

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

Taming the Tongue James 3:1-12 Part Two

As we have been examining the Epistle of James, we have discovered a series of tests. The first test that we examined was the “Response to Trials test” in **James 1:2-18**. The second test that we examined was the “Response to the Word test” in **James 1:19-27**. The third test that we have examined was the “Impartiality test” in **James 2:1-13**. The fourth test that we examined was the “Works test” in **James 2:14-24**. Each of these tests are designed to help us discern whether or not we possess living faith. Each of these tests are designed to help us to discern whether we are a Christian or not a Christian. We are now considering the fifth test which we are calling the “Speech test” in **James 3:1-12**.

Let us read this passage of Scripture. **“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment. (2) For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. (3) Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well. (4) Behold, 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. (5) So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! (6) And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among your members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. (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. (8) But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. (9) With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we 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. (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? Neither can salt water produce fresh.”**

The tongue is like a mirror. It reveals who we are. In **Matt.12:34** Jesus said that **“...the mouth speaks out of that which fills the what? The heart!** How can we know whether we are saved or not saved? We can know by what we speak and how we speak. The saved will speak one way and the unsaved will speak in a different way. And because of this we can look at the way we speak to see whether we are a Christian or not a Christian.

If you have been a Christian for any length of time at all and you find yourself continuing to curse, yell, scream, defame, defile, or belittle people you cannot take those sinful expressions of speech lightly. If you have been a Christian for any length of time at all and you fail to involve yourself in sharing the Gospel, speaking the truth of God’s Word in love, seeking to minister grace to the hearer as we read in **Eph. 4:29**, **then you have a serious problem**. Why? Because the very assurance that you are a Christian is at stake. If we believe that this is true, then we need to purpose ourselves to control our tongue. We need as believers to control the way we speak.

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James 3:1-12 gives us 5 different reasons why we need to tame the tongue. James gives us five different reasons why we need to work hard at controlling the way we speak.

The tongue's potential to bring judgment **Matt. 12:36** says, **“And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment.”** We may no longer be able to hear the sounds of the words spoken this week that may have been rashly or carelessly spoken, but they will not be forgotten. We will have to answer to God for every one of them. This includes every one of us. It even includes Bible teachers who have failed to weigh their words carefully. Look at **James 3:1**, **“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.”** A teacher of God's Word certainly has a great responsibility which offers them tremendous opportunities to do good but there is also significant risk.

Why should we seek to control our tongue? Because of the tongue's potential to bring us into judgment, no matter who we are and regardless of our function in the body of Christ. What is the second reason why we should strive to tame our tongue? What is the second reason that James gives us for controlling our tongue?

The Tongue's Potential to Effect the Course of Our Lives

Let us read **James 3:2-4**, **“(2) For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. (3) Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well. (4) Behold, 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.”**

What do you want for your life? Do you want to follow Christ and be His disciple? Do you want to live a life pleasing to the Lord? Do you want to enter into all the blessings that come to those who in fact follow Him? If this is what you want then let us strive to control our tongue. Because, if we can do this we will not only effect the way we communicate but we can dramatically impact the course of our lives as well.

To help us understand the truth of what I have just said let us look at **v. 2** beginning with the second phrase, **(2) “If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.”** The word “stumble” (PTAIO) as in James 2:10, denotes a moral lapse. In its literal sense the term conveys the picture of the foot striking against some obstacle so as to cause the individual to trip or stumble; metaphorically it denotes the fact of a failure in duty, a mistake that is blameworthy, or a sin. The present tense indicates that James has a repetitive stumbling in mind. He has a reoccurring speech problem in mind.

As we consider the question of what might constitute a moral lapse in respect to our speech, we must appreciate the fact that this would include not only sins of commission but also sins of omission. We can fall short of God's holy standard by saying things we shouldn't or not saying things that we should.

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Paraphrasing this first phrase we could read it this way, **“If anyone, whoever that might be, does not commit sin with their mouth either in sins of commission or omission ... he is a perfect man....”**

“Perfect” (TELEIOS) has two possible meanings. One carries the idea of absolute perfection, of being without any flaw or error. If that is James’s meaning here, he is obviously speaking hypothetically, since no human being but Jesus would qualify for that sort of perfect speech. But the word can also mean complete or mature. If that is the sense intended here, the idea is that a person who **“does not stumble in what he says”** gives evidence of a purified and mature heart, which is the source of the righteous speech which characterizes his life.

It seems likely that this latter meaning is specifically what James has in mind here in **v. 2**. We could never be **“perfect”** in the sense that Jesus is perfect, in speech or in any other way, but we can, in the Holy Spirit’s power, have a spiritually mature and sanctified heart that keeps us from stumbling with our tongue as a way of life. This is not only supported by a similar use of the word in **James 1:4**, but by the statement later in the passage that says in **v. 10** **“these things ought not to be this way.”** which clearly gives us the impression that stumbling in the ways that James is speaking of in this passage can actually be avoided. Therefore, James is using the word **“perfection”** (TELEIOS) not to describe a morally flawless man but rather a man with a purified and mature heart. (James 1:4; 3:10).

An individual with a purified or mature heart or in other words a perfect man would not be characterized by opening mouth and inserting foot. An individual with a purified or mature heart, or in other words a perfect man, would not be characterized by such things as cursing, yelling, screaming, defaming, nagging, belittling, defiling speech. Rather an individual with a purified or mature heart should be using his tongue to serve the Lord and to serve others.

You may be here this weekend and may try to represent yourself as mature. Perhaps you may think you are mature because you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend. Perhaps you think you are mature because you drive a car, or because you are married and are carrying out the responsibilities of maintaining a household. Perhaps you think you are mature because you are able to hold down a job. Perhaps you think you are mature because you have a job. I don’t know what basis you might be using to evaluate the question of your maturity. But I do know what James tells us. Now let us put this all together, **If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he does not sin with his tongue either in sins of omission or commission and this is what characterizes his life. He is the perfect man. He is a mature man.**

How are you doing? If you are bringing your speech into line with the teachings of God’s word, eliminating those things which it condemns and embracing those things which it commands and this is what is characterizing your life, you are, according to the definition that James gives in this passage, a “mature man.”

But someone here might say, “All of this might be interesting, but how does controlling my tongue have the potential to effect the course of my life?”

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Look at the rest of the verse “**able to bridle the whole body as well.**” This is an amazing statement. In this context, “body” seems to refer to the person in general, to his whole being. In other words, if we can control our tongues we can control the entire course of our lives.”

James uses two analogies to show the power of the tongue to control the course of our lives.

The Bridle: v. 3, “Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well.” This illustration is particularly appropriate, because the bit lies on top of a horse’s tongue, and when attached to the bridle and reins, it is possible for the rider using that bit to easily make the horse obey. Controlling the horses’ mouth control his head, which, in turn, directs his entire body.

The horse is an awesomely powerful animal. It can carry 550 pounds (which is as much as a puffing Olympic heavyweight lifter can hoist overhead). Set it on a horse’s back, and it will barely snort as it stands breathing easily under the burden. The same horse, unburdened, can sprint a quarter-mile in about twenty-five seconds. A horse is half a ton of raw power! Yet, place a bridle and bit in its mouth and a 100 pound woman who knows what she is doing on its back and the animal can literally be made to dance.

The rudder: v.4 “Behold, 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.” The largest “ships” of that day were small compared to the gigantic ocean liners and warships of modern times. But the ship in which Paul traveled on his voyage to Rome had a total of 276 persons on board, including the crew, soldiers, and prisoners according to **Acts 22:37** indicating it was a fairly large vessel. In any case, James’s point is that, compared to its overall size, a ship’s rudder is very small, yet can easily steer the vessel “**wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.**”

Where do you want your life to go? What do you want your life to accomplish? Know this! That if you can control your tongue you can bring every other part of your life to bear upon whatever goal you decide to pursue. Why? Because “**If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.**” This opens up for you doors of incredible opportunity. But don’t forget, based on the teaching of vv. 2-4, controlling the tongue or taming the tongue is the key. Because not only is your tongue the most difficult member of your body to control. It is also the most powerful member of your body.

The influence of the tongue on your life can be great. Look at v. 5 “**Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things...**” This mere “two ounce slab of of mucous membrane,” as Charles Swindoll has called it, can legitimately boast of its disproportionate power to determine human destiny. The tongues of Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill bear eloquent testimony to the dark and bright sides of the tongue’s power. The German leader on one side of the channel harangued a vast multitude with his hypnotic cadences. On the other side, the prime minister’s brilliant, measured utterances pulled a faltering nation together for its “finest hour.” But we need not look to the drama of nations to see the truth of James words. Our own lives are evidence enough.

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So once again let me ask you the question, where do you want to go in your life? What do you want to accomplish in your life?

Let us say that your first answer to that question might be, “I want to have a happy marriage.” If you want to have a happy marriage, you need to get your tongue under control. If you get your tongue under control, this means that you will be able to bring all other areas of your life that effects your marriage under control. Why? v. 3 **“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.”**

What I am sharing with you is the truth. Now I would like to give you a word of caution. If you heard and understood what I have shared and you have believed what I have shared, you might immediately set out to control your tongue so that you might be better able to direct the course of your life in respect to whatever area you are concerned whether that is in your marriage, or in your family, or at your workplace. But no matter how you try, you will not succeed in controlling your tongue if you do this in your own strength.

We cannot change the way we speak until the Lord Himself changes us. Therefore before we can bring our tongue under control in any area we must give our lives up to the Lord in all areas. Jesus said in **John 15:4-5**, **“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in me. (5) I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing.”**

Now let me ask you a question, If we are to give our lives up to the Lord in all areas, what area would you suspect would be our greatest area of challenge in respect to what God has called us to do? I believe it will be the tongue.

We are called to come before Him in praise and thanksgiving. **Ps. 95:1**, **“O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. (2) Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; let us shout joyfully to Him with Psalms.”** **Ps. 100:1-4** **“Shout joyfully to the Lord all the earth (2) Serve the Lord with gladness; come before Him with joyful singing. (3) Know that the Lord Himself is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. (4) Enter His gates with thanksgiving, and His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him; bless His name.”** Someone might say, “This is Old Testament teaching.” Yes, it is. But it is also New Testament teaching. Listen to **Eph. 5:18-19** **“Be not drunk with wine wherein is excess but be filled with the Spirit (19) Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.”** If we are able to tame our tongue wouldn't it be very difficult for us to choose to sin in our private moments?

We are called to share our testimony with the righteous. **Ps. 22:22**, **“I will tell of thy name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise thee.”** The Lord wants us, in our fellowship with one another, to not focus on what we are doing but rather what the Lord has done, is doing and will do in and through our lives. Someone might say, but this is Old Testament teaching. Yes, it is. But it is also New Testament teaching.

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Listen again to **Eph. 5:18-19** “**Be not drunk with wine wherein is excess but be filled with the Spirit (19) speaking to who? one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs...** If we are able to tame our tongue in this way, wouldn't it be difficult for us to choose to sin in respect to your relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ?

But someone might say, “But what about the world? How does taming or controlling our tongue effect our relationship with the unsaved?”

We are called to reveal the Lord to the nations. **Ps. 57:9-11**, “**(9) I will give thanks to thee, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to thee among the nations. (10) For thy loving kindness is great to the heavens, and thy truth to the clouds. (11) Be exalted above the heavens, O God; Let thy glory be above all the earth.**” It is the Lord's will for us to sing His praises among the nations. There certainly is no better way for us to do this than to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is to be our occupation, at our workplace, in your neighborhoods, or wherever we go. If we are able to tame our tongue in this way, wouldn't it be difficult for us to choose to sin in respect to our relationship with the people in the world?

CONCLUSION

Why should we seek to tame our tongue? Because of the tongue's potential to bring judgment. Because of the tongue's potential to effect the entire course of our lives.

Let us by God's grace bridle our tongue. First and foremost to serve the Lord. Using our tongue as an instrument to exalt the Lord when we are alone, when we are with the church, or when we are in the world. Secondly let us use our tongue to serve others.

If we by God's grace, are successful, the course of our life will be greatly impacted.

Never doubt the power of the tongue and do not underestimate it. It truly can boast great things.