

Taming the Tongue

James 3:1-12

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me.” Did you ever hear that when you were a kid? Maybe you even said it. Have you ever thought about how completely untrue it is?

Words can hurt a great deal! And the wounds inflicted by words are actually deeper and more painful than merely physical injuries. Those who are wounded by words typically take much longer to heal those with broken bones. Six to eight weeks and a bone is generally back to normal. Even with a severe fracture requiring surgery, a couple of months is all that is normally needed for recovery. But beloved, have you ever been hurt by words spoken by another person? How long does it take to heal? Some wounds might never heal!

So this is a very important subject, and James has already brought it up twice,

James 1:19 “So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.”

And, James 1:26 “If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless.”

He will bring it up again,

James 4:11 “Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 12 There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?”

This subject of our words is important to Jesus, too.

Mat. 12:36 “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. 37 For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

By your words! By evidence of your words. So let’s look at what James has to say about those words, beginning with how he describes,

I. SINNING WITH WORDS.

He begins with a warning to those who might presume to become teachers, but shouldn’t. The thought is very practical.

v.1

He isn’t disparaging the office of teacher or preacher in the church, for that is an office established by Christ. He is not discouraging rightly qualified men from teaching. But still, his words ought to cause everyone who teaches to pause, especially those ordained in an office of teaching elder. There is accountability. they “will be judged with greater strictness.”

So Christians will stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and teachers especially. Not in danger of eternal condemnation, for that is removed. Not in order to receive our just punishment for sin, for that is removed, too, as far as the east is from the west. But that removal of sin doesn’t remove the context of accountability and responsibility. Teachers are accountable for their teaching. As are those given any form of authority of leadership according to,

Heb. 13:17 “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”

So here in chapter 3, James is clearly referring to the sin of,

A. False teaching.

And the greater judgment to those false shepherds is severe, as Jesus declares in,

Mat. 6:5 “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, 6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel had the same warning,

Ez. 34:1 “The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? 3 You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. 4 The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. 5 So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. 6 My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.”

The sin of false teaching! Then James gets broader in his exposition on the dangers of the tongue, mentioning the sin of,

B. Self-exalting boasting.

v.5

I’m going to come back in a minute to look at these images James uses, emphasizing how small the tongue is but how much influence it exerts. For now, look at what the tongue does. “It boasts of great things.”

The boasting of your tongue can far exceed your own ability or power to perform, can’t it? The boasting of your tongue can go well beyond your own spiritual maturity or evidences of God’s grace. And it is sin!

Just a couple examples. You ought never to boast about your own goodness when it comes to your salvation, for you know the familiar verse,

Eph. 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

You have nothing to boast about in yourself, so let him who boasts, boast in the Lord. And Paul adds with characteristic humility,

1 Cor. 4:6 “Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. 7 For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?”

There is the sure foundation for casting aside all boasting. “What do you have that you did not receive?” To complete that thought, Paul adds in,

2 Cor. 11:30 “If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity.”

What a danger is this thing called boasting. Boasting of yourself, of your own virtues or abilities. Boasting of your own wisdom or insight. Boasting in such a way as to intentionally draw attention to yourself.

The tongue is a small member of your body, but it boasts of great things! So beware! Beware of any words designed to exalt yourself. Beware of speaking in such a way as to bring honor or glory to yourself! And that warning is all the more necessary when you realize that the temptation is embedded in the very nature of this self-absorbed age in which we live. Everywhere you turn you are tempted to consider your own well-being, your own reputation. And to defend it with your words.

Thus the plain wisdom of the Proverbs becomes all the more significant,

Prov. 27:1 “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring. 2 Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.”

Likewise, don’t boast about your accomplishments--especially your planned future accomplishments. Don’t brag about yourself in that way, for as we will study later in,

James 4:13 “Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; 14 whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. 15 Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” 16 But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.”

Such is the evil of the tongue, along with perhaps its greatest evil,

C. Cursing others.

James’ point is very clear,
v.9-12

Your tongue, rightly used, speaks God’s praise. We could properly say that that is why God gave you a tongue to speak in the first place! The sun in the sky declares God’s praise, as do all the heavens and the earth. All of his creation declares the praise of the creator, by its very existent.

But only we human beings, created in the image of God, speak that praise with rational, volitional and verbal words. We think about the praise we offer to God. We do it intentionally, of our own free will. And with our tongues.

But those same tongues are so often used to speak evil of other people, other people whom James emphasizes are also created in the likeness or image of God. The sin of cursing others is so greatly magnified by James’ words, that we use the same tongue to praise God. And that simply ought not to be!

For indeed, how can you praise God with your tongue when you have used that tongue to speak evil of other people? Do you see the strength of this argument? How can you speak God’s praise with a tongue that is already defiled by cursing others?

Ultimately, you can’t. Ultimately your praise to God becomes unacceptable! Warnings to the wicked given in Psalm 50 are an appropriate exhortation for us, too.

Ps. 50:19 “You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit. 20 You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother’s son. 21 These things you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.”

Then the wisdom of.

Prov. 10:18 “The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, and whoever utters slander is a fool. 19 When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent. 20 The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the heart of the wicked is of little worth. 21 The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense.”

People of God, this sin is rampant among God’s people today, and too often we refuse to recognize it for what it is. We speak evil of others, we speak badly of them, and think nothing of it. Beloved, if someone sins against you, Jesus says to go to him privately to seek reconciliation. Not to speak evil of him in public! Scripture teaches that if someone falls into sin, “you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.”

If you have a conflict, a concern, a problem, an offense, you go privately and personally to resolve it. For your tongue that is used to praise God cannot be also used to curse men created in his image!

So if you have spoken badly about another person, with no attempt to seek reconciliation, you have sinned. If you speak badly of those within the church, your brothers and sisters, it is all the more offensive in the sight of God. Slander and gossip are consistently listed among those things which are inconsistent with Christian living, and utterly divisive to Christian unity. For,

Prov. 16:28 “A perverse man sows strife, And a whisperer separates the best of friends.”

And beloved, one of the seven things God hates is “one who sows discord among brethren.”

Let me emphasize this Christian duty and obligation in a positive way as well, not just what you are forbidden to speak, but how you ought to speak instead. Turn with me please to,

Eph. 4:29 “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. 32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.”

People of God, that is the standard by which you must measure your own words. If your words are not intended to be edifying to the one to whom you speak, then keep quiet! Get rid of words that reflect your bitterness or anger or malice, and replace them with tenderhearted words expressing kindness. And if you can’t, keep quiet!

For there are terrible dangers attached to these sins, great...

II. EFFECTS OF SINFUL WORDS.

As James puts it, almost overstating the case,

A. Your words can defile your whole body.

As the NKJV puts it,

v.6 “The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body.”

The ESV has these similar words, “The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body.” Your tongue can defile you, stain your whole body, in the same way that we might think about the sins of sexual immorality! And we don’t take this warning seriously enough. You might well have sufficient restraint to keep yourself from fornication and adultery, knowing that your

body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. You might well recognize the defilement of sexual sin, and I hope you do. But you must also realize that the sins of your tongue defile you too. The sins of the tongue make you unclean, dirty.

And James isn't just talking about those common four letter words often used in what we call cursing, such that if you avoid them your tongue is clean. He is talking about any evil speaking as being in the same category, so just as you might be embarrassed by the language we might say belongs to sailors, you ought also to be embarrassed by slander and gossip. If you are offended when hearing words of filthiness and moral impurity, if you are embarrassed by words that are degrading of the marital relationship, then you ought to be embarrassed as well by words that speak badly of other people. For those words, even just hearing them, can defile your whole body. And,

B. Your words can destroy your whole life.

The end of,

v.6 "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."

"Course of nature" is translated "course of life" in the ESV, and I believe the reference is to that course of your own life. Literally it is the "wheel of your birth." It is the whole life which is set into motion by your own birth. It can all be destroyed by mere words.

Now if that don't cause you to pause, you are not listening closely enough. Your words can set the entire course of your life on fire! Your words themselves, if they are words of speaking badly about other people, are words set on fire by hell! They come from the devil himself!

And thus in verse 8 James calls those words "deadly poison." They can kill you! They can destroy your life, even as they can destroy the lives of others. And they can destroy the life of a church, any church, this church included. For,

C. Your words can open the door to the whole world of evil.

You might think yourself godly and mature. You might think yourself to be advancing in sanctification and successfully battling against the temptations to sin. You certainly wouldn't classify yourself as "evil." Yet your tongue, your words, can bring you into that world of evil more quickly than you could ever imagine. Evil words open the floodgates to all other forms of evil, for words are the spark that can set a whole forest on fire.

v.5 "See how great a forest a little fire kindles! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity."

That evil is described in verse 8 as an "unruly evil," restless and unrestrained. Always going about its evil business without ever taking a rest. Like a great forest fire spreading in the dry winds of the west.

We should always teach our children, don't play with fire. Don't play with matches, stay away from fire. That is the lesson of James here. People of God, don't play with fire. The fire of evil speaking, which is a world of iniquity, a world of evil all its own. It will harm and defile you, whether you are speaking or listening. It will destroy your whole life, and therefore it can also destroy the church as a whole. And it leaves behind exactly what is left behind by a real fire, a scorched land of utter destruction.

And so we have,

III. A CALL TO RIGHTEOUSNESS.

A call to a personal response, and responsibility. It is the response that begins with understanding just how important this subject is. And if James' words mean anything at all, then,

A. You must humble yourself to accept the priority of taming your tongue.

The priority--maybe even first in priority! This might even at the top of the list of those things which you need work on in your Christian life. Taming the tongue. This priority is established by words that might seem discouraging even to the point of despondency, for James seems to say that actually you can't do it!

v.7-8a

We can tame all the wild animals, but can't tame the human tongue. Yet as true as that is, it is not a cause for personal despondency, for that would contradict the whole idea of God's power at work through his word and spirit that gives us everything we need for life and godliness. So on a personal level, by the grace of God at work, it can be done. Yet in general terms, in the life of mankind as a whole, it has never been accomplished. And no one has accomplished it with a final completion and perfection.

Therefore it must become your priority, and James sets the example of humility.

v.2 "For we all stumble in many things."

Thus this is no self-righteous, legalistic condemnation. This is a pastor identifying with his people. "We all struggle with this." For this matter of taming the tongue is, perhaps, the best measure of Christian maturity and godliness. This is the purpose and the end result God has intended for our salvation, which is the meaning of that word "perfect." It refers to something that is brought to its intended goal or has accomplished its intended

purpose.

v.2 "...If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body."

The idea there is that in many ways, the tongue is the hardest part of the body to control. It is the hardest area of life to bring under the control of the Holy Spirit, and though for some people the hardest thing might be alcohol or jealousy or sexual purity, still the general statement is true. The tongue must be your priority in seeking to apply your salvation to your daily life.

And just as the negative warnings about the tongue destroying your life are true, so are the positive encouragements. If you can get this under control, you really will be able to manage other areas of your life, too. So important is this very little part of the body. Look at,

v.3-4

I know very little about training or riding horses, but I know this much, that you control a horse and direct him as you ride with the bit and bridle. If you want a horse to turn, you pull on the bridle which pulls the bit in his mouth, and he turns. The theory is that simple.

Likewise, I know very little about navigating a ship or a boat. But still James' words are clear as they can be. Even the largest of ships is steered by a very small rudder, and wherever that little rudder points, that is the direction in which the whole ship will travel.

So it is with your tongue. If you can learn to put the law of kindness on your tongue, then that will change the direction of your whole life. If you can learn to "let no corrupting talk come out

of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up,” then that commitment will determine the whole direction of your life.

Likewise, if you want to deal with issues like anger, bitterness, or jealousy without first dealing with the matter of taming your tongue, you will fail! Taming the tongue must have priority, and therefore,

B. You must humble yourself to accept the responsibility to tame your tongue.

This is not works-salvation. This is not a legalistic form of righteousness through which you are justified. Rather, these are the priorities for Christian living which James sets out under inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

You are surely saved by grace through faith, and not by works. And you are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. This is one of them, and you **MUST** accept this responsibility as a Christian, in Christ. You cannot profess Christ over here, and then over here live your lives with no constraints upon your tongue.

James puts that responsibility this way,
v.9-10

These things are a contradiction! These things are irreconcilable opposites. They are mutually exclusive--you simply cannot have both!

With two illustrations to make the point even clearer,
v.11-12

Sadly, professed Christians are often willing to live with that contradiction, willing to live without any effort at taming their

tongue. Yet the point here is that ultimately, you can’t have it both ways. The point of the illustration is the impossibility of it! Can a fig tree bear olives? Well, no. **NEVER!**

Writing to Christians, he isn’t imposing a sentence of eternal condemnation upon a believer who sins with his tongue, but still there is a great warning to those who fail to see the importance of this matter. And there is a strenuous exhortation for all Christians to be engaged in this battle as a matter of utmost importance.

For a salt pond cannot yield fresh water.

So beloved, before the Lord, examine your heart and confess your own sins in matters of the tongue, committing yourself to speaking only those words that will benefit and edify the person to whom you speak. Make the commitment that you will not only refrain from speaking evil words, including slander and gossip, but that you won’t listen to such words either!

May the law of kindness be upon your tongue as you commit yourself to accepting the priority and responsibility to show forth the genuineness of your faith by exercising control over all the words you speak. May God give you the grace to enable you to do that which he commands you to do.