

“Tongue Control”

James 3:1-12

July 30, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

This lengthy passage on tongue control seems at first to be a little random. Why does James bring this up in a letter that is targeted mainly against what is called “easy-believism?” This is the error that looks upon faith in Christ as nothing more than our ticket to heaven. There is no love for Christ in this faith, no giving of oneself to Christ, no death to self, and no surrender to obedience. It is a false faith unable to bring salvation to anyone. Those with this faith profess faith but do not possess it. The reason James devotes 12 verses to talk about tongue control is that those guilty of easy believism need to be disrupted. They need to be shaken out of their over-confidence in their faith and realize their desperate need for God. In a word, they need humility, and this need can be seen by going small, by considering the simple and common act of speaking. The truth is that there are so many ways to sin with our speech that anyone who earnestly undertakes the path of obedience to all commands related to speech will soon realize the depth of his or her sin. That is where James wants us to be.

James gets into this topic with a warning to teachers. **“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”** Why does he begin here? Most of us are so resistant to correction that the one doing the correcting has to be just a little sneaky. James sneaks up on his readers by surprising them with this warning. In James’ day, many people wanted to be teachers, but they sought the position for the wrong reason. In the early church, to be a teacher brought high status. Early Christians were largely Jewish, and the Jews of this day gave great honor to their rabbis. As a matter of fact, the title *rabbi* meant ‘My great one.’ In Jewish law of this day, one’s duty to help a rabbi exceeded even the duty to help one’s parents. The result was that many sought this office for the wrong reason, for reasons of pride and selfish ambition. So when James utters this surprising warning that not many should be teachers, he would have had their attention. “Why in the world not?” would have been the question uppermost on their minds. The simple, but rather surprising reason, is that teachers are required to use many words, and **“When words are many, transgression is not lacking”** (Prov. 10:19). James begins by talking about the good potential for the tongue but quickly moves to its negative use, only to conclude with the seemingly hopeless statement that “no human being can tame the tongue.”

I. The Good Tongue

In this opening paragraph, James makes the positive point that a controlled tongue results in a type of master-control over our whole lives. **“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.”** James then gives two illustrations of this point. First, the tongue is like the bit put into the mouth of the horse to bring it under control. The horse is a creature of immense bulk and power. I remember attending the State Fair as a boy and seeing a team of Clydesdale horses pulling a large wagon. A mature Clydesdale horse stands about six feet tall in the way horses are measured, which is to the top of their shoulders, not their head. These horses weigh an average of 2000 pounds and are capable of pulling loads many times their own weight. But put a bit weighing about one pound in the mouth of these impressive creatures and they can be controlled easily. James gives a second illustration of a ship, able to be brought under control by a small rudder. Imagine a modern-day nuclear aircraft carrier, with a crew of 5000 sailors, carrying numerous aircraft and all the fuel and supplies needed for lengthy missions at sea. Yet these floating cities can be turned by a rudder that, in comparison to the bulk of the ship itself, is quite small. In the same way, the person able to master the tongue can bring his whole life under control.

The tongue has great potential to bring good to oneself and to others. Remember that the context here is teaching. The controlled tongue is capable of bringing good not just to the speaker, but to others as well. Most of us can think of one or two teachers whose words were a significant part of our development. I remember Coach Krone, my high school calculus teacher. He was a man of few words, but he affirmed me in some ways that were meaningful to me, and as a result I would have done anything for him. I don't think he would have used this word, but what he did was to bless me. Back in 1986, Gary Smalley and John Trent wrote a book called *The Blessing*. The central thesis of the book centered on the power of a blessing to bring about the thing actually spoken. This is closer to the biblical view of language, in which there is power in the spoken word to bring about either blessing or cursing. Now we know that the ultimate power lies with God himself and not with our words, but it does seem to be the case that God uses our words of blessing to be a blessing to others. So Jacob sought the blessing of his father, and those words were powerful to bring about the thing spoken. And Jacob, before his death, blessed his sons with words of power. God has invested our words with power, and consequently they have great potential to transform people's lives.

We had a small group leaders training time this past Wednesday night, and our discussion topic for the night was encouragement. One brother present spoke about an encouraging experience he had in his small group. After sharing honestly about a need in his life, words of affirmation followed from the

group that he reported were like breathing life into his soul. Our words have great power for good.

II. The Bad Tongue

The tongue is like a scalpel, able to bring healing and life when handled skillfully, but able to cut deeply and do much damage when handled carelessly. James would not have agreed with that children's rhyme, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never harm me." On the contrary, James says, **"How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell"** (v. 5-6).

A couple of things are striking about these verses. First, just as the small tongue could control the whole body for good, now the seemingly small errors of the tongue are capable of bringing great harm. The great forest is set ablaze by a small fire. Most of us have heard of the great Chicago fire of 1871. It lasted two days and blackened three and a half square miles of the city, destroying 17,000 buildings and taking the lives of over 250 people. And most of us have probably heard about the way that fire started. At 9:00 one Sunday evening, a woman named Mrs. O'Leary went out to milk her cow. While she was being milked, the cow kicked over a lantern that started this great fire. In the same way the tongue, though it is small, can do a world of damage. The contagion of our words can spread, staining the whole body. Not only is the contagion of the tongue capable of spreading over space and staining the whole body, it is also capable of spreading over time, **"setting on fire the entire course of life."** In other words, something said at one point in time can bring ruin far into the future.

A second thing that strikes me about James' words here is his acknowledgement that much of the damage done by our words is inadvertent. "I was just starting a little campfire," we say. "I never intended for it to destroy the whole forest." And then at the end of verse 6 he indicates that even though we may not have intended the fire to spread so fast and do so much damage, someone did intend that. The tongue is set on fire by hell. In other words, Satan gets involved, both encouraging our careless words and then fanning them to ignite and spread in order to do maximum damage. Most of us, when we hear those words **"set on fire by hell,"** think of some kind of really foul language that would never be heard in polite society. I don't think that's what he means. Satan's normal methods are deceptive and sneaky.

This is a frightening truth. A seemingly small sin of the tongue can turn out to do great damage. In Smalley and Trent's book I referred to earlier, *The Blessing*, they begin with the story of a man named Brian. Brian's father was a

career Marine officer, and he wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. So as Brian was growing up, his father attempted to toughen him up. Whenever he would accomplish something, Brian's father would not congratulate him, but tell him that he should have done better. Brian finally did enlist in the Marine Corp, but he did not flourish there and was eventually given a dishonorable discharge. His father was so disappointed that he vowed never to speak to his son again. Predictably, the forces of hell were unleashed in the life of his son. The father's tongue had been set on fire by hell, and the fires ravaged the person he was closer to than anyone else.

III. The Untamable Tongue

James closes his treatment of the tongue in a curious way, saying that no human being can tame the tongue. **“For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue”** (3:7-8). If it is true that the tongue is unable to be tamed, why is James talking about it at all? At one level, he seems to take away what he has just said about the good the tongue can do in determining the whole course of one's life. If no one is capable of doing that, why even bring it up? It would be like someone saying that he has discovered the cure for cancer. His cure is to run a three-minute mile. But no human being is capable of such a thing, so what's the point?

James' words are intended to undercut human effort in the matter of tongue control. In other words, if you read this and merely conclude that you just need to try harder to control your tongue, James wants to challenge you. That's why he goes on to describe in verse 9 the outcome of merely trying harder to gain control of your tongue. **“With it [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing”** (3:9-10). You can make yourself say good things, such as praising God in worship. But you can't make yourself stop all hurtful language. So you end up with both good words and bad words.

James locates the problem in the same place Jesus did—the evil heart. Jesus said that it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person but what comes out, because **“what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart”** (Matt. 15:18). James says the heart is like a spring or like a fruit bearing plant. What comes out is merely a product of the nature of the spring or plant. Why is it that the tongue is untamable? It is because the heart is untamable by any human being.

So James is not telling us that we merely need to try harder to gain control of our unruly tongues. Rather, he is telling us that our problem runs so deep that there is no help for us outside God. While it is true that no human being

can tame the tongue, the task is not beyond God's ability. James is seeking to make us desperate for God's help. He is building up to his theme, which is stated in 4:6. **"God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."** As he counters the false faith of easy-believism, James is telling us that desperation is a mark of true faith. In his book *Holiness by Grace*, Bryan Chapell tells of friends of his who had a rebellious teenage son. This son brought such pain into their lives that the mother once told the Chapells that she didn't know if she loved her son anymore. Her heart had grown cold and hard against her own son. What melted her heart was a cry of desperation from him. It happened like this. The son got into trouble once again and responded in his typical way of a combination of weak justifications and promises to do better. Fed up with these excuses, the mother left the room. Left alone, the son began looking through a family photo album that was nearby. One picture particularly struck him, one that showed the son as a young child under the approving smile of his mother. He called his mother back into the room, pointed to the photo and said, "Mom, when I see this picture, I understand why you don't know if you can love me anymore. In the picture, hope fills your eyes as you look down at your little boy. But I have dashed all your hopes, Mom. Please forgive me that I have dashed all your hopes." The mother's hardness toward her son was then broken by his desperation.

Remember that James is writing against easy-believism, the person who professes faith in Jesus but doesn't actually possess it. What this person needs is the kind of desperation that drives him into the arms of Christ. Such desperation will come when he considers the difficulty of tongue control. In our Sonship discipleship program, there is an assignment we call the tongue assignment. It is simply to go one week without committing any sin of the tongue—no lying, gossip, exaggeration, boasting, defensiveness, blame-shifting or any other sin with our speech. It is an assignment with the same purpose James has—to make us desperate for God's grace.

CONCLUSION:

When we are desperate for God's grace, his heart goes out to us and he forgives and receives us. There really is power in words, and God speaks words to us. Can you hear and receive those words? Jesus said, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life"** (John 5:24). God gets the last word. Do you know what the last words of the Bible are? **"The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen."** The grace of God comes to those who are desperate for him. Let your untamable tongue give you a desperation for God.