

James 3:1-12 Truths About the Tongue (part 2)

There are many truths and applications in this passage about the tongue and how we use our tongues. I am highlighting 4 truths. Last week, we considered two of them: First, the purpose of the tongue. God speaks! And He has given us this privilege as well. And we must use our tongues to praise God. And in this text, we see the responsibility of using our speech to proclaim truth. The context is teaching. James was an elder, which included the gift of teaching. There was obviously quarreling among the body concerning who was supposed to teach. And James reminds them of the huge responsibility to the teachers, particularly those in leadership, who will be judged more strictly. But, we also considered the truth that all God's people in the NT are teachers in that as we follow the command of Christ to make disciples, ALL of us teach them to obey the commands of Christ (Matt. 28:19). In our 2nd truth we looked at the power of the tongue through James use of 3 illustrations, the horse and the bit used to control the horse, the ship and the small rudder to control the direction of the ship, and finally, the spark that turns into a great fire. And such is the power of the tongue. Today, I want to consider 2 more truths: 1) The inability of man to tame the tongue; and 2) The motivation behind the tongue. So let's begin.

1. Man cannot tame the tongue. Look at vv. 7-10. **“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. 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.”** In these verses James uses another illustration. He speaks of all the animals we are able to tame. I think of our beloved cat, Pumpkin. When she first showed up at our house (actually under our house), she was so afraid of us. But, we began to feed her and after a couple weeks, she began to warm up to us, especially to Abigail. And at the end of her life, she was the sweetest cat, even coming into the house and laying in the kitchen floor, as tame as ever could be. But James says that no matter how hard we try, we cannot tame the tongue.

Now, this doesn't mean that we are unable to control our tongues. We are. And back in v. 2 James says, **“For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a ‘perfect’ man.”** The word for “perfect” is better translated as “complete,” “whole,” or “mature.” In other words, we can become mature in the use of our tongue. And he does imply that those who teach in the body of Christ should be mature. Paul says the same thing about elders. They should be *“self-controlled,” “not violent or quarrelsome”* (1 Tim. 3). All these are characteristics that require a mature tongue. But, this does not mean the tongue is completely tame, even for the mature elder.

Let me give another illustration. This past month, I read a novel on WWI. And before America entered the war, there were a number of American pilots flying for France in a special squadron. And this group of men had a lion cub that they “tamed.” And even as it grew into a large lion, it was still friendly and wouldn't hurt the men. But, in the end, they knew it was still a lion and it didn't know its strength. And they knew that as much as they tried, the lion may still turn on its owners. So, they ended up giving it to a zoo. The tongue is like this. No matter how much we bring the tongue under control, it will still get us into trouble, or worse. Look back at vv. 8-9: **“but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 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.” How many times, have you found a solitary place, read the Word, prayed, praised God with your tongue and been filled with the presence of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, and then your teenager comes home and says something shocking, and you respond with very different words that were used just a few minutes earlier. How many times have you had a great day in the use of your tongue, and your spouse comes home and says something, and again you speak words that hurt. In this way, your tongue is just like the lion that pounces in a moment. Or, from our previous examples, your tongue is like the bit in the horse’s mouth, the rudder that turns the great ship, or the spark that starts a great fiery argument.

I think this what James is saying. Which of us can tame the tongue? Last week, we considered different venues of evil flowing from the tongue: lying and deceit, arrogant boasting, idle chatter, gossip. Turn on the news. In our world we see all these things in abundance. And even among Christians, we see such things. However, we know the truth about the tongue. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, as we read the Word and even, now gain instruction and wisdom from James, we can become “mature” in the use of our tongues (v. 2). And we must! We must learn to control our tongues, even if our tongues cannot be “tamed.” With this in mind, I must ask, “Why” can man not tame the tongue? It is because our problems are deeper than our mouths, which brings us to our next truth.

2. The Tongue Is an Indication of the Heart. In other words, what we speak flows from a deep well, one which, and even we ourselves do not know the depths of this well. In fact, James describes the depths of the tongue as flowing from a spring. And this spring is the heart. Look at vv. 11-12: **“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.”** Here James is merely repeating the words of our Lord Jesus who says, **“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks”** (Luke 6:43-45). Our hearts are the abundant springs from which flows good and evil. And **“out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”** So, in order to understand the tongue, we must consider the heart. For the tongue is merely an extension of the heart.

Let mention a few truths about the heart: And these are very important for us as we consider that which is true and form a Christian worldview.

i. The heart is the core of everything we think and say and do. Often, we tend to separate the heart from the mind and from the will. In other words, we tend think about the mind when it comes to understanding. When you hear a statement from someone, you listen and with your mind, you consider the words and give meaning to the statement. In other words, you think about what you hear or read, and you use your mind. And the Bible speaks often about the mind, about understanding, about processing knowledge. The Book of Proverbs appeals to the mind. Prov.

1:5-6: **“Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles.”**

The Bible also speaks about the heart in regard to our desires. There is something within us that desires a cheeseburger instead of a salad, but upon reflection, the desire may change back to the salad when the mind considers the benefits of what some call “rabbit food.” And the Bible speaks about the will. And this is often in regard to what we choose to do. And these can be helpful ways to help us think about the mind, the will, and the heart. And we may even throw in the conscience, which is our moral compass to help guide us in our decisions. All these are biblical truths. However, ALL these categories, mind, heart, will, conscience are still called the “heart.” So, when the Bible speaks of the heart it includes all these truths.

ii. The heart is sinful. This is the problem with the world. Since the Fall of Adam, every human heart is sinful. I often say this. This is why we don’t have to teach our children to be bad, to throw tantrums, to fight with their siblings, to lie to their parents. Instead, we teach to be good. When we look at the world around us, the heart is the cause of injustice of racial inequality, or discrimination, of wars between countries, of all forms of corruption. All these things flow from the heart. In Matt. 15:19 Jesus says, **“For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies”** (Matt. 15:19). Temptations and occasions for sin put nothing into a man, but only draw out what is already there. Gen. 6:5 **“Every imagination of the thoughts of man’s heart is only evil continually.”**

iii. The heart is unsearchable. In Jeremiah 17:9-10 we read: **“The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, According to the fruit of his doings.”**

Only God completely knows our hearts! This is an honor only to God. By doing this, He is declaring Himself to be God, only displaying another one of His glorious attributes. Think about this! No one knows the heart like God. We don’t know the hearts of each other or our own hearts as we ought. Yes, we know our likes/dislikes, or dispositions, strengths, weaknesses. Parents know this about their children. Spouses know this about the spouses. However, no one knows all the secret intrigues, the windings and turnings, the actings and inclinations of his own heart or those close to them. Do you know how your mind will think in any given situation? Do you know what emotions will emerge in another situation, or what you may find desirable at different times? I don’t know why sometimes I choose a hamburger over a chicken sandwich and at other times order the chili at Wendy’s. Sometimes I am calm and gentle when my kids disobey or Kristen says something shocking, and other times when I least expect it, I lose my temper. Why? I am not excusing any sin. I only say this to show that even I don’t know exactly how I will act, or think or exactly what emotions I will display in all the situations in life that come my way every day. And, neither do you. All in heaven and earth, but the infinite, all-seeing God are utterly ignorant of these things. Only God knows your heart. He declares Himself to be God in this way. This is certainly something to ponder and think about.

iv. The heart is unconquerable. Finally, the heart is unconquerable. It is unconquerable in the sense that you (and I) will always have to deal with it and struggle while we are in this body. Sometimes it has more strength, and more success; sometimes less and we have victory; but, it is always there. We still struggle with the heart, with sin that comes from within.

Now, let's move back to James point on the tongue. If the tongue is an extension of the heart (which is unconquerable), it makes sense that the tongue follows the same path. So, what do we do when we hear the words James say, "*No man can tame the tongue?*"

The answer is the power of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. 2 Cor. 5:17 says, "**If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation.**" This truth is our hope. And this truth is tied to the doctrine of regeneration we find especially in the New Covenant. Jeremiah the Prophet looks forward to this day. 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. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more**" (Jer. 31:33-34). Because of the person and work of Jesus Christ, God gives his people new hearts. He takes out the heart of stone and gives a heart of flesh, and this is through the great powerful, effective work of the Holy Spirit. And when we have such a heart, what begins to flow from this spring?

To answer this, let me read from Eph. 4 where reminds them of their change. Starting in v. 17: "**Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. *But that is not the way you learned Christ!*—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer *steal*, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:17-32).**

ALL of these things are not only possible, but they are sure for the believer. For this is the will of God in our sanctification. Now, this doesn't mean we can tame the heart or the tongue. But, we can grow to be mature. You see, NOW, there is no condemnation in Christ. As Christians, we are justified. God has declared us NOT GUILTY in Christ. His wrath has been removed on the cross and our sins have been thrown as far as the east is from the west. We are justified. But, we must not forget, we are also being sanctified. As we grow in the ways I just read from Eph.4, our tongues become more and more mature. And do we sin with our tongues? Yes! But, we have an advocate, the Lord Jesus Christ, who sits at the right hand of the Father as our high priest, who is always interceding for us. So, when your tongue shows its untamability with your spouse or your

kids or your employees or your neighbor and you realize it, what do you do? You repent. And, you look unto the Lord Jesus in faith. This is what we do! So: 1) The tongue cannot be tamed; and 2) The tongue is an indication of the heart. (Out of the heart the twitter tweets!)

Let me end with some brief applications.

Consider the example of Christ: his heart, his speech.

Application: There is great potential to sin when we speak (vv. 1-2). This is a follow up of last week. So, listen before you speak. And use every opportunity to find instruction from the Bible.

Application: The use of our tongue is an indication of our maturity as Christians. (See v. 2) This means we can control our tongues and we can speak with maturity. In fact, the further along we move in the process of sanctification, the more godly our speech will be.

Application: James 1:26 **“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.”**

Application: Consider One Another when you speak.

Application: We should not expect a sinful world to act biblically as long as their hearts are not changed.