

Taming The Tongue

James 3:1-12

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. (James 3:1-12 (ESV))

Have you ever had the occasion to say to God, "Lord please, please, please get control of my tongue, get control of my voice, my words and help me to say only things that are right and good and kind and helpful to people?" I confess to you that I have said those words, on many, many occasions. I am a talker by nature, and my tongue has been a constant source of difficulty for me.

And, may I kindly suggest that while you may not have pleaded for relief from the Lord as I have, you probably should have. I know that I can say that of you with all truthfulness because these words in this passage, this scathing indictment of every person's tongue, tells me so. We all, each and every one of us, are plagued with this wretched affliction. Our tongue is a continual source of defilement of ourselves, and of dishonoring to the Lord. And we really do need to know how we are to deal with it.

And yes, I realize that by saying those word, I am going against the grain of modern-day psychology, and especially against some of our more humanist thinking church leaders. According to them, we are never to criticize, but are to lovingly affirm each other, and affirm each other's behaviors.

And I do always want to lovingly affirm you as a person and as a fellow believer in Christ. But folks, there is far more to this Christian life than our always trying to keep each other warm and fuzzy, and affirmed. And here in these words, James is telling us so.

Here, we are being reminded that instead of always reaching to affirm each other in some of the conversations we engage in, we ought instead to give a careful ear to the things being said, and especially to the words that are coming out of our own mouths.

These scriptures are clear and plain. They tell us that each of us has a naturally-occurring sinfully-vile and reprehensible tongue, often full of poison and flaming fire. And if we keep letting our tongue have its own way, that fire will destroy everything it touches, beginning with our own souls. Verse 6,

6 . . . the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. (James 3:6)

And in Matthew 15, Jesus was very clear in His warning, saying

18 ". . . the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. 19 "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. 20 "These are the things which defile the man." (Matthew 15:17-20 (NASB))

The words that come out of your and my mouths, come from our heart. And here, Jesus is warning us that our heart is not the innocent and trustworthy source that we think it to be. It instead is a haven for all sorts of evil thoughts, evil plans and behaviors.

And this is not a new revelation to us. In the Old Testament, Jeremiah gave us the same warning in Jeremiah 17, verse 9. He said,

9 "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9 (NKJV))

You and I really do have a naturally occurring problem, one that was bred into our human condition at birth. Our hearts are desperately wicked, and from out of our desperately wicked heart flows all manner of defiling conversation and behavior. And left unchanged from its inborn condition, our heart and our tongue will continue to spew forth every one of these things that Jesus spoke about, evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and slanders. Simply put, and as the old saying goes, "we have met the enemy, and it is us!"

So then, as we engage in this study this morning about all the many words we say each day, and also the way we say them, may we understand exactly what we are dealing with, and it is this. Our words have power, real power, power to heal and to help, yes, but also power to hurt and to do harm. And unfortunately, far too often, the words that pour forth out of our mouths do harm.

Here, using very simple and descriptive language, so that we would not misunderstand, God gave us this very clear and plain warning. He said,

3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. (James 3:1-12 (ESV))

Folks, these words really are simple, and you and I ought to easily grasp their meaning. But do we? Are we able to humble ourselves enough to recognize that the Lord is really talking about me personally, about you personally?

Consider for a moment . . . conversations, by nature, involve at least two people, often more. And each person's mind and personality is involved in the matters that are being discussed. While one is talking, the others are listening and receiving the things that are being said. And along with the words being said, are other contributing factors, voice inflections, mannerisms and expressions, all adding up to what will become the understanding, or the misunderstanding of the things being said.

Often, most of the people involved in the conversation are in general agreement about the matter being discussed. But just as often, one or more of those who are listening are not in full agreement. And a disagreement can arise from any of several points of

difference, and again, not just from the words that are spoken. Our voice inflections and mannerisms add to the words being spoken, provoking anger and resentment.

But again, the warning goes to a level deeper than our tongue. The real source of all that flows forth from our tongue, our voice inflections and our mannerisms is our “heart”. And while many of us may have genuine intentions, we still have this corrupt condition that we spoke about a moment ago. Our,

9 ". . . heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9 (NKJV))

And while we may have no intention whatsoever of being unkind or offensive, our heart may still have its own way, cleverly inserting little cuts or jabs or other criticisms. And those things immediately influence the other people in the conversation, provoking their own “deceitful and desperately wicked heart” to receive your words, either in agreement or to take offense. And then problems begin to develop and disagreements foment.

Again, you might not really intend any offense. It is just your normal way of “giving your opinion” about a matter. But your words, or voice inflections or mannerisms touch a raw nerve, and the things you say become the small spark that ignites the flames of hurt and offense.

It is as the words of this passage suggests, our tongues breathe out the breath of our soul and our hearts are so desperately wicked and deceitful that we ourselves aren’t able to fathom the depth of our own depravity. And just a random conversation can then become that small spark that will ignite flames of discord, flaring into destructive arguments that we might never get back under control. As in the example here in this passage, our tongue has become like the small rudder that is able to direct the course of a giant ship. Our words can take us down a path that we will wish we had never traveled, broken hearts, broken relationships, broken marriages.

A favorite preacher of mine, Sinclair Ferguson had this to say regarding our tongues. He said,

Our tongues were given to us as a gift from God so that we can praise and worship Him, with shouts of joy and love. But too often, our tongue that was intended to praise Him, instead speaks words of anger and lust and deceit.

He goes on to say . . .

Our tongue has great power, able to help, but also able to hurt, and sometimes very badly, and long lasting.

We must learn to “master” our tongue. But how? How can we ever master such a formidable foe as our tongue? How can we “tame” something that is “untamable”?

He concludes . . .

The “taming” of our tongue can only arise out of a foundational unity with Christ, a deep abiding relationship with Him from which words can flow as a continuing unction from the Holy Spirit, our saying only the words that God’s Spirit within us would give us to say.

And I agree fully with these words of Sinclair Ferguson. There can be no effort on our part that can actually tame our tongue. We are told that clearly in verse 8, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (James 3:8 (ESV))

I am reminded of the secular efforts that have gained popularity over recent years. They call their programs “Anger Management”. I’ve seen news reports about “Anger Management Classes” being mandated by the courts as an attempt to quell some offender’s tirades of anger.

Granted, to some degree, those programs might be helpful. The “fear” of going to jail might cause some people to better “manage” their behaviors. But we must understand that no “real cure” can take place using only human efforts. These words of verse 8 are absolute in their truth.

8 . . . no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (James 3:8 (ESV))

The reason we can’t cure ourselves is that our problem runs far deeper and is far more complicated than some secular based psychological program is able to fix. As verses 11 and 12 tell us, our problem and the corruption within us is deep within and is a part of our very nature.

11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. (James 3:11-12 (ESV))

As these words imply, the real problem is most often within our very “nature”. And our “nature” is inherently sinful and corrupt, unfixable, unrepairable. And natures such as ours can never be really changed, or cured. The only real remedy for our old sinful nature is that it simply must “die”. Like a rotted and crumbling building must simply be

torn down and a whole new building constructed, so also our old nature must die, so that a whole new nature can be born within us.

That is God's answer to our dilemma. As we're told in Ezekiel 36, our desperately wicked heart, this heart of stone needs to be removed and a whole new heart put within us. And we need to have a new spirit put within us and then for God's Spirit to be put within our Spirit. Nothing short of a complete change-out of the nature of a person can bring about the change that God desires. We must be "born again" from above.

That is the intention that God has been voicing here in this Book of James. For us to become the person God wants each of us to be, there needs be a complete change-out of our heart. And from that change can come forth the "Faith" and the "Works" that are able to combine to carry forth the "image" and the "Face of God" that He desires us to represent.

And this "mastery of the tongue" is a perfect example of the "works of love" that the Holy Spirit will then enable you and me to have. How do I know that? It is because I am experiencing it within my own life. Though I have not as yet been able to curb my tongue nearly as much as God intends, I am so much more aware of the need and so much more desirous of doing that. And that kind of desire has to come directly from God's Holy Spirit.

One last thought before we close. As God replaces our "deceitful and desperately wicked heart with our new heart of flesh, we really do change. And from that change, our new heart is able to develop a loving and obedient abiding relationship with Christ. And it is out of that relationship that whole new conversations are able to flow, conversations that are pure and holy, filled with a continuing unction from the Holy Spirit, more and more our being able to say only the words that God's Spirit would have us to say. Praise be to God!