

Faith that Works: Taming the Tongue

James 3:1-12

What would it be like to be involved in the following kind of church:

- A church where everyone lived out Paul's instructions in Ephesians 4:29 and no one spoke any unwholesome word, but only words that were good for edification according to the need of the moment, words that gave grace to those who hear.
- A church where every word spoken in every interaction was full of grace and truth.
- A church where no unkind or angry word, or gossip or slander was spoken, but rather, every word was kind and gentle and loving.
- A church where no words that were dishonest or deceptive.
- A church where words were not used to manipulate, or for impression management.
- A church where every word was full of wisdom, and civility and respect.
- A church where words were forgiving and humble and always welcoming.

What would it be like to part of that kind of church? That would be like K-Love Radio, right . . . positive and encouraging. I'm not saying there couldn't be laughter or discussions about the game the previous day or anything like. I'm just asking, what would it be like to be part of a church community where every word honored God? Where every word built up and didn't tear down. What would it be like to be part of that church?

That would be a powerful, transformational church. We would actually be able to live out the 'one another's of Scripture' – to love, to encourage, to bear one another's burden. We would feel safe open up about our brokenness and sin and find real help and healing and freedom. It would be church where the fellowship ran so deeply and because of that we would shine brightly to the world around. People would notice and be attracted to that kind of church. They would know we are his disciples by our love. This would be a church where you would say, "they have a faith that works."

Now, the reality is that only in heaven will we experience such perfect fellowship. In this world where we struggle with sin we will continue to fall short. We will sin with our tongues. But as we grow up in Christ, we ought to be moving towards this kind of church.

Today, we are looking at James 3:1-12 where James addresses the tongue. In the passage we looked at last week, James taught that genuine faith will be expressed through works. Your words ARE in fact works. If we are going to be a church and individuals who have a faith that works, we must pay attention to the tongue.

James has already talk about this in brief. In 1:19 he urged his readers to be quick to hear, but slow to speak. And in 1:26 he said that if a person is not able to bridle his tongue that person's religion is worthless. But now as we come to chapter 3, he takes a deep dive into this topic. He makes it clear that we must pay attention to taming the tongue.

He first addresses teachers, but then quickly transitions to address all believers. In verse 1, James gives a warning to teachers.

I. Warning to Teachers (v. 1)

¹Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.

You notice that he says “we” and so he is including himself in what he says. He warns that *not many* ought to become teachers. It’s likely that James gives this warning because there were those who were not seeking this role for pure motives. They were seeking this position for personal gain of some sort. Teachers held a kind of status and prestige.

Any teacher, James says, needs to understand that they are accountable to God. They will *incur a stricter judgment*. Most likely he means the judgment at the end of times. What teachers say holds great importance for good or for evil and they will be held accountable for it.

What James says here certainly applies to me this morning. But I believe that the principle that teachers in the church are accountable for their words would apply to any who are in a role of using their words to influence others.

Now, as we come to verse 2, James broadens out his warning about words and he talks about the power of the tongue.

II. The Power of the Tongue (vv. 2-5a)

² For we all stumble in many ways.

James is certainly applying this to teachers, but when he says, *we all*, he is now applying this to all believers. He states a general principle – *We all stumble*. In other words, we all sin. And we do so *in many ways*. We all know how true this is, right?

If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.

Back in 1:4, James used this word, *perfect*, when he urged them to let endurance have its perfect result that they might be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. In 1:4 and here, he isn’t talk about perfection, but maturity. His point is that if you can control what you say, you are mature. You are exhibiting godly virtues. In fact, he says that if you can control what you say, you can control your *whole body as well*. The tongue, though small, is powerful.

James goes on to illustrate the truth that small things can be powerful. He says:

³ *Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.*

There is a close connection here to what he said in verse 2. The *bit* in the horse's mouth allows the *entire body* to be controlled. Something small controls something large.

⁴ *Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.*

Some of the ships that the Romans built in James' day could be up to 180 feet long and 45 feet wide. These would have been great ships in that day. And such ships *driven by strong winds*, are controlled by a *very small rudder*. Something small controls something large.

⁵ *So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.*

James is not referring to boasting in a sinful sense here, but rather that the tongue can be used to great effect. It can be used for great good or it can be used for great evil. There is power in this small part of the body.

As we come to the second part of verse five, James transitions from just talking about the power of small things to describing the destructive power of this small thing. He talks about . . .

III. The Destructive Power of the Tongue (vv. 5b-12)

See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!

In July of 2018 a rancher in Northern California was trying to drive a metal stake in the ground when a little spark flew into the brush igniting a fire that became known as The Ranch Fire. That little spark became one of the largest wildfires in state history. It burned over 459,000 acres, destroyed 280 structures, killed one firefighter and injured three others. Small things can be very destructive.

And the tongue is one such thing.

⁶ *And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.*

The details of what James says here can be a little confusing, but the big picture is crystal clear. *The tongue is a fire*; it has great capacity for destruction. It is *the very world of iniquity*. It is as though all the wickedness in the world is found in the tongue (EBC, Burdick, p. 187).

He says that this part is *set among our members as that which defiles the entire body*. This is consistent with what Jesus taught in Matthew 5:18-19:

But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man;

...

James adds that the tongue *sets on fire the course of our life*. It affects all of our existence. And then he says that the tongue is *set on fire by hell*. He is using *hell* as a personification of our enemy. And so behind all of this destructive potential of the tongue is the enemy of our soul. Let me say that again. Behind the destructive potential of the tongue is Satan.

Now, I don't think James is saying that we can blame Satan for every hurtful word that we say. But we should be sobered by this truth that our enemy does seek to use of our tongues as a tool to cause damage. And so we simply must not take it lightly when we say a hurtful word, or a lie, or sin in any other way with our tongues, because behind it may be a scheme of the enemy who is seeking to kill, steal and destroy (John 10:10). Behind it may be the enemy's strategy to keep us from being the kind of church that Jesus wants us to be.

⁷ *For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.*

James is using hyperbole here. Of course, not EVERY animal in the world has been tamed, but in general this is true. And so, while the human race has been able to obey God's creation command to subdue and rule over the earth, we struggle to subdue the tongue.

⁸ *But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.*

The word that is translated, *restless*, is the same word that is translated, "*unstable*," back in 1:8 where James was talking about the double-minded person. The idea seems to be that the tongue is an unstable evil ready to break out at any moment. It is *full of deadly poison*. It is a deadly force.

We have all experienced this, right? We have either said or been on the receiving end of this *deadly poison*. Probably both. I can't remember specific words now, but I can remember too many moments when our kids were young and I spoke angry words to them. I remember the hurt in their eyes as they experienced the deadly poison of my angry words.

Now, one last thought on this verse. The phrase, *no one*, is literally, "no one among men." It is possible that in this phrase James is pointing to our only hope. He very well may be indicating that no human can control the tongue, but that as believers in Jesus, we are not left to fend for ourselves. We can look to the grace of God to help us.

Now, as we come to the final four verses, James focuses on one of his core concerns in the whole letter of James – double-mindedness. In verse 9 he says:

⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;

With our tongue we bless God. This is one of the highest and best uses of our tongues. As we've gathered here today, this is what we've done. We have voice worship to God. We are blessing our Father. And yet, we can walk out of this place and into our weeks, into our homes, to our places of work, or to social media, and we use our tongues to *curse men*. . . who have been made *in the likeness of God*.

¹⁰ from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

To use our tongues in this way is unthinkable! It is wrong! It is a reflection of our immaturity. It indicates that we are allowing Satan to have his way. It reveals that something is not right in our hearts.

James then gives several examples that illustrate how unthinkable this reality is:

¹¹ Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?

¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

Of course, the rhetorical answer to all of these questions is “no!” And so too how unthinkable it is that both blessing and cursing come out of our mouths. If this is happening, this is double-mindedness. This is immaturity.

At the start today, I invited us to imagine a church where we only used our tongues to bless. That would be an amazing church. That would be a powerful church. And I do believe God wants us to grow to be more and more that kind of church. But here's the deal, if we are going to grow to be that kind of church, we each have a responsibility to pay attention to our tongues. We each need to learn to control our tongues. And so let's talk about that for a bit. Let me give you some . . .

Practical Ways to Grow in Controlling Your Tongue

Let me give you some things to practice this week. Obviously, we are going to need to work on this area of our lives longer than a week, but sometimes it can get overwhelming if we think too far down the road. And so let me give you some things to do this week. And then if you want to continue past the week, that would be great!

First, **decide to give God control of your tongue.** In Romans 12:1, Paul tells us to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God. We are to intentionally offer our bodies to be used for God and his purposes. This would include the tongue. And so every morning this week be intentional about giving God control of your tongue. Ask him to fill it with His life and to use it for His purpose. One way to do this would be to pray a daily prayer like the one printed in the bulletin:

Lord, today I give you control of my tongue. I ask for your empowering grace to guide all that I say. Help me to be quick to hear and slow to speak. Help me to see when I am about to speak without thinking and to check my heart. Father, by Your Spirit fill my heart with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And may all that I say today only be a reflection of the fruit of your Spirit.

And so start each day by intentionally deciding to give God control. Then, secondly, **daily reflect on your words.** At the end of each day this week as you are getting in bed take some time to think back over your day and take an inventory of your words. Spend some time in silent reflection. Listen to God. Where did you stumble with your tongue?

If God reminds you of unkind words, or angry words, or untrue words that you spoke confess your sin. Don't make excuses. "I didn't mean it." "I'm just tired." Or, "that's just the way I am." Instead, confess it as sin. Jesus has already forgiven you. But He still wants you to come clean. By confessing our sin, we open ourselves up to God's transforming work.

Third, **invite feedback.** Sometimes we really don't know quality and impact of our words. This can be a blind spot. And so invite feedback. You could ask a friend, a spouse, your children or a co-worker to give you some feedback on your words. Ask them if they have heard you speaking in any way that has been hurtful to them or others.

One of the things you might have to do to follow this up is to ask for forgiveness for hurtful words that you have said to someone. This might be the person that is giving you the feedback or it may be that they observed you speaking to someone else in this way. If you have the information that your words have been hurtful you need to ask for forgiveness. And that can be hard. But God changes our lives as we humble ourselves and respond to truth in this way.

Finally, you can **practice the discipline of silence.** Donald Whitney defines the discipline of silence as "the voluntary and temporary abstention from speaking so that certain spiritual goals might be sought" (*Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 224). Of course the spiritual goals for practicing this discipline are many, but in this case the goal is control of the tongue.

There is a way to practice this discipline where you get away to places of solitude so that you can be alone and, in the quietness, seek to listen to God. But there is another way to practice this discipline in the midst of your normal day where you choose not to speak; you purpose to listen more and say less. And so when you are with a group of friends you choose to focus on listening and seeking to really understand them rather than speaking. As you are doing this you

seek to listen to God in the midst of this situation. Or maybe you are in a Bible study and you check the tendency to say something every time you can. The idea is that you practice being quick to hear and slow to speak. Obviously, you don't want to be silent when you should speak.

You can choose a day or a whole week where you make this approach to speaking your goal. The goal of this spiritual practice is not silence, but control. We want to gain control over our tongues. As you practice this discipline of not speaking when you are around people you will probably find that so often you want to use words to control people, or the situation or how they think about you. But in practicing the discipline of not speaking, we learn to rely more on God's control in situations. When you do this kind of thing for a period time it begins to help you develop the discipline of considering what you say before you say it. It helps you control the tongue.

Let me encourage you this week to focus on controlling your tongue. Pick one or two of these suggestions and apply yourself to them. Ask for God's help every step of the way. Ask that He would enable your faith in Him to work in this area of your life.

If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.

Proverb 18:21 says that life and death are in the power of the tongue. May we each gain control over our tongues that we would use our speech to give life in our families, with our friends, at work, and certainly here at Faith.

Amen.