

# Taming the Tongue – Part 1

## Introduction

### a. objectives

1. subject – James instructs his audience to speak as those transformed by faith
2. aim – to cause us to speak in a way that glorifies the one who has saved us by his own word
3. passage – James 3:1-12

### b. outline

1. The Centrality of the Tongue (James 3:1-5a)
2. The Power of the Tongue (James 3:5b-10a)
3. The Taming of the Tongue (James 3:10b-12)

### c. opening

1. the **changeover** to the second half of the letter
  - a. although this is only the beginning of chapter 3 *out of 5*, it is still the midpoint of the letter:
    1. because the *amount of words* is about equal between **chaps. 1-2** and **chaps. 3-5**
    2. because the *subject material* morphs at this point to the “second half” of faith and works
  - b. **chaps. 1-2** concentrated on the definition of faith:
    1. James’ statement in **1:22** as his **thesis**: “*be doers of the word, and not hearers only*”
    2. **i.e.** the **tendency** within us: to “disconnect” what we *believe* from what we *do*; the “natural” condition of the flesh whereby we tend to think one way but act another
    3. **IOW: what is genuine saving faith (vs. a faith that is just “professed”)?**
    4. **outline:** the elements of saving faith are ... 1) it is *tested* (by definition), 2) it is *consistent* (between profession and action), and 3) it has *substance* (it is *transformative*)
2. the **content** of the second half of the letter
  - a. **chaps. 3-5** will concentrate on the transformative effects of faith (**i.e.** what are works?)
  - b. **IOW:** what are the ways that those who trust in Christ *live out* that faith in everyday life?
    1. in same ways: a change from a more “instructive” section to a more “practical” one
    2. similar to: Paul’s rhetorical use of *indicative* and *imperative* – instruction that leads to practical outworkings of truth in life – here, not specifically a “rhetorical” device, but similar in nature
    3. **e.g.** James will discuss such “works” as: the speech of a person of faith, wisdom in the life of a person of faith, the person of faith avoiding worldliness and the trappings of wealth, and patience and prayerfulness throughout the life of a person of faith
3. the **starting point** of the second half of the letter
  - a. interestingly, James will begin by “flipping” his argument over (metaphorically)
  - b. the concept of “the word” has been key to his thesis – “*be doers of the word, not hearers only*”
    1. **i.e.** up until now, James has been focusing on the “*not hearers only part*” ...
  - c. salvation comes by hearing a word from God, *believing that word*, and then going out and *doing what it implies or commands* – **IOW:** it is **a word from God** that:
    1. tells us what salvation is, how it has been wrought, and how it comes to apply to us, and ...
    2. declares what we have *become* by virtue of trusting in Christ (**i.e.** justified), and ...
    3. commands us what we are to *do* as a result of being made into new creations in Christ
  - d. **now:** James will argue that it is the **words of a believer** that are part and parcel to being this new creation in Christ – one of the first “works” of a believer **is how he or she speaks**
    1. **IOW:** God spoke in bringing us to faith, now we prove that faith *by how we speak*
  - e. so, James starts the “practical” side of his letter by giving some instruction about the very nature of speaking and language itself ... and he starts *in a very interesting place* ...

## I. The Centrality of the Tongue (James 3:1-5a)

### Content

#### a. the centrality of speech (in the work of God)

1. *words* (revelation, spoken and written) are central to the work of God:
  - a. the creation (and the decree behind it), the first human, the call of Abraham, the promise to Abraham, the establishment of Israel at Sinai, the giving of the law, the call of various judges and kings, the word of the prophets, the *Logos* of God, the *theopneustos* of Scripture, the centrality of preaching to worship, the proclamation of the gospel, the power of regeneration in its hearing, etc.

- b. thus, the *word of God* (in all of its various manifestations) is central to the Christian religion
  - a. Christianity (and a Christian worldview) is based *solely* on the concept of verbal revelation
  - b. **e.g.** Jesus = “*Word of God*” because he *is* God *speaking* to us (**John 1:1 cf. Hebrews 1:1-2**)  
“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God *spoke* to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has *spoken* to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, *through whom* also he created the world”
- 2. and, one of the central *uniqueness* of the **Imago Dei** is our ability to *speak*
  - a. while other animals possess various forms of intelligence, emotion, and will, it is only human beings who have the ability to *articulate* complex concepts in words, both spoken and written
  - b. thus, the effect of the word of God in faith **is to transform every aspect of the Imago Dei in us**: how we think, how we respond emotionally, how we exercise the will, how we understand ourselves and the world around us, **and how we speak**
  - c. **IOW (one could argue)**: the *primary* transformation of the individual of faith is in how that person now *speaks*, the *language* that he uses, and the *content* of that language to those around him
    - 1. **i.e.** too many assume that Christianity is a religion of “feelings” – that it is our *emotional* sense that guides what it means to “live by faith” (**e.g.** “God said to me” is an *emotional* assertion)
- 3. **principle: it is in our speech that our regeneration is most notable**
  - a. **i.e. Romans 10:9** – if you confess “*with your mouth*” that Jesus is Lord – it is the *words* that come from us that separate us from the reprobate – it is our *confession* that truly stands us apart from the rest of the world, and that confession *continues* throughout all of life
  - b. **ironically**: a “profession” of faith alone does not save, but a true confession of faith is followed by a consistent pattern of words *demonstrating* that profession permeating our lives
- b. the connection of speech (to the work of God; v. 1)**
  - 1. James *starts* with a discussion of the *place* of speech (or language) in the life of the believer
    - a. in **vv. 1-5a**, language is the *central element* of life; we are all *governed* by this thing called “speech”
    - b. and for believers, this “work” is at the *center* of the entirety of our lives (**see above**)
  - 2. but, in **v. 1**, James *begins* the section on the centrality of language by delivering a **warning** regarding the strictness of judgment *upon those who teach*
    - a. **question**: why – why start a discussion of the importance of taming the tongue with a warning to those who might want to teach?
      - 1. maybe he feels that his audience of converted Jews was not well-trained enough to teach doctrine and theology (**i.e.** in 45AD, without a N.T., church tradition, ecumenical councils, etc.)
      - 2. or, maybe he is simply saying that the work of teaching is the most *glaring* example of the use of speech in the church, and it is *representative* of the point he is about to make ...
    - b. **answer**: since teaching is fundamentally *communicating information*, it is a tremendous **example** of either the *proper* or *improper* use of the “*tongue*” (**i.e. a segue by example**)
  - 3. “*teachers*” (*didaskalos*; **x59**) = simple: an instructor – one who brings information and learning
    - a. **BTW**: preaching is just an *elegant* and *formal* form of teaching – all teaching is to *transform*
    - b. since everyone is a teacher (by definition, in some form or another), it is *likely* that James is referring here to a more “formal” sense of the word (**i.e.** in a more “official” capacity)
      - 1. a synonym is “*Rabbi*” (*rhabbi*; **x15**) = a formal teacher in Israel of the law
      - 2. although, James *could* simply be “restraining” his audience based on their *immaturity*
  - 4. **principle: teaching is the primary means by which the church is both established and maintained – teaching is the central activity of the church**
    - a. Jesus’ entire *public ministry* was one of teaching, both publicly and privately (**i.e. red letter words**)
      - 1. “*disciple*” = a learner; a follower of a teacher (Rabbi) to understand what he knew
    - b. the corpus of the N.T. epistles is *didactic* in nature (**i.e.** of a teaching nature; **James!!**)
    - c. the *advancement of the gospel* is through instruction – bringing to faith is by teaching the promises and warnings of God, and discipling is (literally) teaching believers more and more about God
      - 1. **i.e.** to “*grow up in every way [in faith]*” is to learn (**Ephesians 4:11-16**)
  - 5. **principle: the essence of Christian teaching is to communicate the revelation of God – to bring the words of God to the hearer**
    - a. **question**: what is the difference between a *true* teacher and a *false* teacher? **answer**: the **content** of his teaching and **where that content inevitably leads** (**Matthew 7:15-20**)  
“Beware of *false prophets*, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but *inwardly* are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their *fruits*. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”
      - 1. **note**: this warning is *immediately* followed by the warning of **Matthew 7:21-23** – it is the *false teacher* that leads many into a place of “false” faith
      - 2. the true teacher desires to teach only the things that God has revealed; the false teacher comes with half-truths, personal opinions, and that which is “popular” or “fancy”

3. the true teacher desires to glorify God; the false teacher comes to elevate himself and “profit” off of what he is “peddling”
  4. the true teacher is unconcerned about what people think of him; the false teacher is *only* concerned with how he appears to others, his reputation is the *basis* of his “success”
    - a. **i.e.** John the Baptist: “*He must increase, but I must decrease*” (**John 3:30**)
  5. the true teacher leads his flock to greater holiness; the false teacher leads people to legalism, false assurances, focus on the self, and a fixation on the temporal over the eternal
  6. the true teacher will be rewarded by God for truth; the false teacher will *ultimately* be revealed for who he really is and the content of his message will become the basis of his own judgment
    - a. **i.e.** the false teacher will get *exactly* what he wants – but it will be *without mercy*
6. **application: just as the one who aspires to teach in the church better be sure about his words, so the one saved by grace must also be sure about how he speaks**
- a. “*judged with greater strictness*” = since God considers *his words* to be the center of all creation, and because the church is built upon *the Word*, **great emphasis in the Scriptures is placed on the teaching of truth**, thus those who teach will be held to a much higher accountability in it
    1. **i.e.** with great power comes great responsibility ...
    2. **e.g.** this statement by James is what drives me (**personally**) to try and teach well
  - b. thus, the *words* that we use as teachers are a great *example* of the importance of *speech* in the life of the believer – **true believers speak in ways that are consistent with what it means to be a follower of Christ**, just as teachers are held accountable to teach in ways *consistent* with what God has revealed as *truth*
  - c. this is how James **begins a section** on how our speech must be evidence of our conversion ...