

Taming the Terrible Tongue

James 3:1-12

You might have noticed that I'm wearing boots today. These aren't just any boots. They are steel-toed boots. There are some Sunday mornings the text requires you to step on some toes, and many times the first toes the Scripture passage steps on are my own. This Sunday is one of those sermons. My toes have been getting smashed all over the place during the last week as I've studied and prayed and prepared for this message.

This is because James is talking about something we all struggle with. It's a problem we all have. He says that none of us have this licked, because if we did, we would indeed be perfect people. What he's talking about is our tongue, our inability to control our speech, and to consistently use our words in a way that brings glory to God and builds others up.

James comes right out of the gate in chapter 3 stepping on my toes, "*Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.*" (Look up at the ceiling like you're expecting fire to fall from heaven, and then step over.

Apparently, there were some in this early community of Christians that were seeking the status of being a teacher. In Jewish communities, a teacher, or a rabbi, as they were known, was a position of influence and respect. I'm sure for these Jewish Christians that James was writing to, a lot of this admiration for teachers carried over into their new Christian lives. Teachers became a significant role in the early church, and some were seeking that status without the character and integrity to go along with it.

That's what makes it so risky to be a teacher. Teachers, because their ministry involves speech, the hardest of all parts of the body to control, expose themselves to a greater danger of judgment. Since we're flapping our gums all the time means we can stumble into sin much more easily. Do you really think I can stand up here and talk for 30 minutes straight and not say something I shouldn't. Surely, I'll make an error in judgment. I'll say something that isn't exactly correct. I could have worded that better. I could have been more understanding and less judgmental. I should have been more forthright. Maybe something should have been stated a bit more humbly. And I am sure there's at least a couple of things I shouldn't have said at all.

Now you might just be tempted to check out at this point and think you can take a nap for the next 25 minutes. “Oh, he’s talking about teachers. This doesn’t really apply to me.” Yes, he is saying we should be very cautious before thinking, “Yeah, I could be a preacher. I can teach that class. I can lead that group.” But he says this, because controlling our tongue is a problem every single one of us has. Look at verse 2 again. “*If **anyone** is never at fault in what he says.*” If **ANYONE**. James is talking to all of us here.

James then goes on to tell us why we have so much trouble with our tongue.

I. It is Very Hard to Control.

The first thing James tells us is that the tongue is very hard to control. Look at verse 2, “*We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.*” At first, that sounds like a pretty sweet deal doesn’t it— If you can accomplish this one thing in your life, you will be a perfect person. If you can control just this one aspect of your life, you can control everything. But then we stop and think about it for a moment and we quickly realize— none of us are perfect. None of us can control our speech all the time. We all suffer from foot in mouth disease and we have a pretty healthy diet of shoe leather. James was simply making his point in a poetic way— none of us can control our tongues.

All of us make mistakes. We all have areas of weakness, things we struggle with. We have different areas of sin that we spend years, sometimes a lifetime battling. Now, it’s different things for different people. One person really struggles with anger. Another is ensnared by materialism. Others battle one sort of addiction or another. But James is saying there is one area we all struggle with. All of us fail in controlling our tongue. We all sin with our words.

No matter how hard we try we slip up and let some choice words fly. We lash out in anger. We hurl an insult like a finely sharpened spear. We fish for some cheap laughs with a coarse joke. We snap at our kids using our words like a whip. We toss out a snide remark like a hand grenade timed to go off at just the right moment in the school hallway. We get into an argument with our spouse and instead of using our words like surgical thread to heal, we use them like barbed wire, spiked with bitterness and sarcasm to rip and tear.

James then furthers his point using an illustration from nature down in verse 7 and the first half of verse 8. “*All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been*

tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue.” He could make this point even more emphatically today. We think we are great because of scientific accomplishments. We can probe the secrets of genomes of creatures great and small. We can splice genes and genetically modify plants with animal DNA. We can clone embryos. We can train lions and elephants to perform in circuses, and whales and dolphins to spin through the air for our amusement and amazement, but we can’t control what we say.

II. It Has the Potential to do Great Harm

I’m going to tell you a little secret about myself. I’ve got some muscles in my nose that I can’t control sometimes. After a long day, or when I’ve been dealing with a lot of stress, my nostrils will suddenly start flaring ever so slightly. That’s not a good thing when your nose is already as big as mine. It’s kind of annoying that I can’t keep my nose from doing that. I can’t control it. But it’s not that big of a deal. It doesn’t hurt anything. It doesn’t keep from doing anything. It doesn’t hurt anyone else either. In fact, they probably can’t even tell.

Not so with our tongue. If the tongue was just a harmless muscle in our nose, our inability to control it wouldn’t be a big deal. However, James tells us that our tongue has the potential to do great harm, and that makes it dangerous indeed. Listen to verses 3-5:

³ When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵ Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

James isn’t just pulling random examples out of a hat here. He’s using some of the same illustrations used by well-known writers in the 1st Century in both Jewish and Greek literature. He’s echoing guys like Plato, Plutarch, and Sophocles to make a very Christian point about our speech. Our words can hurt and they can hurt deeply.

We’ve all heard the old adage “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Everyone who’s ever been hurt by words knows what a lie that is. Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can hurt forever. The greatest weapon in the human arsenal isn’t smart bombs, cruise missiles, or nuclear weapons. It is our words.

Ask the wife whose husband continually yells and threatens here. Ask the husband who is constantly belittled and humiliated by his wife. Ask the child who’s internalized self-hatred that grew

out of repeated criticisms from a parent. Ask the student who is butt of every joke in the hallway. Ask the employee whose every idea is cut down by his coworker. Ask teen who was driven to suicide by the words posted on Facebook. Words destroy marriages, divide churches, ruin friendships, polarize nations, and start wars.

Nothing has changed in the nearly 2,000 years since James wrote this letter. We still lie, curse, insult, demean, and slander. Oh, we have nicer terms for it. We spin, flatter, obfuscate, tease, and joke, but nothing has changed. “With our words we name the world and each other, and in some sense our naming creates a genuine reality. Once our speech and narratives take hold, they have a tremendous power for good or evil. They can exclude or embrace, heal or humiliate, lift up or tear down.”ⁱ

III. **It is Easily Influenced by Evil**

Just why are our tongues so terrible? James tells us it is because they are so easily influenced by evil. Look at verse 6, “*The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*”

Think of how many sins are directly related to our speech. I just made a quick list of tongue-related sins in scripture—Beguilement, deceit, lying, false witness, gossip, slander, boasting, flattery, exaggeration, murmuring, contentiousness, profanity, and sensuous speech. And think of how many other sins can be so easily expressed through our the things we say—anger, bitterness, envy, pride, and lust are all so readily revealed through our words.

The reason for this is that words are a direct expression of our hearts, the very place where our sin resides. Jesus tells us that “*out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.*” Our words directly connect to the sin that is in our hearts. Yes, we are forgiven, but until our sinful natures are fully done away with, our words will continue to betray what’s in our hearts. We can come to church and we can put up a spiritual façade. We can paint a happy face, and say all the churchy stuff.

We can put up all our defenses and engage all our filters, but words will get through every time. I don’t care how good your filter is. You will slip, because there is a direct connection between your mouth and your heart. Okay, nerd alert! I’m going to use a Star Wars illustration. But in the original Star Wars when they are looking at the plans for the Death Star this massive moon-sized battle station that can destroy entire planets, they are looking for a way to take it out. We’ll it turns out some

engineer designed this space station with an open exhaust port that leads directly to the power core. That's what our mouth is. It is an exhaust port that leads directly to our heart.

You know that moment where someone says something and as soon as the words are out of their mouth, they know they shouldn't have said it? They immediately apologize, "I'm sorry. I don't know where that came from." That's not true. We know exactly where it came from.

The tongue is easily influenced by evil and this works contrary to godliness. James continues in verses 9 and 10.

⁹ *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness.* ¹⁰ *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.*

There's a reason that the water line and the sewer line in your house aren't the same line. Yet that's the very problem we have with our mouth. We come to church and sing, "Holy Spirit, come and fill this place. Bring us healing with your warm embrace." Then we can turn right around and cut down on brother or sister in Christ. We will read God's word in Sunday School class, and then spew venom on social media. And this is a condition we are far too tolerant of. We make excuses. That's just how I am. I'm just wired that way. We blame others. Well, they had it coming.

James says this can't continue. We can't keep talking out of both sides of our mouth. Verses 11 and 12 ask pointedly, "*Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*"

The obvious and implied answer is, "No, they can't." Now James will provide some solutions throughout the rest of the letter. He talks about wisdom from above. He deals with what causes fights and quarrels among us. He urges us to submit to God, and how we can stop slandering one another. In chapter 5 he will talk about seeking the Lord's will and developing patience. But for the most part, our passage this morning is simply a diagnosis, and I don't want this to be a sermon where we only diagnose the problem and say, "This is bad," but we don't provide any solutions.

The most practical solutions for taming the terrible tongue in all of the Bible come from that ancient collection of wise sayings, known as Proverbs. And so I want to leave you with some principles from Proverbs to help in taming your tongue. Since controlling our tongue is something we all struggle with in some way, I want to challenge you to pick one or two of these things as area to focus on this week.

Pray about this. Ask God to help you in this area. Ask for the Holy Spirit to reveal to you when your tongue is getting out of control and to remind you to follow these principles from Proverbs.

1. **Listen first, talk later** James himself has already mentioned this one when he wrote in chapter 1 that we, “should be quick to listen” and “slow to speak.” Prov. 18:13 says, *“To answer before listening-- that is folly and shame.”* We are so quick to spout off. We want to get our word in. We talk first, and listening is optional. Proverbs points to a better way. Listen first, then talk. Proverbs warns us not be hasty in our words but to seek understanding.
2. **Listen More, Talk Less** – As I said back in chapter 1, God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason. He expects us to listen more than talk. Many times we’re not even listening when the other person is talking, we’re just formulating our next argument. Prov. 18:2 says, *“A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.”* The wise approach says to seek to understand before declaring what you think and feel.
3. **Use Words that are Quiet** – Some of us think the louder we are the more we will be heard. The more volume the more believability. Not true. Prov. 19:8 says, *“The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.”* Prov. 15:1 says, *“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”* All our loud words do is escalate the situation.
4. **Use Words that are Gentle** - Some of us have a gift of saying things in the worst way possible. If there are three ways we could say something, we say it in the way to cause the most hurt. Let me tell you that is not a spiritual gift. We need to learn to find the most gentle, loving way to speak the truth. Speak the truth in a way that brings healing and not hurt. Prov. 15:4 says, *“A gentle tongue is a tree of life; but perverseness therein is a breaking of the spirit.”*
5. **Use Words that are Carefully Chosen** – Others of us are shoot from the hip kind of people. There isn’t a thought that crosses our minds that doesn’t also cross our lips. We just spout whatever we’re thinking without any sort of filter. We need to pick our words carefully. Years ago a carpenter told me one of the most basic rules. “The right tool for the right job.” When you use the wrong tool for the wrong job, it only hurts people and breaks things and makes a mess. Each word you use is a tool. Make sure it’s the right tool. Prov. 12:18 says, *“Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”*

6. **Use Words that are true** – Prov. 12:19 declared, *“Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.”* Not only do our words need to be quiet and gentle, but they also need to be truthful. Not exaggeration, not spin, not a white lie, not withholding vital information, but words that are true.
7. **Use Words that are Pure** – We live in a coarse culture that loves to wallow in the filthy and the obscene. There need to be a marked contrast between the way a Godly person talks and the way the rest of the world talks. Prov. 4:24 urges, *“Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips.”* Prov. 10:32 likewise says, *“The lips of the righteous know what is fitting, but the mouth of the wicked only what is perverse.”*
8. **Some things are better left unsaid** Many times the best words you use are the ones you never speak. Some things we should just keep to ourselves. Silence is a virtue. Prov. 17:27-28 says, *“Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding”* 18:2, *“A fool takes no pleasure in understanding but only in expressing his opinion”* 10:19, *“When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.”* 17:28, *“Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.”* The bottom line is some of us just need to shut up sometimes. You say too much to too many people, that you’ve got no business talking to them about.

ⁱ Clendenin, Daniel B. *Toxic Talk and the Virtue of Silence*. Journey with Jesus Retrieved from <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20120910JJ.shtml> on Sept. 10, 2015