

### Hold Your Tongue! – James 3:1-12

If you've just joined us, we're working through the book of James as part of our theme this year to Get Serious, from **1 Tim 4:7-8** which says –  
*Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.*

We started out the ministry year looking at the spiritual disciplines necessary to Get Serious About *Godliness*  
Then we looked at an overview of the Bible in order to Get Serious About the *Word*  
For the past few months, we've been working our way through the book of James in order to Get Serious About Our *Walk*

That said, we're in James 3:1-12 this morning, looking once again at the things that come out of our mouths  
James has already touched on this topic twice before  
And though this isn't the last time we'll hear about our tongue, this is certainly the grand daddy of them all; the big sit-down if you will; 12 verses  
God must think we need some help in this area, or something; You think?  
The gist of what he says here, is – Hold Your Tongue!

#### James 3:1-2

##### **With great influence comes great responsibility (v1-2)**

(1) *Not many of you should become teachers* – teachers of God's word  
*For you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness*  
You better take a long hard look at your aspirations/motivations to become a teacher  
Whether a CM teacher, youth leader, SG leader, Bible study leader, or a pastor  
Because you will be judged with greater strictness  
You'll be held to a higher standard

Why? Because teachers bear such a huge responsibility for the spiritual well-being of those to whom they minister . . .  
And they have the potential to exert a great deal of influence on them

And if you're constantly stumbling in your speech or life as a teacher, you could do more harm than good  
That's why God will scrutinize teachers to a greater degree, judge w/ greater strictness  
That's why not many should become teachers – it's a high standard for a high calling

So if you're already in one of those roles, make sure you take it seriously  
Because God is watching – what you say, what you do, and how you live  
With great influence comes great responsibility

- Problem is – nobody's perfect; not only are you going to be scrutinized, but you're going to fail as well; that's the implication of v2  
*If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man*  
And since we know that nobody is perfect, we know that everybody stumbles at least in what they say, because it's far harder to control the tongue than the body  
And with teachers, the risks are even higher because they talk so much!  
But that's no excuse because *we will be judged with even greater strictness*

So let me get this straight – as a teacher of God's Word, I'm held to a higher standard  
A standard I can't live up to, but a standard to which I'm held nonetheless; Nice huh?  
Can you say “grace”  
Every time I speak, and every day I live, I trust that God's grace is sufficient to cover my failures, and compensate for my weaknesses  
And it's one of the greatest joys of my life to do so

And not only is *God* watching, but so are people – those who are following  
**Heb 13:7** – *Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.*  
If you're a teacher, people are watching you – and they should be  
They're watching what you do and how you do it – and imitating your way of life/faith

- But *never* should you be living to please them; Rather, u should be living to please God  
Try to do anything else, and you'll go crazy

I try to affirm that to our staff from time to time – that the last thing they need to worry about is what others think of them  
Rather they should be living for the Lord, and him alone  
Not the uptight parents of “Over-Sensitive Susie;” Or peering eyes of “Legalistic Larry”  
But having said that, living for an audience of one is not license to live however we please  
Because people *are* following, and God *will* judge us with greater strictness  
With great influence comes great responsibility

#### James 3:3-5a

##### **As your tongue goes, so goes your life (v3-5a)**

- The tongue can be an instrument of great *self-control* – like the bridle of a horse  
You're probably aware, that if you can control the tongue of a horse, you can control the horse itself  
I'm told there are different kinds of bridles . . . (etc)

Put this baby on, grab hold of the reins, and your chances of controlling the horse go up exponentially  
But take it off the horse – and you have problems

James is not suggesting, nor am I, that you hold your tongue by putting this on . . .  
He *is* saying that your tongue is the *key* to your self-control  
If you can control your tongue, you can control your life

That said, there are 2 main bridles of the tongue:

1. THINK before you speak (gave u an acronym on that in the message fr James 1:19)  
Is it True, Helpful, Inflammatory, Necessary, Kind?
2. Pray before you think

I don't know about you, but my mind will spin out of control if I don't pray  
Often times the right perspective is not gained unless I get on my knees  
Have you noticed that? That in life, God's perspective is always seen better fr the floor?  
The tongue can be an instrument of great self-control if you put your bridle on . . .  
The bridle of thinking before you speak, and praying before you think

- It can also be an instrument of great *influence* in your life
  - Like the rudder of a ship
    - A small part compared to its size, but wielding great influence
    - A relatively fragile component compared to the strong winds, but equal to their force
  - As the rudder goes, so goes the ship
- So too our tongue can be an instrument of great influence in our lives, despite our headstrong ways, or the overwhelming winds of our culture

So it's no wonder James says it's *a small member, yet it boasts of great things* (5a)  
 IOW's, it has a tremendous effect on your life – like who your friends are  
 Nobody wants to hang out with a loud mouth, or foul mouth  
 Nobody wants to associate with a perpetual critic  
 Nobody wants on their team a constant contrarian  
 Your tongue has a tremendous effect on your life  
 So much so, that as your tongue goes, so goes your life

- My tongue has had a tremendous effect on my life – sometimes for worse in early days  
 I remember Becky's grandfather bringing me up short one time when I spouted off about not caring what Becky thought about something  
 Though it made me mad at the time, I'm glad he did it because as your tongue goes, so goes your life

James 3:5b-8 – it doesn't get any more scathing than that

**Left unchecked, your tongue is a weapon of mass destruction (v5b-8)**

(5b) Speaking of small things that have a big impact . . . *How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!* All it takes is a spark to destroy a forest  
 So too with our tongue – our words have the power to reap massive destruction

Just to make sure we make the connection between a small fire and our tongue, he makes it explicit in the next phrase . . .  
*And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness* (6a)  
 An unending source of wickedness, rebellion, and sin  
 Capable of destroying in many different ways

That's the first of **7 Characteristics of an Unchecked Tongue**, we find in these verses

**1. It's capable of destroying in many different ways**

Why? Because it has multiple warheads at its disposal  
 Like gossip, lying, slander, demeaning comments – those are the blatant ones  
 We'll call those the nuclear warheads  
 Then there's the biological warheads – equally destructive, but far more insidious/subtle  
 Like innuendo, false flattery, boasting, sarcasm, and rumors  
 The tongue is capable of destroying in many different ways  
 Causing wounds that are far harder to heal than those made by sticks and stones

**2. It soils the bearer**

It's *set among our members* (6b), part of our body; and you can't escape its ill-effects  
 Left unchecked, *it stains the whole body* (6b) – it dirties and adversely affects every single aspect of your life, including you soul  
 A dirty mouth leads to a dirty life – that's how powerful the tongue is  
 That's how much influence it has

**3. It ruins your life**

*Setting on fire the entire course of life* (6b) – the whole circle of life, top to bottom, start to finish  
 There's no getting around it – an unchecked tongue leaves a path of carnage in its wake, and has the potential to ruin and destroy every single relationship, opp, and circumstance that God brings your way

- Like when I was in Jr High – I was a terrible swearer; a total potty mouth  
 One of the many things I'm not particularly proud of  
 I could cuss with the best of them, and did – not at home or church of course  
 I totally concealed it from my parents – probably like some of you

Fortunately, God got hold of my life sometime in there, and I decided to live right  
 But not before I went to a basketball camp at our high school when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade  
 As far as I knew it was just any other sporting event, and thought nothing more of it  
 But I found out years later as a Senior, that my high school coaches didn't know what they were going to do with me as a 7<sup>th</sup> grader  
 They saw some good *basketball* potential in me, but they had no idea what they were going to do with my foul mouth and sharp tongue  
 It was out of control, and a hindrance to the team

Fortunately, they were pleasantly surprised when I showed up as a Freshman, a changed person – but until that point, I had no basketball career waiting for me, despite what I thought

My tongue was ruining my life and destroying my opp's, and I didn't even know it

**4. It's provoked and fueled by the worst evil you could imagine**

The word for *hell* here (6c) is Gehenna, which refers to the Valley of Hinnom  
 The Valley of Hinnom was a deep gorge just outside Jerusalem where trash, garbage, and the bodies of dead animals and executed criminals were dumped and burned  
 Originally used by Canaanite worshippers to sacrifice their children as burnt offerings –  
 It became a place where the fire never went out; the worms (maggots) never died  
 And so over the years, it was considered to be unclean and unfit for any *decent* usage, and was associated with all that is filthy and evil in this world . . .  
 Eventually representing hell on earth

So when James says that the tongue is *set on fire by hell* (Gehenna) – he's saying that it is fueled, and provoked, and influenced by the worst evil you could ever imagine  
 Not a pretty picture

**5. It itches to wreak its havoc – it's a restless evil** (8b)

An unchecked tongue looks for outlets; It looks for victims  
 It looks for opp's to unleash its fury, and wreak its havoc  
 It looks for people on whom it can spew its *deadly poison* (8b); its verbal venom  
 Venom that far too often drips from the fangs of our soul, waiting for its next victim

**6. It has an endless capacity for harm – it's full of deadly poison** (8b)

Just like a snake has an endless supply of venom . . .  
 So too, our tongue has an endless supply of words that can hurt, sting, and harm  
 The effect of which lingers long after they're spoken

Just like the effect of snake venom continues long after the bite  
Which is one of the reasons that as members here at Harvest, we commit to refrain from gossip; and when offended, we will speak lovingly and directly to one another  
Anything else does great harm, for which the tongue has an endless capacity

## 7. It's impossible to tame

V7-8a – *tamed* here means subdued; referring to God's mandate in Gen 1:28 to *fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion . . . over every living thing that moves on the earth*

James is saying, as huge and vast as that directive was – it's been done  
But when it comes to the tiny little tongue, exceedingly small in comparison to the animal kingdom, and some of the animals themselves – it can't be tamed  
It can't be subdued; it can't be controlled

Does that mean we should just throw up our hands and let God's grace abound?  
That we should abandon all efforts to check it and bring it under control? Not at all!  
The realization that perfection in our speech is unattainable, just like perfection in our life is unattainable, should not dampen in the least our enthusiasm/desire . . .  
To honor God by becoming more like his Son with every word we speak

We will never reach the point where our tongue is perfectly controlled, but we can surely go a long way toward using it to glorify God (Moo, 162)  
And if we can't, we should hold it

With great influence comes great responsibility  
As your tongue goes, so goes your life  
Left unchecked, your tongue is a weapon of mass destruction  
And finally . . .

**If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all (v9-12)**

This is the epitome of hold your tongue, from v9-12

A duplicitous tongue, a two-faced tongue, in the mouth of a believer, is a problem  
It's a problem to praise God with one breath, and damn your neighbor with the next  
Someone made in the image of the God you just praised – that's a problem  
James says – *these things ought not to be so* (10b)  
And the solution is, when you get right down to it – if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all

Does that mean there's no place for constructive criticism in life? Not at all  
We need that from time to time to grow in our areas of weakness . . .  
And so do the people around us  
And at times you may need to make constructive assessments of people and situations in order to know what to do, or who to associate with  
But what you say should never be said for the purpose of being mean – whether *in* their presence or far removed

- As believers, kind, constructive speech should characterize our tongues  
Our words should always be marked by kindness, even when we're saying the hard things and speaking the truth

Never should we praise God in worship, and curse people at work

At best, that's inconsistent with your heart

Inconsistent with your confession of faith in Jesus Christ

At worst, it's disingenuous – it doesn't line up

And you show your true colors to your own demise

Constructive speech should always characterize your tongue

Otherwise, you either betray a hard heart, or bring shame to the One who saved it

The second point James is trying to get across, is . . .

- How can it be otherwise?  
How can anything other than constructive speech be on our tongue?  
How can a heart that's been quickened, softened, and made alive by the power and presence of the HS, produce anything other than a self-controlled mouth?  
It can't; It doesn't; If it does, if a sharp tongue is the norm, it's a contradiction

Just like a spring pouring *forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water* is a contradiction – it just doesn't happen (11)

Or a fig tree that produces olives (12) – it's a contradiction

Or a grapevine that yields figs; Or a salt pond that produces fresh water

Just like those things will never happen in nature, so too, a soft heart should never be characterized by a sharp tongue

If it is, it's not the soft heart of a true believer

## Summary

Strive in the strength that God provides to speak words that heal and help

Because with great influence comes great responsibility

As your tongue goes, so goes your life

Left unchecked, your tongue is a weapon of mass destruction

Strive to make your speech consistent with your confession

And if there's any doubt, any doubt at all – hold your tongue

## Close