

James: sermon #6
The Tongue's Three Powers
(James 3:1-12)

Introduction

In this series in James we've been learning about the **characteristics of the spiritually mature—those who participate actively in Jesus' love and life**. In chapter 1, we learned that **they are patient in trouble**. In chapter 2, **that they practice (live) God's word**. Now in chapter 3, we learn that **they exercise control of their tongues**.

For James, **the loving use of our words is a primary mark of spiritual maturity**. Already he warned, be “**quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry**” (James 1:19) and noted that when we fail to control our tongue we fail to practice true religion, which is to love others (James 1:26). In chapter 2, he warned that what we say is evaluated (**judged**) by God (James 2:12). Clearly, this is a serious matter—if Jesus is to be experienced and expressed through us, our tongues **must** be brought under his control.

In order to impress on us the importance of **controlled speech** and the **great consequences of our words**, in **chapter 3** James gives us six pictures of the tongue: the **bit**, the **rudder**, **fire**, a **poisonous animal**, a **fountain**, and a **tree**. Putting these into three classifications, we observe three powers of the tongue: **to direct, to destroy and to delight**.

1. The power to *direct* (bit & rudder) (James 3:1–4)

1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 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. 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.

Apparently, lots of people in the churches to which James wrote wanted to teach and be spiritual leaders, for James had to warn them: “**Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers**” (James 3:1). Perhaps they were impressed with the authority and prestige of the office, and forgot about the tremendous **responsibility and accountability!** Those who teach God's word are **held to a higher standard** because their influence is so great. They must use their tongue to **share** God's truth, yet it's easy to **teach and live what is contrary** to that. **Think of the damage done by teachers and leaders who are unprepared, unskilled, unknowledgeable or hypocritical.**

But teachers are **not the only ones** who have problems with their tongues: “***We all stumble in many ways***” (James 3:2). Indeed, words **lead** to actions, and the **capacity to control** the tongue is the **capacity to bring the whole body under Christ’s control**. That **control** is the **mark** of a mature (**perfect**) person (James 3:2b).

James uses two analogies to make his point: a horse’s bit and a ship’s rudder. Both are **small**, yet both exercise great power, just like the tongue. A **small** bit enables the rider to control a great horse, and a **small** rudder enables the pilot to steer a huge ship. Though the tongue is a **small** member in the body, **it has great power to accomplish mighty things**.

Note: the bit and rudder are designed to overcome **contrary forces**. The bit **overcomes** the wild nature of the horse, and the rudder **fights** the winds and currents that would drive the ship off course. The human tongue also must overcome contrary forces. *We have a fleshly nature that wants to control us and lead us into sin.* And circumstances all around us tend to make us *say things we ought not say*. These contrary forces of sin on the **inside** and pressures on the **outside** seek to allow of our tongue to run wild or get us off course. **But how do we resist?** The bit is controlled by an **expert** horseman; and the rudder by an **experienced** pilot. And **only a strong and experienced** hand is able to control the tongue. **That person is none other than the God-man Jesus**. And when we give control of our tongues **over to him**, we need not fear saying the wrong things—or even saying the right things in a wrong way. It is true: “***The tongue has the power of life and death,***” (Prov. 18:21) and so we need to call out to our Lord like David did: “***Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips. Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil***” (Psa. 141:3–4a). We are not able to perfectly control our tongues. **But Jesus is perfect for us and in us**. The issue here is the **direction of our heart**, for, “***Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks***” (Matt. 12:34). When **Jesus is Lord of our heart**, he is also **Lord of our tongue and our lips**. When we **actively embrace** Jesus’ heart and his nature, his words of love and wisdom **will flow** from our lips.

Note: also that the bit and rudder have the power to **direct**, which means **they affect not only our lives but the lives of others**. A runaway horse or a shipwreck **can bring injury or death**. Just so, the words we speak affect our live and the lives of others. For example, even a simple yes or no from the lips of a parent can greatly affect the direction of a child’s life. **So never underestimate the guidance you give by the words you speak or do not speak**. Yes, the tongue is like a bit or a rudder: it has the power to direct. How important it is that our tongues **direct people in the right way---the way of God’s royal law of love that brings true and loving relationships into being**. It’s all about **the life and nature of Jesus in us**.

2. The power to *destroy* (fire & animal) (James 3:5–8)

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. 6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, 8 but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

a. Runaway fire (James 3:5-6)

A runaway fire, which can begin with only a small spark, can cause massive destruction. So it is with words: **“Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down. As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife”** (Prov. 26:20–21). Like fire, the tongue can **“heat things up.”** David wrote: **“I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence... My heart grew hot within me, and as I meditated, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue”** (Psa. 39:1, 3). David had a temper, and he sought God’s help to control it. No wonder his son Solomon wrote, **“He who restrains his word has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding”** (Prov. 17:27, NASB).

Fire spreads, **and the more fuel you give it**, the faster and farther it goes. The person with an **uncontrolled tongue “sets the whole course of his life on fire,”** opening themselves up to a world of evil (James 3:6). And once ignited, the flames rapidly spread from one part of their life to the next. We may confess our sins of misstatement, but the fire can keep spreading. And as it spreads, it destroys. **Misspoken words can destroy lives, break hearts and ruin reputations.** This is often seen within the church. How important it is in all aspects of life to let our speech **“be always full of grace, seasoned with salt”** (Col. 4:6). **How important to have our words reflect love, joy and peace.**

b. Dangerous animal (James 3:7-8)

The uncontrolled tongue is also like a **dangerous animal. It is restless and unruly and seeks its prey to pounce and kill.** Some animals are **poisonous**, and some tongues spread **poison**. The deceptive thing about poison is that it works **secretly and slowly, and then kills.** How many times has some **malicious person** injected poison into the conversation, **hoping it would spread and finally get to the person he or she wanted to hurt?**

In an ironic twist, James, who notes that humans can control wild animals and runaway fires, are unable to tame the tongue (James 3:8). However, **God is able.** Our tongues need not be **“set on fire by [cosmic forces of] hell”** (James 3:6). As at Pentecost, **they may be set on fire by the Spirit!** And a Spirit-controlled tongue becomes a mighty tool for good. **The key is sharing Jesus’ heart,** for **“out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh”** (Matt. 12:34, KJV). When our hearts are

inclined to hatred, **Satan lights an evil fire**. But when our hearts are inclined to Jesus and his love, **the Spirit lights a holy fire**. May our tongues burn for Jesus!

3. The power to *delight* (fountain & tree) (James 3:9–12)

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

a. Freshwater spring (James 3:11)

Water refreshes, providing a key ingredient for life. ***"The words of a man's mouth are deep waters, but the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook"*** (Prov. 18:4). ***"The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked"*** (Prov. 10:11). These verses parallel what James has written and underscore the truth that our words can be a true delight to others, bringing healing and refreshment. ***"Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing"*** (Prov. 12:18).

Water also cleanses. The basin (laver) in the Old Testament tabernacle and temple, provided water for the cleansing of the priests' hands and feet. God's word is ***spiritual water*** that cleanses (John 15:3; Eph. 5:26–27). Our words can bear the blessing of God's word—***helping to bring cleansing to others—like the river in Ezekiel 47, they can bring life to everything they touch.***

b. Fruit-bearing tree (James 3:12)

Trees are vitally important: they **help hold down the soil**; they **provide beauty and shade**; and they **bear fruit**. Our words can **encourage** a weary traveler, and **feed** a hungry soul. ***"The lips of the righteous nourish many, but fools die for lack of judgment"*** (Prov. 10:21). Jesus said, ***"The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life"*** (John 6:63b). As we share his word with others, we **feed** them and **encourage** them along the way.

The most important thing about a tree is the root system. If the roots do not go down deep, **the tree will not grow in a healthy manner**. If we are rooted in the things of the Lord, then our words will be the fruit of our fellowship with Him. We will be like that ***"blessed man"*** in Psalm 1 and ***produce fruit in due season***. **One reason our Lord was able to say the right words at the right time was because he was in constant communion with his Father: *"The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught"*** (Isa. 50:4). ***"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed"*** (Mark 1:35).

Our tongues will be a source of delight as we commune with our Lord. Let us get our “**spiritual roots**” deep into his word—**filling our minds and hearts with his love and truth**. But there is a warning here: a spring cannot give forth two kinds of water, and a tree cannot bear two different kinds of fruit. We expect the spring to flow with sweet water at all times, and we expect the fig tree to bear figs and the olive tree to bear olives. *Nature reproduces after its kind* (see **Matthew 7:16-17**).

Let’s **examine** ourselves and take seriously the **inconsistencies** of our own tongue. The tongue that **blesses** the Father, and then turns around and **curses** people made in God’s image, is in **need of spiritual healing**. How **easy** it is to sing the hymns of praise during worship, then after church get into the family car and **argue and fight or gossip** about others all the way home!

The problem, of course, is not the tongue; **it’s the heart**. It’s easy to have “**bitter envy and selfish ambition**” in our hearts (**James 3:14**) because that is the nature of the flesh which is earthly. But God tells us in Proverbs, “**Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life**” (**Prov. 4:23**). As we **share the heart of Jesus and share in his very nature**—a **heart and nature overflowing with God’s word and God’s love**, we will be a delight to others like refreshing springs and fruitful trees.

Conclusion

The smallest but largest troublemaker of all is the tongue. But it does not have to be that way! **God can use our tongues to direct others into the way of life—the way that brings healing of relationships and loving fellowship. Give God your tongue and your heart each day and ask him to use you to be a blessing to others.**

Sermon Series is provided by Ted Johnston via the Senior Pastor Team of Tom and Alberta Ecker to assist ... Bible studies in series covering a book of the Bible.

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