. With this in mind, I must read from James 4 and make some comments. Starting in v. 1. Listen carefully to these words. **“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? But he gives more grace. Therefore, it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a**

judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"

Application: Consider the power of the word of God in your life. These words change the world. They begin with just words, but grow until all the purposes of God are fulfilled. Is. 55:10-11 says, **"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."**

Therefore, how should we spend our time in regard to the Word? Read it every day, every chance. Memorize it. Hide it in your heart. Speak it to those around you, in your family and to your neighbors. Further, consider your speech as you praise God in front of your family and friends, and co-workers. Consider the great effects it has on those around you. We are all farmers with good seed in our hands, spreading this seed across the soil of the world, as we await the harvest. And we must keep our minds on the eternal "Word of God," whom the Apostle John equates with the Lord Jesus Christ.