

James: The Practical Christian

Taming Your Tongue

James 3:1-12

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Taming Your Tongue

Scripture

An elderly man had serious hearing problems for a number of years. His family tried again and again to convince him to get a hearing aid. Finally he relented. He went to the doctor and was fitted for a set of hearing aids that allowed him to hear 100 percent.

A month later he went back to the doctor. The doctor said with a smile, “Your hearing is perfect. Your family must be really pleased that you can hear again.”

The old man replied, “Oh, I haven’t told my family yet. They still think that I cannot hear, but I just sit around and listen to their conversations. I’ve changed my will three times!”¹

All of us say things that we later wish we did not say. I am not aware that someone has changed a will because of what I have said, but speaking appropriately is a constant struggle for me.

In our text today, James is concerned about taming your tongue. He wants your speech and mine to be winsome and gracious. So, with that in mind, let’s read James 3:1-12:

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. 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

¹ “Hearing Problems,” Crosswalk.com, (12-03-02).

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.

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. (James 3:1-12)

Introduction

Sometimes we say things we really don't mean to say! Perhaps you have seen the following questions from lawyers, which apparently were taken from official court records nationwide:

- "Was that the same nose you broke as a child?"
- "Was it you or your brother that was killed in the war?"
- "The youngest son, the 20-year-old, how old is he?"
- "Were you alone or by yourself?"
- "Do you have any children or anything of that kind?"
- "Were you present in court this morning when you were sworn in?"
- "Now, doctor, isn't it true that when a person dies in his sleep, in most cases he just passes quietly away and doesn't know anything about it until the next morning?"

These questions were asked by well-meaning lawyers simply trying their best to be clear and concise. And although slips of the tongue can be funny, far too often they are anything but funny.

Journalist William Norris was often quoted because of his unique ability to put in rhyme and jingle sayings that were worth remembering. This piece is often quoted from his works:

If your lips would keep from slips,
five things observe with care:
To whom you speak, of whom you speak,
and how and when and where.

The taming of your tongue is anything but an easy task! In verses 7-8 of our text James writes, **“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. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”**

We can train Flipper and Trigger and Shamu and Lassie. We can train falcons to land on our wrists, pigeons to carry our messages, dogs to fetch our papers, elephants to stand on rolling balls, tigers to sit on stools and alligators to turn over and get their bellies rubbed. But James says that **“no man can tame the tongue”**! It’s a battle some people just seem never to win!

Lesson

On a windswept hill in an English country churchyard stands a drab, gray slate tombstone. If you stoop over and look closely, you will be able to see the faint etchings which read:

Beneath this stone, a lump of clay,
lies Arabella Young,
who, on the twenty-fourth of May,
began to hold her tongue.

But surely this battle with our tongues is winnable sometime before death? Of course it is! And in order to help you do that, James outlines four critical truths about taming your tongue in James 3:1-12:

1. Your tongue is a mark of your spiritual maturity,
2. Your tongue, although very small, is very powerful,
3. Your tongue has the potential to be very destructive, and,
4. Your tongue can be a great power for good.

I. Your Tongue Is a Mark of Your Spiritual Maturity (3:1-2)

First, your tongue is a mark of your spiritual maturity.

James says, in effect, “If you want to know how spiritually mature you are, consider your tongue.” He makes this point by speaking first to those in the church who held the office of teacher. In verse 1 James writes, **“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”**

In the Early Church, teachers were held in very high esteem. And because of that, many insincere people were seeking to be teachers. So James says to them, “Not many of you should aspire to become teachers because, even though the position may at times appear to have high status, teachers will face a stricter judgment. They will be held accountable to God for what they have said to others in his Name.”

But James goes on in verse 2 to make the point that all people will be held accountable before God for the use of their tongues, teachers and non-teachers alike. Here he writes, **“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.”** James is saying here that although teachers will be judged more strictly for the use of their words, everyone else will still face judgment for the words they speak as well.

The one who learns to control his tongue, teacher or non-teacher, James calls a **“perfect man”** in verse 2. This does not mean that such a person is sinless but rather is a very mature person. The Greek term used for **“perfect man”** describes “a completeness and a fullness of character that marks one who is spiritually mature.” The point is that the person who has learned to control his tongue is also the type of person whom you can be sure will have control over the rest of his life as well.

Genuine faith will always show itself in speech. If you want to know how healthy you are spiritually, pay attention to the things you say and the things you don't say, for your tongue is a mark of your spiritual maturity.

II. Your Tongue, Although Very Small, Is Very Powerful (3:3-5)

Second, your tongue, although very small, is very powerful.

James makes this point by using two interesting illustrations.

In verse 3 he compares the tongue to a small bit in the mouth of a large horse. He writes, **“When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.”**

The picture is that of a large healthy horse running across an open field. And although it is powerful enough to do what it wants and to go its own way, a rider is able to control that massive animal by means of a small bit in the horse's mouth, a bit which is only about 4 ounces of steel.

In verses 4 James compares the tongue to a small rudder on a large ship. He writes, **“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.”**

James is referring to the great ships that plowed up the waves of the Mediterranean Sea in his day. Many of them were up to 1,000 tons in size, and they had crews of up to 600 men. But they were steered by a little rudder only about a foot long.

In verse 5 James says, **“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.”** The power of the tongue can be truly amazing.

With the power of his tongue Adolph Hitler convinced tens of thousands of Aryan Supremacy and eventually brought about the Jewish Holocaust, which killed millions of Jews.

Karl Marx said, “Give me 26 mighty soldiers and I will conquer the world.” He was referring to the 26 letters of the alphabet.

And yet it is with the tongue that parents and teachers stretch the minds of children and young people, attorneys defend their clients, ambassadors represent their nations, and mothers sing their babies to sleep at night.

Think about it. Without the tongue no-one could comfort those who are suffering or share the message of God’s love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Without the tongue, our communication would be reduced to unintelligible grunts and shrugs.

God has given you a tremendous privilege by creating you in his image and thereby giving you the ability to communicate. And to whom much is given much will be required! Your God-given ability carries with it a tremendous responsibility. Your tongue, although very small, is very powerful.

III. Your Tongue Has the Potential to Be Very Destructive (3:5-8)

Third, your tongue has the potential to be very destructive.

James illustrates this point with two graphic illustrations.

First, in verses 5-6 James tells us that the tongue can be as destructive as a spreading flame: **“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. 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.”**

There are some great forests in the United States of America, yet every year thousands of acres of beautiful forests are destroyed by someone who leaves smoldering ash in a campfire, or carelessly tosses a cigarette out of a car window. From just a little spark an entire forest can be set ablaze.

So it is with words! One word of gossip, one lie, one insinuation, one harsh criticism and the fire can begin. Human hearts, dry

from a lack of genuine love, then catch fire and it spreads from heart to heart across a community and then leaves behind it charred and burned reputations, broken hearts and broken homes. And the damage can be so severe and extensive!

A young man, ridden with guilt during the Middle Ages, went to a monk, and said, "I've sinned by telling slanderous statements about someone in town. What should I do now?"

The monk said, "First I want you to put a feather on the doorstep of every person to whom you have spoken in town."

The young man followed the monk's instructions. When he was finished he returned to the monk to see what he was to do next.

The monk said, "Now, go back and pick up all the feathers."

The young man replied, "That's impossible! By now the wind will have blown them all over town."

Seizing the moment, the monk replied, "So has your slanderous word become impossible to retrieve."

James tells us that there is a whole world of evil that the tongue can bring to pass. When James says that the tongue **"itself is set on fire by hell"** he means that the ultimate source of that evil can actually be traced back to Satan himself.

Those who spread gossip and slander are being used by Satan to cause discord, strife and pain between people. Although they lack any real facts, they still freely share their information with others. Satan uses them to drop subtle bombs that explode in the minds of others by lighting the fuse of suggestion. And all the while they see themselves as being nothing more than "innocent channels" of unsure information. But the truth is that they are nothing more than peddlers of slander who will one day be judged by God for what they have wrongly passed on.

The lines go like this, "I hear Jim and Diane are getting a divorce. They say she was unfaithful." Or, "Word is that Mark was very controlling and abusive. That's why his wife left him." Or, "Somebody said Mary was a heavy drinker." Or, "I was told their daughter is on drugs and has even been picked up for shoplifting."

Or, “It’s a concern to several people that he can’t really be trusted.” Or, “Somebody said she had to get married.”

Be careful when you hear someone say, “I want to share something with you but you need to keep this in absolute confidence.” Or, “I want to share something with you in confidence about Mike so that you can pray about it.”

The fire rages and Satan laughs!

Second, James goes on in verses 7-8 to make the point that the tongue can also be as dangerous as a wild animal or a deadly poison: **“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. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”**

When James says the tongue is **“a restless evil,”** he is still thinking of the animals referred to in verse 7. Like a lion behind the bars of a cage, it still stalks back and forth—it is restless. You open the door and back it goes back into the wild.

That’s also true of the tongue. Control it today and it will leap out tomorrow. It can speak kindly now but it can turn and spit out hatred in a moment. It’s a restless evil waiting to break free.

But more than this, James says in verse 8, that it is **“full of deadly poison.”** Your words can be like a snake in the grass that sinks its fangs in and then crawls off. And yet its poison remains to hurt, destroy and possibly even kill. Once the poison is injected, it begins to spread and is very hard to extract. That is true of your words. They can be like verbal cyanide.

Some time ago a dead woman was pulled from a river around Los Angeles. She had committed suicide. They searched her for identification but could find none. In fact there was nothing on her person except one single piece of paper. And on that scrap of paper there were two words. The words were, “They Said.” Who said? No one knew. What was said? They could not find out. But those words, whatever they were, spoken as they were, were as deadly as a smoking revolver or a twelve-inch knife.

So, your tongue has the potential to be very destructive.

IV. Your Tongue Can Be a Great Power for Good (3:9-12)

And finally, your tongue can be a great power for good.

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

James reminds us that he is speaking to Christians. In verse 9 he says that he is writing to people who **“praise our Lord”** and for whom God is both **“Lord and Father.”** These are people who have come to faith in Christ, and now have a new ability and responsibility to use their tongues for good and not for evil.

In verses 11-12 James says that true Christians are now to use their tongues so that they become like fountains of fresh water and trees that bear much good fruit.

In Proverbs 10:11a we are told that “the mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life.” Proverbs 10:20a says, “The tongue of the righteous is like choice silver.” Proverbs 10:21a says, “The lips of the righteous nourish many.” In Proverbs 12:18 we are told that the tongue of the wise brings healing. God wants your tongue to be an instrument of forgiveness, encouragement, wisdom and healing in the lives of the many people he brings your way.

Let me ask you, “Is your home a place where words are used wisely? What about your office? If I were to drop by as an invisible guest and listen in on conversations, would I hear sarcasm, put-downs, and caustic comments? Or, would I hear statements like, ‘Good job!’ ‘Thanks so much!’ Or, ‘I know you’ve failed and I understand.’ Or, ‘I really care.’ Or, ‘I’ve been there myself and I forgive you.’ ‘Let me work with you. Let me help you.’ Or, ‘I really appreciate you.’”

The Proverbs say that “the tongue has the power of life and death” (Proverbs 18:21a). Death words destroy, hurt, and create hateful and humiliating feelings. Life words build and increase strength of character. They lift spirits. They center on the truth, and they set people free who would otherwise be in bondage.

Conclusion

But how can you do it? How can you tame your tongue? Doesn't James still tell you in verse 8 that no man can tame the tongue? What then are you to do?

You must first realize that James' emphasis here is on the words, “**no man.**” That is true, for no man can tame his tongue. But the good news is that what man cannot do, God can! God can enable you to tame your tongue! How does he do it?

He does it by dealing with the root problem which lies behind the tongue. Jesus tells us in Matthew 15:19 that the real problem is not the tongue but the heart. He said that “the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’” According to Jesus, the tongue is simply a neutral messenger boy that carries the words from the heart. It is the bucket that goes down to the well, dips into what is there and then dumps out of the mouth what it picks up.

The good news is that Jesus promises a new and clean heart to all those who will turn from their sin and trust in him. When a person believes the gospel, Christ starts changing the person including his or her speech.

As God moves upon a person's heart, he also moves upon his tongue. No cruel or unfair words have ever come from a heart controlled by the God of love. No bigoted conversation has ever come from a heart controlled by God. No lying speech has ever come from a heart controlled by the God of truth. When God controls the heart, he controls the tongue.

So, believe the gospel and allow God to tame your tongue. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAYER:

Father, we confess before you that we have failed to use our tongues as we should. We ask that you would not relieve any of the sorrow in our hearts today until we have taken definite, specific steps before you. We ask that all the old habits might be curbed and a new lifestyle replace the old.

O Lord, we give you our tongues, for we cannot control them any longer. We have tried and we have failed. We give you our weakness and ask for your strength. Please bring to our attention—starting right now—each time that we are about to say something that is not pleasing to you.

And Father, as we exchange our weakness for your strength, would you now control our tongues. We ask this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Never forget that your tongue possesses the power of life and death. Don't ever think your words will be overlooked or easily erased. They won't. Resolve today, by God's grace, to be a good steward of this wonderful gift of speech that God has given you. And use it to his glory and praise. And now, may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.