

Master Your Mouth!

The Sermon on the Mouth

“A Journey Through James”
Sermon 11

Text: James 1:19; 3:1-12. Matt 15:11, 17-20

James 1:19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;

*James 3:1–12 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.*

*Matthew 15:11, 17-20 ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person. . . . ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? ¹⁸ **But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.** ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ **These are what defile a person.** But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.”*

The paragraphs before us contain the most concentrated teaching on Christian communication in the New Testament. James makes the case that how we use our mouth has an enormous impact on our own lives as well as the lives of those who need to embrace the gospel we are called to proclaim.

Since James exhorts us to cultivate and display a living faith to a dying world by embracing a whole-hearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith in God and in His Word – at some point on a fairly regular basis we will be called upon to explain that faith accurately or defend it attractively and for our faith to be acceptable to God and credible to those around us (1:26-27), what comes out of our mouth on that occasion must be confirmed by what comes out of our mouth and life all the rest of the time.

James has reminded us that subduing and controlling our speech and communication is *one of the chief marks of a true spiritual maturity* shaped and guided by wisdom from above (1:5-8, 19-21). In fact, so powerful is the tongue and so great its potential for good or evil that James relates its use and subjection as a defining mark of our own spiritual maturity and a reliable gauge of the true condition of our living faith.

This is the case because, for James, subduing one's mouth and controlling one's communication is evidence of a person's ability to subdue other sinful passions and to govern and direct the whole of one's life by true wisdom from above as opposed to wisdom from below.

For James, controlling one's speech is essential for hearing and doing the word in ways that are pleasing to God and effective before men. A person who has learned, by the Spirit's power, *to restrain, control, and direct his speech so that it conforms to God's expectation in the Royal Law* (the Perfect Law of Liberty) is, according to James, a mature man who is slow to speak, quick to hear, and slow to respond in sinful anger (1:19-20).

So essential to a whole-hearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith is the control of our mouth that James devotes more space to this topic in his short epistle than to any other single issue or area of daily Christian life.

For James, a critical, caustic, or arrogant mouth is not a minor flaw in our spiritual life; it is a devastating venue of sin that, if left unaddressed, will damage our gospel effectiveness, defile our life, and destroy our relationships.

To be clear, James is addressing believers who claim to have a living faith, who present themselves as spiritually mature, and who presume to be qualified to be teachers of the faith they claim. However, based on how they use their mouth and the spiritual damage done by their words, their speech reveals they are not mature, they are not wise, and they are in fact double-minded believers whose true behavior is more aligned with and shaped by the world than by wisdom from above.

But how can such a tiny member of our body have such an outsized impact and influence on our lives, our ministries, and our relationship with God and others? Is it possible that James is exaggerating to make his point? Does such a small part of our body, our tongue, truly “boast or possess such great power?” (3:5)

James answers this question with a resounding yes! So great is the power of the tongue for good or for evil that it is the single most effective way we recognize a person who possesses true wisdom and whose spiritual life is truly mature. This is so because a person who has subdued his speech in ways that conform to God’s expectation evidences that he has also brought the rest of his life under the Spirit’s control and into conformity with God’s Word.

So, with that in mind, what does James want us to know about what comes out of our mouth when we use our tongue? There are several things that are true about every one of us sitting in this room today.

1. We all talk – We were created to talk . . . to God and to others.

- It is one of the things that distinguishes us from the rest of the animal species on the earth. It is an essential part of what it means to be made in the image of God. Speech is essential to our giving God glory!
- God speaks and He intended for His image-bearers to speak and so He created us with the capacity to speak and designed human language to make communication possible and intelligible.

- In the garden, original human speech produced and enhanced shalom with God and with each other. However, false speech resulted in relational damage, spiritual death, and cosmic devastation.
- 2. We all talk a lot. We live in a world of words – we are wordy!**
- Age old question – who speaks more? Women/Men?
 - Someone said that women speak 20,000 words per day and men speak about 7,000 words a day. One wit observed, “By the time I get home I have used up all my 7,000 words and my wife still has 13,000 words to go!”
 - Actually, according to a study reported in *Scientific American* men and women speak about the same amount of words - women at 16,215 words and men at 15,669.
 - Most of us speak about 120-130 WPM; Professional speakers about 150-160 WPM; Auctioneers about 250-400 WPM.
 - So we all talk and we talk a lot!
 - And while a good bit of our talking is done with our mouth, much talking happens in non-verbal ways or with our fingers.
 - So when James talks about the tongue – he was addressing an audience with many who could neither read or write and whose primary means of communication was verbal. However, his larger point has to do with the entirety of our communication be it verbal, non-verbal, visual, written, or otherwise.
- 3. Our mouth is the source of much of the trouble in our life.**
- Our mouth gets us in trouble as much if not more than almost any other part of our body!
 - Most of the problems in our life originated with words we said –
 - ❖ Something slipped out unintentionally
 - ❖ Something jumped out unthinkingly
 - ❖ Something came out intentionally
 - ❖ Something that should have been said, wasn't.
 - ❖ Something that should not have been said, was.
 - We said or communicated something that we didn't mean to or didn't think about – and before we knew it our mouth landed us in a mess!

Jesus preached the most famous sermon in the World – *the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)*. His half-brother James preached the most difficult sermon in the World – *The Sermon on the Mouth (James 3)*.

James is writing to every-day believers living every-day lives in a world full of people who desperately needed to know:

- The truth about God and His Word
- The truth about Jesus and the Salvation He freely offers
- The truth about the power of the Gospel to transform lives

For believers to advance these truths they must determine to live and speak in ways that represent their faith accurately and attractively.

In other words, to make an impact for the Gospel we must strive to be mature believers who are growing in their ability to live out our faith.

James tells us three important realities about spiritual maturity (friendship with God) -

1. It is **developed** through our response to trials and temptation (1:1-18)
2. It is **energized** by our response to truth from God's Word (1:19-25)
3. It is **evidenced** by our ability to restrain our tongue/speech (1:26)

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

So. . . how do I learn to bridle my tongue? Our text this morning is probably the single most concentrated paragraph in Scripture on the importance of mastering our mouth if we want our lives to make a difference for the gospel.

James gives us **three significant insights** in this text that we must embrace to master our mouth and live a religion that makes a real difference for the gospel.

What comes out of our mouth is of great importance because:

I. **Our Communication is the Test of Spiritual Maturity (3:1-2)**

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.

- James argues this way – we should think soberly before we assume the role of a teacher of God’s Word because such individuals are held to a greater spiritual accountability. (Judgment here = stricter accountability).
- ***Teachers must know the truth accurately, communicate it carefully, and live it out consistently.*** In other words, they must be wise and mature. The maturity that comes from the kind of wisdom James has in mind will affect the way we live and navigate life.
- How will we recognize a person who is sufficiently wise and spiritually mature enough to be a teacher of the faith so that we can submit to his teaching and follow his example?
- James points out that we know something that will help us identify a wise and mature person: *“We all stumble and constantly slip up in many different areas of our life. But there is actually a way to recognize a mature man . . . if you find a man who does not stumble in his words then you have found a mature person.”* (note present tense verbs in this text)
- Why? Because a person who has learned how to control his tongue has developed the ability to control the rest of his life by shaping it according to God’s Wisdom and submitting it to God’s Word.
- This is why James makes the point that how well one controls their mouth is a reliable mark of that person’s spiritual maturity!
- Think about how often you meet people who claim to be spiritual or who profess to possess deep knowledge of spiritual things from God’s Word but whose mouth is out of control.
- James warns you that such a person, regardless of their profession or proclamation, is not a spiritual person because they have not learned to control their tongue.

II. **Our Communication is the Means of Great Power and the Source of Grave Danger (3:3-6)**

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!

- The tongue is one of the smallest parts of our body – but it has immense ability and amazing power disproportionate to its size.
- But, is this really the case? How can such a small part of our body have such an outsized influence and impact on the rest of our life and its spiritual effectiveness?
- Spiritual maturity is not just a matter of being a Christian for a long period of time or even of being involved in various aspects of Christian ministry or service.
- Spiritual maturity is marked by wisdom from above and submitted to God’s Word as it lives here below in the kingdoms of this world where God has placed us.
- And nothing has greater power to develop and give credibility to our spiritual maturity or to damage and discredit it than what comes out of our mouth.
- And to help us see this James give us three illustrations that make two important points:

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A. *Our Tongue has Great Power and Strength (3:3-4)*

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.

1. *Strength to Control our Actions – Bit and Horse (3.3)*

2. *Power to Establish our Direction – rudder/ship (3.4)*

- Huge things are subdued, controlled, and directed by very small but powerful things. And the point is that this is true of your tongue!
- For good or for evil – your tongue has great power to influence the direction and the impact of your life.
- And what determines how that power is used is who controls the bit and the rudder. James reminds us that the rider of the horse controls the horse by its bit and the pilot of the ship keeps the ship on course in the midst of a turbulent sea by means of the rudder.

- The horse has immense size and strength and all of that strength is brought to bear for good when the horse is submitted to the desire of its rider – and that desire is communicated through a few ounces of metal placed in the mouth of the horse. Likewise, a believer’s entire life is to be submitted to the direction and control of the Word of God which James exhorts us to embrace with meekness (1:21).
- The ship is kept from wandering or from being tossed to and fro in the waves of the sea by means of the direction of a rudder in the hands of a good and wise pilot. Likewise a wise and mature believer is kept from being tossed to and fro in the stormy waves (1:6-8) when his life is submitted to the word of God.
- And in both cases – the bit and the rudder – are compared to the tongue. When God has control of our heart, it will come out in speech marked by His Wisdom and flavored by His grace. When God does not have control of our heart, it will also come out in speech marked by anger, jealousy, selfish ambition, contention, caustic criticism, cynicism, and a host of other evils source in wisdom from below (3:14-16).
- Illustration: In 1933, Adolf Hitler used his mouth to start a global conflict that resulted in multiplied millions of deaths and to inflame one of the greatest human genocides in our history as a race. In 1940, Winston Churchill used his mouth to motivate a tiny nation to rise and stand against an army that vastly outnumbered them – and his mouth led to victory. Both men used their mouths in ways that impacted millions and set the direction of entire nations . . . for good and for evil!

B. Our Tongue is the source of Grave Danger – it is a fire. (3:5-6)

⁵ So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. (NASB)

- Our tongue is the source of grave danger because it possesses the power to destroy our lives and greatly damage others.
- **Behold** . . . take note . . . a little flame can ignite a massive fire that rages out of control and brings great damage and destruction! (3:5b)
- Many examples exist of this devastating danger –

- ❖ The Great Chicago fire of 1871 – destroyed 3.5 miles of city, 17,000 buildings, 250 lives.
- ❖ On same day, Oct 8, 200 miles north another fire burned through the town of Peshtigo WI– temperatures of more than 2000 degrees and driven by winds of 110 mph – by the time it was over it had destroyed 12 towns, 1875 square miles of timber, and 1200 to 2000 lives were lost.
- So, what is the point James is really making when he states that the tongue is a fire? Note: he moves beyond simile to actuality – not “the tongue is like a fire” but “the tongue is a fire.”

1. *An untamed tongue is like a fiery world full of every kind of evil: And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; (3:6)*

- The tongue as fire requires fuel – and that fuel is internal.
- This is true because the tongue has a source for everything it says – the heart of a man. Jesus made this very point when He rebuked the Pharisees, “*Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks*” (Matt 12:34).
- And Scripture reveals that the heart of an unredeemed man who does not trust the Lord but rather turns away from the Lord is deceitful above all things and desperately sick (Jer. 17:5,9).

2. *An untamed tongue will defile and stain the whole of our life:*

the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles (staining) the entire body (3:6)

- James has reminded us that true, authentic religion that is pure and undefiled before God has two important concerns: First, to care for others as one would care for self; and second, to keep oneself unstained by the world (1:27).
- For most of chapter 2, James has been addressing the first of these concerns by exposing and rebuking the defective faith of his readers that served others selectively and showed partiality to the wealthy at the expense of the poor (2:1-1-13).
- In chapter 4:1-11 James will address the second concern by rebuking his readers for embracing the world and allowing its values and

behaviors to stain their lives and ruin their relationships with each other and ultimately with God!

3. *And if left untamed it can destroy the whole course of our life: and sets on fire the course of our life (3.6).*

- Whatever sinful impulse or lust is controlling the life will come out of the mouth and will destroy that life as surely and as completely as a raging fire destroys a forest.

4. *It can create a living hell on earth filled every form of wicked deed or thought because it is speaking the same sort of words that Satan speaks:*

and is set on fire by hell (3.6)

- every relationship, occupation, and ultimately our entire life will be ***damaged, defiled, and destroyed*** by an out-of-control mouth.
 - Friendships will be severely damaged
 - Marriages will be irreparably broken
 - Children alienated and destroyed
 - Careers ruined and opportunities lost
 - Hearts crushed and dreams ruined
 - Souls damned

III. Our Communication affects the credibility of our life's message:

James 3:9–12 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰ from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. ¹¹ Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

- Nothing will compromise or destroy our Christian confession quicker than an untamed tongue. James reminds us that when we refuse to tame our tongue -

A. *We are duplicitous – We bless God and We curse men (3:9)*

B. *We are inconsistent – we use our mouth to bless and to curse – these things must not be! - why? (3:10)*

C. Because such a mouth creates an irreconcilable conflict with the Gospel – a fountain can't produce sweet and bitter water and a fig tree can't bear olives or an olive tree figs! (3:11-12)

- And this is what James was talking about way back in chapter 1:26 when he stated that a person who refuses to bridle his tongue is not only self-deceived about his faith – His religion is defiled before God and worthless before men.
- This person's religion is defiled before God because to curse someone made in God's image, is actually to curse the One in whose image that person was made.
- James' readers would have immediately grasped this truth – to utter a curse at the image of Caesar that was located in Ephesus was to curse Caesar who lived in Rome.
- To curse the likeness of God on earth is to effectively curse God in heaven which creates an irreconcilable conflict when that same mouth professes to “bless God.”

Conclusion: *So how do I master my mouth?* Since James exposed the problem, let's let James give us help and counsel.

1. Recognize that we can't tame our tongue in our own strength.

but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

- James is giving us an important reality – we can tame many things in life but we are powerless to tame our mouth – because our mouth is controlled by our heart.
- He reminds us that, in accordance with the creation mandate in Genesis 1-3, mankind has been able to subdue and control every realm of animal life on the planet. But, mankind has lost the power to tame or subdue his own tongue.
- But that does not mean the tongue cannot be subdued and brought under control of Someone who can help us use it for the purpose for which it was created – to glorify God (bless) and to benefit others.
- Which is why James exhorts us to submit our lives to God and to His Word because He has given us a new heart that is capable of knowing and doing

God's Will AND He has imparted to us His Spirit who will enlighten and enable us to understand God's Word.

- So the way to tame/control my mouth is to let God take/control my heart!
Great – how do I do this?

2. Receive God's word with meekness and not resistance!

Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath . . . and receive with meekness the engrafted word which is able to save your souls (1:19-21).

3. Resolve to be true to the truth even when your heart struggles.

But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth! (3:14)

4. Refuse to speak evil or grumble against my brother no matter what the provocation.

Speak not evil one of another, brethren! (4:11)

5. Run to God's mercy and Rest in God's grace (4:7-10)

- Submit and draw near to God about this (4:7-8a)
- Truly mourn and repent when you sin with your mouth (4:8b-9)
- Humble yourself before God (4:10)

6. Request Help – from others and from God (5:16a)

Confess your faults one to another and pray one for another that ye may be healed.

- Our tongue will either be controlled by Wisdom from Above or it will manifest that we are controlled by wisdom from below. Just as Jesus observed that when our "eye" is evil our whole life is affected by that evil, so when our tongue is untamed, our whole life will be marked by a lack of submission to God, to His Spirit, and to His Word.
- Corrupt speech produces corruption in our own lives and in the body of Christ. But gentle, gracious speech will bring life, peace, and joy from God and with others.
- A person who has cultivated a whole-hearted, single-minded, fully trusting faith will manifest that this is so by consistent Spirit-controlled, grace-flavored communication that comes out of a heart that has been born

again out of the good and perfect gift God sent down from heaven – the Word of Truth (1:18).

Psalm 19:14

Let the words of my mouth

And the meditation of my heart

Be acceptable in thy sight (my whole life – word/deed)

O Lord . . .

My Strength (I can't tame my tongue – who will help me?)

*And My Redeemer! (Who alone gives grace, mercy, forgiveness,
and strength for this!)*

I can't tame my tongue so God must be my strength!

I stumble in many areas including my mouth . . So God must be my Redeemer and deliverer!