

Sermon: The Power of the Tongue

James 3:1-12

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Introduction

It is one of the smaller organs of the body. The weight for a male is about 70 grams, for a female, 60 grams. However, its potential for evil is so great that God saw fit to imprison it behind a double jailer: the teeth and the lips. I am talking about the human tongue.

Why is it that this small 2-3 inch skeletal muscle covered with mucous membrane is so dangerous and lethal? An initial investigation could lead one to the conclusion that the problem is its location. Recent research has revealed that there are few places more infested with harmful bacteria than the human mouth. More than 100,000,000 microscopic critters live in there. Fungus grows in the oral cavity. In 1999 *Medical PressCorps News Service* reported that a study led by Dr. David Relman, assistant professor of medicine and of microbiology and immunology at Stanford University, found evidence of 37 unique bacteria in the human mouth that microbiologists had never before recorded. Dr. Alan Drinnan, a professor of oral medicine at the school of Dental Medicine at the State University of New York at Buffalo, found this rather mundane. He said, "It's really no big surprise. It just reiterates what has been known a long time: That there are many bugs that you can collect from the mouth but can't grow in vitro, in a lab." It is not a pretty picture. Mouths have viruses that may cause disease. The top of the tongue is the main breeding ground for bacteria that attack the teeth and gums. The white

blood cells from another person's saliva will attack once inside your mouth. Indeed you are better off, in one sense, kissing a dog like my Great Dane Samantha, than you are kissing another human, because at least a dog's mouth contains many enzymes that fight infection!

However, as interesting as all of this is, the problem is not the tongue's physical location, but its spiritual connection. For in terms of spiritual anatomy, the tongue is directly wed to the heart, and it is the heart that motivates and manipulates the tongue for good or evil, to bless or curse. Jesus understood this very well. In Matthew 12:35-37, He said, "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give an account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

James, like his half-brother the Lord Jesus, was very interested in the activity of the tongue. He gives attention to it in each of the five chapters of his letter (cf. 1:19, 26; 2:12, 14, 16, 18; 4:11, 13, 15-16; 5:12). Yet his most detailed treatment of the tongue is 3:1-12. James knew the tongue "is a tattletale that tells on the heart and discloses the real person . . ." In fact, Scripture variously describes the tongue as "wicked, deceitful, perverse, filthy, corrupt, flattering, slanderous, gossiping, blasphemous, foolish, boasting, complaining, cursing, contentious, sensual, and

vile. And that list is not exhaustive.”¹

The tongue possesses unspeakable power. Proverbs 18:21 teaches us, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” What lessons would James want us to learn concerning this “subject that is in everybody’s mouth?”² Six principles are set forth for our careful consideration.³

The Tongue Tests Our Teachers (3:1)

James begins this section by again addressing his readers as “brethren” (*adelphoi*). This is his favorite form of address in the letter, occurring 15 times (1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19). It serves as both a term of tenderness and often as a transition to a new subject. Here he starts at the top with teachers, and in a surprising move, seeks to discourage persons from too quickly aspiring to that office. In 2:14-26 James hammers home the importance of good works in the Christian life. He was also acutely aware that “in the absence of works, there is usually an abundance of words.” Far too often, those whose faith is anemic are all too “eager to talk about their faith and to instruct others in its delicate theological nuances!”⁴ James uses one of his 54 imperatives and warns that those who would seek this position should be very careful. “Let not many of you become teachers.” With greater privilege comes greater accountability. “We” (he includes himself) shall receive a greater judgment.

As heirs to the Jewish synagogue, it was natural that the early church would honor the office of teacher. *Rabbi* meant “my great one.” So great was the respect accorded these teachers in Judaism that if a man’s parents and his rabbi were captured by an enemy, “duty demanded that the rabbi be ransomed first.”⁵ This respect

for teachers carried over into early Christianity. As A. T. Robertson points out, “In the *Didache* (xiii. 2, xv. 1,2) teachers are placed on par with prophets and higher than bishops and deacons.”⁶

Teachers of the Word of God bear an awesome responsibility for the health of the Church. The spiritual and theological well being of God’s people rest heavily upon their shoulders. That they are faithful to the Scriptures is not an option; it is an imperative. Phil Newton says in *Reformation and Revival* concerning the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, “The preacher must expound the Word of God or else he has failed in his calling. He may be a wonderful administrator, a winsome personal worker, and effective leader. But if he fails to expound the Word of God, he is a failure to his calling to preach the Word.”⁷ George Zemek at the Masters Seminary adds, “Today there is a great need, not for plausible pulpiteers, but for powerful preachers. Contemporary communicators, saturated with arrogance, given to humanistic tactics, and practiced in manipulation, abound. Yet there remains a real drought for the dynamic Word of God conveyed through humble men of God by the powerful Spirit of God.”⁸

It is a weighty assignment to be called by God to teach His Word: whether it be a public ministry behind a pulpit to thousands, or one that is private in a family room to your children. The stakes are high. Eternity looks over one shoulder and the Lord Jesus over the other. It is a great honor to teach the Word. It is, in one sense, an unbearable mission for which no person is sufficient. I believe John Piper captures something of the gravity of the situation when, in the context of preaching, he writes,

All genuine preaching is rooted in a feeling of desperation. You wake up on Sunday morning and you can smell the smoke of hell on one side and feel the crisp breeze of heaven on the other. You go to your study and look down at your pitiful manuscript, and you kneel down and cry, ‘God, this is so weak! Who do I think I am? What audacity to think that in three hours my words will be the odor of death to death and the fragrance of life to life (2 Cor 2:16). My God, who is sufficient for these things?’⁹

“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers.” As teachers, we must be careful with our mouths. As teachers, we must be mindful of our motives.

The Tongue Measures Our Maturity (3:2)

James now moves to speak not just to teachers but to everyone, including himself. “We all stumble in many things.” Stumble is in the present tense and means to sin or offend. “Many things” refers “not to the number but to the variety of sins.”¹⁰ In other words, “we all sin many times in many ways.”¹¹ His statement was proverbial in the ancient world.¹² It carried the weight of “an indisputable principle drawn from practical life.”¹³ It is universally evident, “we all make mistakes, we all show the signs of the debilitating effects of sin.” The false accusation that James is a theological lightweight is even more unjust when we consider his doctrines of sin (v. 2) and anthropology (v. 10).

While we could understand James as speaking in general terms, reading him in that way misses the point. His concern still lies with the tongue. With a twist of irony, James affirms if one could simply avoid stumbling in word, he would be a perfect man, a truly mature man (*teleios anēr*), able to bridle indeed the whole body.” What

is James’s meaning here?

The most difficult activity to control is our speech. Words have a way of slipping off the tongue and past our lips before we even know it. Often this occurs with tragic results, either for us or others or both. Just consider for a moment the wisdom of the Proverbs in this area:

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

Proverbs 18:6—“A fool’s lips enter into contention, And his mouth calls for blows.”

Proverbs 18:7—“A fool’s mouth is his destruction, And his lips are the snare of his soul.”

Proverbs 19:9—“A false witness will not go unpunished, And he who speaks lies shall perish.”

Proverbs 26:7—“Like the leg of the lame that hangs limp, Is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.”

Proverbs 26:28—“A lying tongue hates those who are crushed by it, And a flattering mouth works ruin.”

It is not difficult to sin in our speech. If we could just muzzle our mouth and tame our tongue, everything else would seem simple by comparison. By using the word “bridle,” James looks back to 1:26. Perhaps he remembered the counsel of David who wrote in Psalm 39:1, “I will guard my ways, that I sin not with my tongue; I will guard my mouth with a muzzle.” Solomon adds in Proverbs 13:3, “He who guards his mouth preserves his life, But he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction.”

Only the spiritually mature can control their tongue. It is an unmistakable evidence of God’s work of grace in their life. It is also one of the ways our maturity is measured against the standard of our Master. First Peter 2:21-23 reminds us, “Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

‘Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth;’ who when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously.”

When you go to your doctor, one of the first things he examines is your tongue. It tells him a lot about your physical condition. If it is coated, you probably have a fever. If it is yellowish, your digestive system may be out of sorts. By looking at your tongue, a doctor can tell a great deal about your physical condition. Similarly, by a tongue examination, we learn quite a bit about a person’s spiritual condition as well. Justin Martyr, Church Father and Apologist, wrote, “By examining the tongue of a patient, physicians find out the diseases of the body; philosophers find out the diseases of the mind; Christians find out the diseases of the soul.”¹⁴

The Tongue Determines Our Direction (3:3-4)

Beginning in verse 3, James “launches into a series of illustrations to reinforce his belief that a comparatively small ‘member,’ such as the tongue, has influence out of all proportion to its size.”¹⁵ As a wise teacher in touch with the times, he draws from a well of illustrations that were common in the ancient world.

The horse is a magnificent beast weighing nearly half a ton. In terms of raw power, it was unmatched in James’s day. However, place a two-inch bridle in its mouth and a 100-pound child on its back who knows what he is doing, and that animal which once ran wild and appeared uncontrollable can be made to dance and prance with remarkable grace and charm. Indeed, it is the same with men and horses; control their mouth and you are

the master of all their actions.

Or consider the large ship. Even in the midst of fierce winds, the pilot holds the key to the direction of the ship by virtue of the control he exercises over the small rudder hidden beneath the water at the back of the ship.

A bit will direct the actions of a horse, though it is quite small in comparison to this great beast. A rudder will determine the direction of a ship in spite of its insignificant size in comparison to the great sea vessel. Likewise, the tongue will direct the actions and determine the direction of our entire body, despite the fact that it is one of the smaller parts of our body.

Our life is destined to go in some direction. It is inevitable. For good or evil, the activity of your tongue is certain to be a determinate factor. Indeed, the right word at the right time may open doors of ministry that will set the course of your life’s work. On the other hand, the wrong word at any time, even an unsuspecting time, may close doors, establish a reputation, and mark your ministry for ill. Words can most certainly determine our direction.

The Tongue Inflames Our Iniquity (3:5-6)

James now compares the tongue in its smallness to the bridle and the rudder. “Even so,” just like the bridle and the rudder, “the tongue a little (*mikron*) member is.” James now develops his case a step further. First, he notes this little member boasts continually (present tense) great things (*megala*). “The tongue is powerful and vainly boasts of its might, a comment that goes back to Ps 73:9: ‘their tongue struts through the earth . . .’”¹⁶ Second, he introduces his most striking imagery: the tongue is a fire, guilty of verbal arson in

an instant.¹⁷ The NKJV states, “See how great a forest a little fire kindles.” “Forest” translates a Greek word that means “wood.” James is probably referring not so much to a “forest” (a rare feature of Near Eastern topography) but “to the brush that covers so many Palestinian hills which, in that dry Mediterranean climate, could so easily and disastrously burst into flame.”¹⁸

Verse 6 may be the most severe statement in all of Scripture concerning the evil destruction that may leap from the tongue. James identifies four aspects of the tongue’s danger. First, it is a fire, a world (*kosmos*) of iniquity or unrighteousness, “a world of wrong” (TEV). Calvin, commenting on this phrase said, “By adding that it is a world of iniquity, it is the same as though he had called it the sea or the abyss. . . . A slender portion of flesh contains in it the whole world of iniquity.”¹⁹ Second, “The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body.” “Defile” is in the present tense and means to stain or corrupt. A contaminating stench emanates from our tongue and infects the whole person like a cancer. Third, the tongue “sets on fire the course of nature,” literally, “the wheel of origin or existence.” The NIV translates the phrase as the “whole course of life,” capturing James’s meaning quite well.²⁰ The evil of the tongue works within and without. It defiles us on the inside and destroys our life on the outside. It leaves nothing unscathed. Fourth, the tongue “is set on fire by hell.” The word translated hell is *gehenna*. This is its only occurrence in the New Testament outside the Synoptic Gospels. The word refers to the valley of Hinnom, just southwest of Jerusalem. Pagan child sacrifices took place there (cf. Jer 32:35). Trash and the bodies

of dead animals and criminals were dumped there. “The place was considered unclean and unfit for any decent usage. . . . Because the fire burned all the time and maggots were always present, the Lord used *gehenna* to represent the eternal, never-ending torment of hell. . . . Hell is Satan’s place, prepared for him and his demons (Matt 25:41). As such, it is used here as a synonym for Satan and the demons.”²¹ The tongue is a tool that the devil is well trained to use. Whenever we make it available to him, he is delighted to use it for his destructive goals.

That fires can be caused from mere sparks became clear to me on a January Sunday in 1985. We were invited to Sunday dinner at the apartment of some friends in Dallas, Texas who lived next to Eastfield Jr. College. The husband, a man named Bruce, decided to entertain my small sons after lunch by shooting bottle rockets out into a big field on the Eastfield campus. They loved it, until one of the rockets ignited a little spark in the field. Bruce and the boys came into the apartment to get a pitcher of water to put out this tiny flame. However, in the few moments it took for them to come inside for the water and to return outside, a strong wind from the north had fanned the flame into a great conflagration moving rapidly toward a trailer home business about 200 yards away. Fortunately, the fire department arrived to douse the fire less than 20 feet from the trailers. Such a great fire burning several acres, and it all began with a tiny spark.

Proverbs 16:27 reminds us, “An ungodly man digs up evil, And it is on his lips like a burning fire.” Proverbs 26:20-21 adds, “Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; And where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. As charcoal is to

burning coals, and wood is to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife.”

The Tongue Reveals Our Rebellion (3:7-8)

The little word “for” which begins verse 7 reveals the connection these verses have with the previous proofs of the tongue’s uncontrollable nature. James now describes the tongue additionally as untamable. He cites four classifications of animals, an argument of amplification by accumulation, emphasizing the totality of our ability to tame animals.²² The fourfold division also reflects Genesis 1:26 and man’s dominion over the animal kingdom.²³ Both the present and perfect tenses are used in affirming man’s ability to tame or domesticate the animal world. Man is continually taming and has successfully tamed the creatures that God has placed under his watch care. But there is one beast no man can tame. It is wilder, more powerful, and more elusive than any animal in the jungle: the human tongue. Several things should be noted about verse 8: (1) The word “tongue” actually occurs first in the verse for emphasis and contrast with verse 7; (2) No man, no human, is capable of taming the tongue. Though not stated, it is possible that what man cannot do, God can; (3) This tongue is “unruly,” the same word James used in 1:8, translated as “unstable,” in reference to the double-minded man. The tongue is unstable, unruly, restless, it lacks single-mindedness; (4) It is full of death bearing poison. A venom more deadly than that of a cobra, a toxin more lethal than cyanide, the tongue is a murderer assassinating a man’s character, destroying the tender fabric that holds a marriage together. Psalm 140:3 says of evil men, “They sharpen their tongues like a ser-

pent; The poison of asps is under their lips.”

Steve Stephens drives home the importance of our words in our marriage. He writes, “There is nothing more painful than having unhealthy communication with the one you love. It is through communication that we connect and our spirits touch. If that connection becomes contaminated, it is only a matter of time before the whole relationship is poisoned. . . . I have gathered together some close friends and asked them what not to say to your spouse. Here is their list:

- “I told you so.”
- “I can talk to you until I am blue in the face and it doesn’t do any good.”
- “You’re just like your mother.”
- “I can do whatever I like.”
- “You’re always in a bad mood.”
- “If you don’t like it, you can just leave.”
- “It’s your fault.”
- “Can’t you do anything right?”
- “What’s wrong with you?”
- “That was stupid.”
- “All you ever do is complain.”
- “All you ever do is think of yourself.”
- “I can’t do anything to please you.”
- “If you really loved me, you’d do this.”
- “You get what you deserve.”
- “You’re such a baby.”
- “Why don’t you ever listen to me?”
- “Turnabout’s fair play.”
- “Can’t you be more responsible?”
- “You deserve a taste of your own medicine.”
- “What were you thinking?”
- “What’s your problem?”
- “You’re impossible.”
- “I can never understand you.”
- “I don’t know why I put up with you.”
- “Do you always have to be right?”²⁴

Words reveal our rebellion. Words can wreck a marriage. Words can be full of deadly poison.

The Tongue Compromises Our Confession (3:9-12)

James concludes his argument by noting the inconsistency of the words that proceed forth from the tongue. "It is a veritable Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Such inconsistent usage is utterly unfit for believers (3:10b). The world of nature is not guilty of such duplicity (3:11-12)."²⁵ To allow our tongues to function like this compromises our confession because it is inconsistent with our profession of Christ. On the one hand, we use our tongues well and "bless the Lord and Father" (literal translation). We then turn around and "curse men who are made in the likeness of God." Amazingly, blessings and curses come out of the same mouth. James issues a strong rebuke. "These things ought not to be so." James clinches his argument by the use of three illustrations: The first and second in the form of a question, the third in the form of a statement. First, does a spring (or fountain) gush forth both sweet and bitter water? The obvious answer is "no." Second, can a fig tree produce olives or a grapevine produce figs? Again, the answer is "no." Finally, neither can salt water produce fresh. Bottomline: Bad things don't produce good things and good things don't produce bad things. "Whatever comes out of the mouth unfailingly reveals what is on the inside."²⁶ Such inconsistency compromises our confession, and in the family it can scar our children. Have you ever stopped to think what it is like to be a child and hear some of the things they hear coming out of the mouth of mom and dad? The same mouth that hopefully says,

"I love you, I'm so proud of you, I thank God, He gave you to me," may also be heard to say,

Shut up. Put that down. Stop that right now. I don't care what you are doing, come here right now. Listen to me. Give me that. Don't touch that. Not like that, stupid. Go away. Leave me alone. Can't you see I'm busy? Boy, that was really dumb. Can't you do anything right? You'd lose your head if it wasn't screwed on. Hurry up, we don't have all day! What's the matter with you? Can't you hear anything? I don't know what I'm going to do with you. You will never grow up to amount to anything.

And with words like these we don't bless, we curse. We don't build up, we tear down. And parents, words are powerful when directed at our children.

John Trent tells the story of the first time a father took his little girl out for a "daddy date." After getting their pancakes at a fast food restaurant, the dad decided this would be a good time to tell her how much she was loved and appreciated. "Jenny," he said, "I want you to know how much I love you, and how special you are to Mom and me. We prayed for you for years, and now that you're here and growing up to be such a wonderful girl, we couldn't be prouder of you."

Once he had said all this, he stopped talking and reached over for his fork to begin eating . . . but he never got the fork to his mouth. His daughter reached out her little hand and laid it on her father's. His eyes went to hers, and in a soft pleading voice she simply said, "Longer, Daddy, longer." He put down his fork and told her some more reasons they loved and appreciated her, and then again he reached for his fork: a second time, and a third, and a fourth, each time hearing the

words, "Longer, Daddy, longer."

Though this father did not get much to eat that morning, his daughter got exactly what she needed. In fact, a few days later, she spontaneously ran up to her mother and said, "I'm a really special daughter, Mommy. Daddy told me so."²⁷

Conclusion

"The mouth is the open door to the soul ..."²⁸ Jesus said in Matthew 15:18, "Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man." Peter, quoting Psalm 34:12-13, wrote, "He who would love life and see good days, Let him restrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking deceit." A hateful heart will not produce helpful and healing words. No man can tame the tongue (v. 8), but God can. It is my hope and prayer for me, and for every person who calls Jesus Lord, that God will so fill our heart and thereby control our tongue, that Proverbs 16:24 will be truly said of us, their "pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones."

A careless word may kindle strife,
A cruel word may wreck a life;
A bitter word may smite and kill,
A brutal word will accomplish nil;
but
A gracious word may smooth the way,
A joyous word may brighten a day;
A timely word may lessen stress,
A loving word may heal and bless.

It was said of Jesus in John 7:46, "No man ever spoke like this Man." As we live in the power of His grace, may it be that others will say the same of us.

ENDNOTES

¹John MacArthur, *James* (The MacArthur New Testament Commentary; Chicago:

Moody, 1998) 144.

²James Merritt, "Don't Be Hung By Your Tongue" (Sermon on James 3:1-12, preached 3-12-95 at the First Baptist Church of Snellville, Georgia).

³Duane Watson has analyzed James 3:1-12 according to Greco-Roman rhetorical patterns of argumentation. His study demonstrates the unity of the pericope (contra Dibelius) and also provides guidance for the expositor who is interested in honoring both the form and content of the inspired author's work. He argues that "James 3:1-12 exhibits the pattern of argumentation for the complete argument or theme" (51-52). See Duane Watson, "The Rhetoric of James 3:1-12 and a Classical Pattern of Argumentation," *Novum Testamentum* 35 (1993) 48-64.

⁴Zane Hodges, *The Epistle of James* (Irrving: GES, 1994) 77.

⁵Cited in William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 84; Kent Hughes, *James* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1941) 126; and MacArthur, 146-147.

⁶A. T. Robertson, *Studies in the Epistle of James* (Nashville: Broadman, n.d.) 105.

⁷Phil Newton, "Biblical Preaching," *Reformation and Revival* 9 (Winter 2000) 19.

⁸George Zemek, "Paul's Personal Paradigm for Preaching," *New Testament Essays*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1990) 37-38.

⁹John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 37-38.

¹⁰Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 150.

¹¹Hughes, 129.

¹²Watson, 55.

¹³Ibid., 56.

¹⁴Quoted by Merritt in his sermon; cf. n. 2.

¹⁵Moo, 152.

¹⁶Ralph Martin, *James* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1988) 112.

¹⁷Merritt.

¹⁸Moo, 155.

¹⁹John Calvin, *Commentaries On The Catholic Epistles*, Vol. 22, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, rpt. 1996) 320.

²⁰Moo, 159.

²¹MacArthur, 157.

²²Watson, 61.

²³Moo, 160.

²⁴Source unknown.

²⁵D. Edmond Hiebert, "The Unifying Theme of the Epistle of James," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (July–Sept 1978) 227.

²⁶Hughes, 142.

²⁷John Trent, "Longer, Daddy... Longer," in *Stories for the Heart*, comp. Alice Gray (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996) 157-158.

²⁸W. A. Criswell, *Expository Sermons in the Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 72.