

How to Live a Good/Godly Life: “Taming the Tongue” - James 3:1-12
Elder Troy Couch February 3, 2019

We continue our study of James and “how to lead a good/godly life” this morning with chapter 3:1-12. So far, we have covered in chapters 1 and 2, how to fend off temptation, not to simply hear the word but to put it into practice, to not show favoritism among God’s children, and that we need to put our faith into action. Here in chapter 3 James really gets into watching what we say with our tongue. He touched on it a little in chapter 1:19 where he says “...everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak...” and 1:26 “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deserves himself and his religion is worthless”. But now he really addresses the power of our words and the importance of what we say.

James 3:1-12

Not many of you should presume to become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. [Pause] *Great, just great! Now I have that to look forward to.* [continue] ²We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what they say, he is perfect, able to keep his whole body in check.

³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

⁷All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹²My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

This is probably the area in our life that it is easiest for us to fall into sin. We can all relate to the problem of saying things that are not in line with God's will. And I'll say just one word...politicians. I think that we can all agree that that particular group needs a lot of help in this area. But if we were honest, we would all have to agree that we all struggle with this.

James starts in vs.1 by warning anyone thinking of becoming a teacher of the Word, which was a very high-status position that many were eager to achieve, that with that status comes great responsibility for which teachers are accountable to God. I can't just come up here and teach what I think, I'm responsible to teach you what *God* wants you to know. Then he gives the reason for the warning as he starts to focus on his main point. Vs2 "We all stumble", understand that this is not deliberate wrongdoing, but a failure due to inadequacy. However, teachers are at special risk for the tongue because it's their main tool of the trade and it is a powerful and dangerous instrument. Then he states "If anyone is never at fault in what they say, he is perfect, able to keep his whole body in check." The word "perfect" here is the word used to describe "what is mature". (Question) Is James suggesting that those who are able to gain control of their tongue should then be able to control the body, a far easier task; or is he suggesting that one who gains control of the tongue thereby gains control of the body? In either case, notice that he is not suggesting silence, but control. Something that mature Christians should be able to achieve at some level. No one is perfect, but we grow and learn how to avoid sin.

Then vs. 3-5 gives three similes of how powerful the tongue is, first with the example of the horse, a large animal, whose whole body is able to be directed by a small bit in the mouth. And second, a tiny rudder on a ship, able to steer that ship wherever directed by the pilot. Likewise, the tongue is also small in size, but can have a tremendous effect on your life which is recognized with the phrase "...it makes great boasts" and then elaborated on in the next verses where he shows the destructive effect of undisciplined speech, where the tongue is compared to a spark that burns a whole forest. I'm here to tell you, that it doesn't take much out of your mouth to cause calamity. A few simple words can cause your whole world to burn!

If you don't hear anything else I say today, be sure to listen to this next part...

Now, in vs.6, he describes the tongue as the part of our body that leads us to sin; among all the parts of our body, it represents the world and all of its wickedness. Thus, it defiles the whole body, making us unclean before God. He then suggests that this horrible effect is felt throughout our entire life, from birth through death and that not just you and I as individuals, but the entire human race is subject to the destructive power of the tongue! Lastly, where does all of this evil originate from? Satan himself turns evil loose on this world through the human tongue!

Vs 6 “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”

Is it any wonder then that “...no human being can tame the tongue” from vs 8? We cannot master our own tongues by ourselves, it is beyond our control. “It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” also from v 8.

My friends, the root of all evil is not money, it’s in what we say every day of our lives. It starts there and then translates into what we do. How we act starts with what we say. Our tongue is the gateway where Satan acts through us.

In verses 9-12 James gives us examples from nature of how this is so unnatural and should not be able to happen.

vs9 “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness.” When we curse another human being, since they were made in the likeness of God, we are cursing God. Vs10 “Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing (for God) ...this should not be.”

We have all been hurt, and have hurt others, with words – heated words, belittling words, dishonest words, thoughtless words. Who here among us has not been tormented by the painful memory of words we wish we had never said?

I remember when I was in a counseling session one time many years ago and somehow, we got on the subject of Debbie’s sister. I was telling the counselor how she was very controlling, incapable of compassion, couldn’t even care for a cat let alone a husband, and on and on. Finally, the counselor said to me: “So the problem is that you can’t stop judging her?” I stumbled around saying “no no ... she can’t...no it’s her... Finally, as he kept looking at me with his raised eyebrow, I

came to the stark and surprising realization that I was very judgmental. And not just with her but with everyone. I started looking at how I had looked at others and what I had said about others and it was startling! It's a memory that I will never be able to shake as long as I live.

People, don't come here and praise God, sing the hymns and then go latter on to curse at the TV because the football team your rooting for just fumbled the ball. Don't worship with your tongue in church and then go downstairs to the fellowship hall and gossip about your sister in Christ from across the hall. Don't sit here and say how much you love the lord then latter, when someone asks you to volunteer to help out, you lie and say you're sorry but you have something else scheduled, when you really don't.

I believe that James is suggesting that, as Christians, who have the Holy Spirit within them, it should feel "unnatural" for us to speak evil because it is direct conflict with the Spirit which lives within us. Vs 11 "Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?" Vs 12 "...can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?"

Have you ever said something and immediately after the words came out of your mouth thought to yourself, "I shouldn't have said that". Did you feel the guilt and or shame of it? I believe that's the conflict that James is talking about here. God cannot be in communion with sin. Don't get me wrong, I'm not talking about salvation, and I know that God never forsakes us, but I'm talking about the Holy Spirit that lives within us. That when we speak or act sinfully, we feel the Holy Spirit withdraw, like oil on water when you put dish soap in it. The two can't mix. I believe that we feel that in a very real way and a response is called for when we feel this.

I love dogs but I hate to pick up dog poop. So, I don't have dogs. But my neighbor across the street has three that they just let run around the neighborhood and pooping in everyone's yard. Let's say I'm looking out my window and see the dog doing a number 2 in my yard and shout out "G D dog get out of here". Only I don't use just the letters and I feel right away that feeling of "I shouldn't have said that". I believe an apology is appropriate and necessary to feel right with the Spirit again. I have done this and find this an effective way to immediately draw close to God again.

James says we all stumble and that taming the tongue completely is impossible. But with the help of the Holy Spirit in us, we can fight off the urges to speak words of dishonesty, thoughtlessness and cursing in anger. And when we do stumble, if we recognize our weakness and sin with a penitent heart, a desire to not do it again, we keep God close and allow him to teach us the self-control James speaks of in verse 2.

Let us pray...

Almighty God and Heavenly Father, may we pause to ponder the words that surround our day, our use and misuse of them, their power to lift up or destroy, to build or maim. Forgive us Lord for our words of hate, coveting, jealousy, dishonesty and thoughtlessness and allow instead words of kindness, inspiration, comfort, encouragement, affirmation, forgiveness and mercy. May our words flow less from the heat of the moment, and more from a heart of discipline. And may they always reflect your character and love. Amen