

Ministry of Grace Church

James 3:1-12 - Speaker Notes

Introduction

Within the church, being a teacher carries with it a great responsibility and a greater judgment (good or bad). One sign of a good teacher, or of any person serving in the church for that matter, is the words he or she uses. The words we speak are a direct indication of our maturity in Christ.

In order to show us how important, and how difficult, it is to control our tongue, James gives us five real world examples of what the tongue is like (a horse that is controlled by a small bridle; a large ship controlled by a small rudder; a small fire which can quickly spread to a flaming inferno; a wild, untamable creature; and a spring of water which brings forth both fresh and salty water). With these five examples James shows how powerful and unruly the tongue can be.

A small thing like a horse's bridle wields great influence over the entire body of the horse. Likewise, our tongue, though a small member of our body, has great power both for good and for evil. Like the rudder of a ship, the tongue may be small, but it can exert great influence either good or bad and it can get us into big trouble if we don't control it. Although men have managed to tame every kind of wild animal, no man can completely tame the tongue.

Finally, James teaches us that when we curse a fellow member of the human race it is offensive to the God who created us. He makes it very clear that it is not right that the same mouth should be used for the noble act of praising God and also the vile act of cursing another human being. Not only is it not right, it's also unnatural.

James 3:1-2

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.

James has talked to us about the fact that works are the evidence of faith. Now he's going to talk not just about the works, but the words of those who serve within the church. Here, he is cautioning church members not to all desire the position of teacher. You may recall that in [1John 2:16](#) the apostle John talks about the three characteristics of the world system: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. This third one, the pride of life, is that desire within each of us to attain greatness and fame. Unfortunately, because the church is made up of sinful humans, this pride of life occasionally shows its ugly face within the church as well. Within the body of Christ each one of us has a function to perform. In 1 Corinthians chapter 12 the apostle Paul says that we are one body with many members, each one with a specific purpose. We can't all be eyes, we can't all be feet, and we can't all be teachers.

Teaching is only mentioned in this first verse of this chapter. Yet, it is with our words that we teach, whether spoken or written. Words properly used can be a powerful force in building up the body of Christ, but they can also be the cause of great pain and contention within the body if used carelessly.

Even though teaching is a good and necessary responsibility within the church, James warns that those who hold the position of teacher are responsible for the content of their teaching and will receive a harsher

judgment if they do not carry it out in a manner worthy of our Lord. A good teacher can lead people to a closer, more rewarding walk with God. But a poor or careless teacher can actually lead children of God away from that close personal fellowship that He desires with each of us.

Within the church, teachers are responsible for the content of their teaching. However, they are responsible even more so than others for their actions. If good works are evidence of our salvation, then practicing what they teach is an indication of their calling from God for those who wear the mantle of teacher.

James starts out his discussion on controlling the tongue with a reminder that we are all sinners and that we “stumble” many times. This is in complete agreement with what the Apostle Paul says:

As it is written: "there is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. (Romans 3:10,11)

None of us is perfect. One of the ways we stumble in our Christian walk is with the words we use. In fact, it is often not so much the words, but the attitude behind the words we use. James tells us that if we don't trip-up with our words, it is a sign that we are a mature Christian and are able to control our entire body.

James 3:3-6

Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.

In the Greek text this sentence begins, “Look at the horses ...,” although in some texts it begins, “But if the horses...” In either case, it puts “horses” in the emphatic position, not “bits.” James is using horses as an example of something large which is controlled by something small.

Being the practical teacher that he is, James gives us real-world examples of what he is talking about. This is the first of two illustrations of how something large is easily controlled by something small. He shows us that we can control a horse, an animal much bigger than we are, simply by putting a bridle in its mouth. That little bridle is used to turn the entire body. Now that's power!

In today's modern, automobile-oriented society we don't have encounters with horses very often. I recall an experience several years back when we were in a field with a number of horses. The owners, who were with us, told us not to be concerned because the horses were very gentle. Unfortunately, the horses got spooked by our dog, turned away from us, and began kicking in our direction. All we could do was run. These animals were significantly larger and stronger than we were. They behaved very aggressively toward us and we had no control over them. And yet, when fitted with a bridle, these same large animals became gentle and easily controlled.

When it comes to the tongue, even King David recognized the necessity of a bridle (or muzzle):

I said, "I will guard my ways, Lest I sin with my tongue; I will restrain my mouth with a muzzle, While the wicked are before me." (Psalms 39:1)

In the previous verses James introduced the concept of being able to control our entire body if we can control our tongue. His point here is that controlling the entire body is easy if we control our tongue, just as controlling a large horse is easy if we have control of the bridle.

James now provides us with a second example of small things which exert great control over much larger things. In this case he is pointing out that seagoing vessels which are driven by powerful winds are effectively steered by a little rudder.

Even today, large ocean-going vessels are steered with a rudder which is only a tiny fraction of the size of the overall ship. For instance, the rudder of the cruise liner Queen Elizabeth is only about two one-thousandths the size of the entire ship. The ships which sailed the Mediterranean Sea in James' day were much smaller, but they were wind powered and very difficult to control when the winds were not blowing from directly behind them.

It takes a skilled pilot to steer a ship that is powered by the wind. If he makes a mistake and allows the ship to be aimed the wrong direction it takes considerable time and great effort on the part of all the crew to get the ship aimed the proper direction again. So, even though the rudder is seemingly insignificant in terms of size, it is crucial to use it properly if the ship is to be steered in the right direction. James' point is that our tongue is likewise a very small part of our body. And a slip of the tongue can cause much pain and hardship for both the speaker and the hearer. In some cases, the damage done by an uncontrolled tongue is irreparable.

Now James drops the hammer (in some cases perhaps, right on our toes)! Having just given us examples of little things which have tremendous influence over much larger things, he compares them with the tongue. He tells us that the tongue, though small compared to other parts of our bodies, makes itself out to be something great. James then uses yet another word picture to help us understand the danger of an uncontrolled tongue. The picture is of a great forest fire which is ignited by a very small flame. And, like ill spoken words from our mouth, once the fire has begun, it is difficult to stop.

It was just such improper use of the tongue by Doeg the Edomite which David talked about in **Psalm 52:1-3**:

Why do you boast in evil, O mighty man? The goodness of God endures continually. Your tongue devises destruction, Like a sharp razor, working deceitfully. You love evil more than good, Lying rather than speaking righteousness.

One of the things that makes James' writing a little difficult to understand is his use of so many odd or obscure words. He says that the tongue is "a world of iniquity." That is, the tongue personifies all that is unrighteous. As was pointed out in verse 2, we are all sinners. This is because we all have a sin nature and our sin nature is expressed by our words. Therefore, our tongue is the ambassador for the world of our sin nature and thereby stains, or defiles, all that we do.

Then he goes on to tell us: **The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature.** "Course of nature" is translated from *trochon tēs geneseōs*, which literally means "wheel of birth." Metaphorically it refers to the entire circuit, or pathway, of life.

James is telling us that even though the tongue is only a small member of our body, it is a fast-spreading fire. It blemishes our entire being and continually ignites all of our being into a fire like that of Hell itself.

James 3:7-10

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.

Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

This is the fourth illustration from nature that James has used to help us understand the tongue (horse's bridle, rudder of great ocean vessels, fast spreading fire, and wild animals). The wild animals, he says, have been tamed by man. He is not saying that every species of animal on earth has been tamed. But he describes four classifications of animals that have been tamed. This is intended to show that all kinds of animals have been tamed by man.

Lest we think that we in the twenty-first century have excelled at taming animals above our ancestors, Pliny the Elder in the first century AD identified a list of animals which had been tamed by the Romans at that time. This list includes elephants, lions, and tigers, the eagle, snakes and crocodiles, and various fishes. Even the Egyptians did some remarkable animal taming, including lions which were used by them both in hunting and in warfare.

However, in spite of mankind's ability to tame all the wild animals, no one can completely tame the tongue, according to James. This is not to say that it is never brought under control for a time or an occasion, but eventually our tongue gets us all in trouble. The way it bites is like a poisonous snake.

The Apostle Paul, quoting from **Psalms 5:9** said a similar thing in his letter to the Romans:

"their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit"; "the poison of asps is under their lips"; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. (**Romans 3:13**)

Has someone ever said something to you that hurt deeply, whether they intended it that way or not? And which one of us has not experienced a time when we said something out of the emotion of the moment, only to regret it as soon as the words were out of our mouth. "Oh, I wish I hadn't said that!" we tell ourselves, wishing we could control our tongue.

Keep in mind that James is not saying that we can't control our tongue, therefore we shouldn't try. He is saying that with God's help we need to work especially hard at controlling the tongue because it is such an unruly thing!

The word "bless" is translated from the Greek word *eulogeō*. This literally means "to say a good word." Therefore, James is saying that we say good things about God. This word could be interpreted as "bless" or "praise." The word "Curse" is from a Greek word which originally meant "a prayer" but came to mean "a curse which a deity was to perform against someone." Thus, we see that this word refers to "requesting evil against someone else."

James reminds us that with our tongues we are continually offering praise and blessing to God. And well we should because he is worthy of all our praise! He is our Heavenly Father who has created us and has given us spiritual life through the blood of His Son. Unfortunately, we use the same tongue to curse our fellow human beings who have been made in the image of God.

In **Genesis 1:26-27** we are told that God intentionally made us in His image. Mankind was a special creation of God, separate and distinct from all the animals. He gave man intellect, a moral nature, the power to communicate with others, and an emotional nature. These are characteristics of God which He only gave to humans. These are the ways in which we have been made in His likeness. Because we bear this likeness, this family resemblance, it is an act of deprecation against God Himself to curse man.

Here's how James really feels about the tongue being used for both blessing and cursing. He says, "Things like this should never happen!"

He may have had in mind the story taught by Jewish Rabbis of his day: Rabbi Simeon, the son of Gamaliel, said to his servant Tobias, “Go and bring me some good food from the market.” The servant went away and when he returned, he bought him tongues. At another time he said to the same servant, “Go and buy me some bad food.” The servant went away and when he returned, he again bought tongues. Simeon said, “What is the reason for this? When I told you to buy me good and bad food, you brought tongues both times?” The servant answered, “From the tongue both good and evil come to man: if it be good, there is nothing better; if bad, there is nothing worse.”

James 3:11-12

Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

In the previous verses, James has written about the fact that from our mouths go forth both blessing and cursing. Now, in his clear exemplary style, he offers us a picture by way of a question. The picture is one that would be very familiar to all his first century readers who usually got their water for drinking, irrigation, and cooking from a well or a spring. Occasionally, a spring would bring forth such bad water that it was actually poisonous and would not even produce crops. The prophet Elisha encountered one such well at Jericho (see [2Kings 2:19-22](#)).

The answer to James’ question would have been obvious to the first century reader, “Of course not. A spring is either a good spring yielding fresh water, or it is a bad spring yielding bitter water. It can’t give both!”

It is unnatural, even inconceivable, for a spring to send forth both sweet water and bitter water. How, then, can we allow both godly words of blessing and wicked words of cursing out of our mouths.

James’ second example is also one that people in the first century would be very familiar with. In the northern and eastern Mediterranean basin both fig trees and olive trees are quite common. Why did he use these two types of trees, though? If you know anything about these two types of trees, you recognize that the fruit of the fig tree, when ripe, is very sweet. It has a very high sugar content. Olives, on the other hand, even when ripe, have a very bitter taste and have to be treated before they can be eaten. So, you see when James talks about water being sweet and bitter, it is only natural in making a sweet and bitter analogy to use the fig tree and the olive tree.

Again, the obvious answer to James’ question by the first century reader is that the fig tree does not produce bitter olives and the olive tree does not produce sweet figs. And certainly, neither can yield both at the same time. Each can only produce a single kind of fruit. A fig tree produces figs, an olive tree produces olives, and a grapevine only produces grapes.

James then applies this to the spring of water; it can only produce one kind of water, either sweet or bitter. He leaves it to the reader to then apply this back to the original subject, our tongue. Just as a spring of water can only produce one kind of water, and just as a fruit tree can only produce the kind of fruit it was created to produce, so our tongue should not be producing both blessings (like sweet fruit and sweet water) and cursing (like bitter fruit and salt water). Our tongues should not be producing both blessings and cursing. It’s just not natural!

So what?

Wow! No wonder James said earlier that the man who can control his tongue is a fully mature Christian. I hope I get there someday soon, how about you? But don't relax just yet. James has lots more to say about how to live the Christian life.

He started this chapter telling us that we should not all be trying to become teachers, because teachers of His Word will receive harsher judgment from God. James' reason is that teaching involves using words which can be a powerful force for good or for evil. Those who have the gift of teaching in the church, need to constantly bathe their teaching in prayer.

We all have a battle with our sin nature which so often shows its ugly face in the words that we use. Lest we give up without even trying, let's remember that God's grace is greater than our sin. And through the power of the Spirit of God we **can** control our tongue.

We are all called upon at one time or another to teach and exhort less mature Christians. When such opportunities arise, we need to be careful that we do not lord it over them. What we say can have a powerful effect on others. And we who have been called to teach need to ensure that we are being instructional and not judgmental.

Whether we have been called to teach or not, we are all called to be a witness for Christ and to build up the body. Whatever ministry we have within the body, or to the world around us, we must be careful regarding the words we use.

We have all had times when we wished we could take back something that we said. Words are powerful and can be used for good or for evil. Let us all commit to putting more effort into bridling our tongue. Then, may the use of our tongues be for the glory of God!

Do you have control of your tongue? Hopefully, the Apostle Paul was describing you when he said,

Let your speech always be with grace (Colossians 4:6a)

Or - do you have a problem with your tongue? If so, this is a very important chapter of the Bible for you. All of us have problems with our words, some more than others. But don't just excuse it because we all do it, rather confront yourself and ask the Lord for His power in controlling your tongue!

Try putting your ear in front of your own mouth (no, not literally, figuratively) and listen carefully to all you say. Are you continually blessing God, or offending Him?

And, may we all pray as David did:

Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips. (Psalms 141:3)

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer. (Psalms 19:14)

Do you feel like God has been talking directly to you through the writings of James? If you do, that's good. If you don't, well, you should! Because of our sin nature, we all have a tongue taming challenge. Are you up to it? With God's help, you are?

Let us all take a few minutes in prayer right now and ask God to help us control our tongue. May our words be a blessing to God and to others, and may we give the praise to God!

Let's pray.