

## Faith in Action Taming the Tongue

Read James 3:1-12

<sup>3</sup> Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly. <sup>2</sup> Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way.

<sup>3</sup> We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. <sup>4</sup> And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong. <sup>5</sup> In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches.

But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. <sup>6</sup> And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.

<sup>7</sup> People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, <sup>8</sup> but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup> Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. <sup>10</sup> And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! <sup>11</sup> Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? <sup>12</sup> Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty spring.

We have been going through the book of James. It was written by Jesus' little brother so you would think that he would have a good idea of what Jesus was all about, he would have seen how Jesus lived his life, he would have seen it close up and personal. If Jesus could convince his little brother that he is the son of God then he probably is, so that is a good reason to listen to what James has to say.

And today James is talking about the tongue. And what a beautiful piece of equipment God has created. Let's have a time of tongue appreciation, everyone poke out your tongue and compliment your neighbour on their tongue.

What sort of things are tongues used for?

- Taste - The tongue is covered with approximately 10,000 taste buds, grouped in areas sensitive to sweet, sour, salty, and bitter flavour.

- Speech - formation of speech, Try speaking with your tongue stuck to the bottom of your mouth.
- Chewing – Very busy manoeuvring food to land between the teeth while keeping a careful eye on them, so that they don't get stuck between them.
- Kissing - Never make an important decision with someone's tongue in your mouth

Another interesting fact about tongues - A giraffe can clean its ears with its 21-inch tongue!

Some of us can control our tongues and some of can't. For example my wife can't control her tongue.... she isn't a tongue roller, she can't touch her nose, she can't twist it upside down. No control at all - you can trust her completely with a confidence - she just has no physical control.

- TONGUE-ROLLING is possible for 7 out of 10 people.
- Fewer than one in 1,000 can roll the tongue the other way, folding the tip back into the mouth. Can anyone do that here?

Mankind is pretty clear, I am continuously amazed at what people have invented, discovered etc. Mankind has invented many things to control the awesome forces of nature around him

- Vaccinations that protect mankind from attacks from many dangerous bacteria, but nothing is effective against the attacks of the tongue.
- Medicines that cure a multitude of sicknesses but nothing that effectively cures hurts inflicted by the tongue.
- Ingenious methods that control the spread of diseases, but nothing that effectively prevents gossip and slander.

The tongue can do so much damage yet if the tongue is properly restrained and trained it becomes man's most powerful tool to...

- encourage,
- teach,
- guide
- warn,
- to make friends
- negotiate deals,
- and to tell people about Jesus.

James has obviously recognised its power so here in chapter 3 he addresses the power of the tongue. And he gives it a fair bit of significance - Why? Because he sees that taming the tongue is the **key to holy living**, the key to living like Jesus, an integral part of that two pedalled bicycle - know the word and do the word.

### 1) The key to holy living / living like Jesus

James starts off by putting the hard word on teachers,

Obviously James doesn't know that teaching these days is tough enough as it is, the huge pressure, the unreasonable expectations - he can't afford to give teachers a hard time, nobody will ever want to teach anything.

James says - don't all try to become teachers, because God has got a stricter set of criteria to judge you. How bad is that? Teachers not only get paid pathetically but have higher expectations put on them. Why is that?

James is saying, the tongue can do a lot of damage and because teachers have a speaking profession there is a lot more damage they can do. They are not only imparting information but directing lives.

*I remember at Bible College as our NT Lecturer gave us some teaching on what he called "The Sticky passages", the passages that dealt with the whole issue of Women in Leadership/ministry. This was a bigger theological issue then than it is today. The teaching was excellent, profound, thought provoking and in some people's opinions, radical. One of the more conservative students, who was really struggling with understanding the theological stance, stood up and asked, "do you understand the responsibility you have as a teacher. You are teaching these radical views, molding the minds of up and coming church leaders, teaching latest theories, how convinced are you that you are teaching the truth?" The lecturer paused and with huge emotion said how he agonizes over the responsibility.*

I must admit, I now know how he feels. All teachers carry this responsibility, and it is not just professional teachers; it is all people who have influence over others.

Educationalist may say they are not teaching morality or anything spiritual but they are. Through what is taught we can either point people toward God or away from God. I know we have a significant number of people who attend and teach at Christian schools, and that is good and important. I hope I don't offend anyone but...we need Christian school teachers and Principals in secular schools. We need to pray for them that despite the restrictions that are put on them they can still live like Jesus, that they can still share something of their faith in appropriate ways.

Of course it is not all about professional teacher teaching. Parents need to take far more responsibility in teaching kids. We as the church need to ensure we are playing our part in the teaching role.

Back to the passage. James is saying teachers be aware of your responsibility, and therefore be careful of what you say and do.

### We all stumble

But James moves on from teachers to every single Christian. He is in effect saying "Don't take any comfort from the judgment that awaits other people who make mistakes," because "we all make many mistakes" other translations say we all stumble (v.2).

Nobody like to stumble. Stumbles are embarrassing. They can hurt your pride, make you look silly. You are walking along and your shoe catches in something uneven and you stumble. You quickly get up, look around hoping nobody can see you.

*Walking up steps at the movies with ice creams*

James is saying we all make mistakes or stumble in our speech. Lying, bragging, gossiping, swearing, sarcasm, dirty jokes, insults, complaining etc.

So if you're looking for rocks to throw at people, there's always a pile. Let's say it's a teacher or a leader, a politician. You're like, "I want to throw a rock at them. Did they say anything wrong?" Of course they did, James says, "We all make mistakes, we all stumble." James is saying there is always a pile of rocks to throw at someone because we all stumble.

But here's the key, there's a pile for you too. And what happens is we're like, "Hey, put that rock down. "Don't throw it at me. I was just having a bad day. "I didn't mean to. You took it out of context. You've got a reason. "Put the rock down." What James is saying, "Everybody put the rocks down." Because we all stumble in many ways? Some of us are just better at hiding our mistakes.

It's like the woman caught in adultery. Everybody grabs a rock. Jesus says, "All right, that's fine. "The guy who gets to throw the rock first is the guy who's never sinned."

What does the bible say? Everybody dropped their rock and walked away. The only guy who could have thrown the rock was Jesus, and he didn't throw the rock, he forgave her.

The fact is, there's a quarry. If you're looking for a rock, they're not hard to find. There needs to be a little grace, a little mercy, a little forgiveness. The Bible says that love keeps no record of wrongs. The Bible says that love covers a multitude of sins. So, what rock do you need to drop? We need to say "You know what? "I'm just going to let that go. I'm going to let that go."

### The tongue is the master controller

We all make mistakes, but interestingly James does not warn us to be on guard against all those sins of speech, he does not want to condemn us, point out our weaknesses or rub our noses in our mistakes, but wishes to make the positive point that **control of the tongue leads to a master control of ourselves and our lives.** James says something pretty big here. If we can control the tongue, it enables us to control all other aspects of our life. That is a pretty bold statement.

In verses 3-4 James brings two pictures to illustrate this point. The bit in the mouth of a horse and the rudder of a boat. Both things very small compared to the thing they are controlling. Both impacting the whole direction of the horse or ship.

In the same way, James says in verse 2, the tongue is the key factor in holy living.

Verse 2 says

For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way.

The interesting thing is that it works both ways, our words are a barometer of our heart, a measure of our heart, but the tongue is also the rudder of our lives. The control of the tongue is more than just evidence of spiritual maturity; it is the means to it, it is the path to spiritual maturity.

## 2) Fire - verse 6

The next thing that James points out is that the tongue has enormous power to do harm and here he uses the image of fire.

But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. <sup>6</sup>And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.

Who hear has accidentally set fire to something?

*Tell story about creative bible lesson*

James says it only takes a tiny spark to start a forest fire? We hear of the massive fires in Australia, often not known what or where it started, a spark of some sort.

This is what James is saying: once a fire gets going, it's hard to know where it started because it moves so quickly and so fiercely. And our tongue is like a spark. It can unleash hell. *for it is set on fire by hell itself*

James uses language here that Jesus used. Jesus speaks of hell, of Gehenna.

Originally Gehenna was a place where followers of various Baal and Canaanite gods would get together to do all kinds of horrible stuff including sacrificing their own children. This place became detestable to God's people for obvious reasons, so they determined that they would turn it in to their city dump. All the rubbish would be taken out of the city, out to Gehenna, this cursed place, and it would be set on fire, and you could see at a distance the garbage burning day and night. And so it became an illustration of what hell is like. That's where all the sin goes, and it's set on fire, and it burns forever.

James is picking up the theme of his big brother, Jesus. James is saying we all stumble, and the picture he is painting is that it's possible to go down to hell, get fire,

and then set your Christian brother or sister on fire and burn them alive with your words.

And we would all say, "Well, that's not what I intended," but that's what a spark does. How many of us have been set on fire by somebody's words? Who have you set on fire?

James here is wanting us to not only be understanding toward ourselves, we all stumble, but understanding toward those around us, we all stumble. This greatly affects our marriages. This greatly affects our parenting. This greatly affects our community. This can greatly affects our church family.

The tongue has power to destroy and yes we see its work in the church. The tongue can corrupt the whole body. It is not confined to the speaker, nor the immediate listeners but spreads like fire in ever widening circles.

The tongue can be such a devastating tool in our mouths, and we can use it to such horrific effects. The tongue is lethal.

Remember the children's rhyme? "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me." We all know it's completely untrue. With our tongues we can put nations at war, we can ruin reputations, we can end careers, and we can destroy lives.

## 3) Inconsistency of the tongue

So James says in the last verses about the tongue:

<sup>9</sup>Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God.<sup>10</sup>And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! <sup>11</sup>Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? <sup>12</sup>Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty spring.

James' response to blessing and cursing coming from the same mouth is; **"this is not right"**

These words come from an understanding and warm-hearted man, and are as much a rebuke as an appeal. A rebuke as in saying "this is not right to be treating each other like this" and an appeal to "stop hurting one another".

He knows there is an awful lot of good spoken to each other, but a little bit of bitterness pollutes everything. As we enter into the time of political campaigning before election, what a mixture of bitter and sweet we hear coming out of the mouths of our politicians, maybe they should read this passage. Oops was that a rock I just threw?

When bitter and sweet comes together it is the bitter that prevails. The bitter is the stronger element and that is what leaves its mark.

When we speak positive, God glorifying words, and then speak ill words, what message leaves its stain? So the tongue needs to be guarded, otherwise it will leave a bitter taste behind.

### **Conclusion**

I am sure we recognize that we all need to engage in this battle to tame the tongue? Will you commit yourself to pray for God's strength to help you with your tongue, whatever it is you find yourself slipping up on most, whether it be gossip, insults, sarcasm, bad language, lying? Whatever it is, there is hope as God works in us by his Spirit to put down our rock. I am not sure we will ever be able to tame the tongue completely this side of heaven, but the help of the H.S. we can make steady progress in living like Jesus.

### **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus, I thank you for your word and the challenges that it brings to us to bring our lives in to line with yours.

Lord, I pray for those of us who are teachers. That we would grow in godliness, particularly with our heart and our speech. God, I pray for those of us who are hearers, that we would be gracious with one another.

And Lord, thank you for the reminder that we all stumble in many ways. There's not one of us who can say, "I have my tongue under control." It's a wild animal. It's a forest fire. It's a ship without a rudder. Holy Spirit, please take the reins.

God, as we come to time of worship, help us to do what we were made for, and invest our words, to be good stewards of our words so that Jesus would be glorified and we would be changed to become more like him. We ask for this in your good name, amen.