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Series: *Some Final Lessons in Neighboring*

Title: *Speech Lessons*

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Scripture: James 3:1-13

I want to begin this morning by sharing some interesting FACTS about an interesting PART of the body, this part (stick out your tongue).

- Did you know that the tongue is the only muscle in the human body that works without any support from the skeleton? It's known as a muscular hydrostat.
- Did you know the tongue can only sense taste if it's wet. So, if you were wandering in the desert with a dry tongue and were to put a lemon on your tongue---you wouldn't go like this. (look like you ate a sour lemon)

Do you know why the doctor always tells you to stick out your tongue?

- It's because the color of the tongue can tell a lot about your health. Pink that means you're in good health. White could mean you have a fungal infection. And a yellow tongue could mean fever or a stomach problem.
- Here's something else. Every tongue is unique. Your tongue imprint is the only one of its kind--like your fingerprint. Can you imagine policemen "tongue-printing" criminals?
- Did you know women have shorter tongues than men? Kind of blows the popular but completely inaccurate saying that women are "tail-waggers."
- If you ever visit Tibet, feel free to stick your tongue out at people. In Tibet its not considered rude. In fact, it's a popular greeting.

And speaking of communicating greetings, that's where our tongues tend to trip us up. You see, this fleshy appendage plays a big part in helping us speak. And the sad fact is, we all use our tongues to form sinful words--hurtful words. As James 3:2 says, "**...we all stumble in many ways...[and] none of us are without fault when it comes to what we SAY...**"

I think one reason we all fall short in this area is because it is so easy to do so. As that old saying goes, "*The tongue is a wet place...be careful lest it slips*" It IS easy to SLIP up and use our words to sin. In fact, as Guy King says, "*The spirit of every one of the ten commandments can be broken by the tongue.*" Truth be told we have ALL used our tongues to break God's loving laws.

Of course, the tongue isn't the only way we "speak." We form words with our fingers and send them out using social media and e-mail or texts. Everyone knows how hurtful THOSE electronic words can be. The sad truth is, we have all used our words to hurt others. We've held someone up in a conversation like a paper doll and snipped away until nothing was left but pieces on the floor. With that in mind, let's stop right now for a time of honest confession. If you have ever used your tongue to speak bad of another person—if you've ever used your words, written or spoken, to hurt would you raise your hands? Thanks for your honesty. With that confession as our motivation let's see what James has to say about this important aspect of neighboring.

Take your Bibles and turn to James 3:1-12 and if able, I invite you to stand in respect for God's Word as it's read:

1 - Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

- 2 - We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their 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 whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.**
- 7 - All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind,**
- 8 - but no human being 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 human beings, who have been made in God's likeness.**
- 10 - Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.**
- 11 - Can both fresh water and saltwater flow from the same spring?**
- 12 - My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.**

In this chapter of James there are four speech lessons I want us to note; lessons that will help us be better neighbors when it comes to the way we use our tongues.

LESSON #1 - The tongue has the power to DIRECT.

As James puts it, like the bit in a horse's mouth that is able to direct the animal's every movement and like the rudder that determines the course of a ship as it crosses powerful ocean currents, the tongue can DIRECT the entire life of an individual for good or evil.

James cites a great example of the human tongue's "directing power" in the work of TEACHERS, No doubt one reason God put this in James' mind is because teachers were very influential in his day. Remember, Christianity grew out of the Jewish faith and in Judaism rabbis or teachers were VERY highly revered. In fact, the name, "rabbi" means "my great one." Everywhere they went these Jewish teachers were treated with great respect. Their words were always heeded. The teaching of a Rabbi was taken very seriously. It was actually held that a man's duty to his Rabbi exceeded his duty to his parents, because his parents only brought him into the life of this world; whereas his Rabbi could bring him into the life of the world to come. It was said that if a man's parents and a man's Rabbi were captured by an enemy, the Rabbi must be ransomed first. If Rabbi and parents needed help, it was the duty to help the Rabbi first. If you were on a flight and the oxygen masks dropped down, put the mask on your Rabbi first. All kidding aside, RABBIS were very highly respected by Jews in the 1st century and much of this respect for Rabbis was passed on to teachers in the early church. That respect was deserved because these teachers had the ability to direct the spiritual growth of their students.

In fact, in some ways, teachers were more influential than even the apostles and missionaries because teachers weren't always on the move. Unlike Paul and Barnabas and Peter and John, teachers stayed in one congregation for years—sometimes for their entire lives; working within one group of believers teaching them the Scriptures—guiding or directing their spiritual development. So, a teacher had the awe-inspiring potential of putting the stamp of his or her own faith and knowledge on these new Christians. Teachers literally DIRECTED the growth of the early church.

Even today teachers would be a good example to cite when it comes to the power of the tongue to direct young lives because, as Proverbs 22:6 says when we, ***“Train up—or teach—or DIRECT—a child the way he should go...when he is old he will not depart from it.”***

Well, with this example James helps us to see that the tongue does have incredible DIRECTING power—and it does. Think about it.

- The president of the United States speaks a few words and the nation is at war. With his words, hundreds of thousands—even millions—of lives are affected.
- The tongue speaks the words, ***“I DO”*** on the lips of a bride or groom and a lifelong relationship is initiated.
- It speaks the word, ***“GUILTY”*** on the lips of a judge and the destiny of an individual is determined.
- It speaks the word, ***“NO”*** on the lips of a person confronted by the call of Jesus Christ and it directs the individual into an eternity separated from God.

The tongue has the power to DIRECT.

Congressman Elijah Cummings who passed away a week or so ago once shared how words directed his life. In a speech given at Howard University in 2000 he said, *“This morning, as I drove through the early-morning, South Baltimore traffic toward I-95 and Washington, I passed near the elementary school that I attended nearly 40 years ago. I spent most of my elementary school training as an unhappy member of what then was called the 3rd group—what we today call special education. To this day, I remember the cold, incredulous, rejecting words of my 6th grade school counselor. ‘You want to be a lawyer? Who do you think you are?’ When I think back to that time, I do something I have done every morning of my adult life. I thank God for the wonderful adults who gave me my head start in life: I thanked God for Mr. Hollis Posey, the sixth-grade teacher who listened to my dreams, who believed in my potential as a human being---and who taught to my strengths, not my limitations. I thanked God for my parents, who convinced me that I could become whatever I decided to be. I made it out of the 3rd group. I graduated second in my class from Baltimore City College High School. I became a Phi Beta Kappa at Howard University. I became a lawyer at the University of Maryland. I was elected to public office and rose to the position of speaker pro tem of the Maryland House of Delegates---and today I serve the people of Baltimore as a member of the Congress of the United States of America. I survived and succeeded because of positive parental involvement, and because of Mr. Hollis Posey's belief in me---because he taught to my strengths and helped me learn and achieve in my own way.”*

Words directed Congressman Cummings right into the U.S. House of Representatives where he served for 23 years!

LESSON TWO - The tongue has the power to DESTROY.

Look at verses 5-6. James says, ***“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 it itself set on fire by hell.”*** James is saying that the tongue can cause damage like the spark that started the forest fires that are even now raging across California.

This is a good word picture and here’s why. The damage the tongue causes is WIDE RANGING.

Like those flames that quickly spread across hundreds of miles, a word spoken in one place can hurt someone far away. It’s also UNCONTROLLABLE like a fire. I mean you can’t take a word back. This is especially true when that word is “spoken” on social media--as this man realized.

VIDEO – Commercial “REPLY ALL”

No matter how many computers and smart phones you destroy you cannot stop a word from spreading. It's like trying to get toothpaste BACK into the tube. You can't do it. Spoken words are unstoppable. Once they leave our mouths, they take on a life of their own. And like a forest fire, words can do extensive damage. WORDS hurt—they WOUND—and in way that is much more painfully destructive than actual physical wounds.

A. One way our words can hurt is when they are UNTRUTHFUL.

Proverbs 15:4 is true when it says, ***“The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.”***

Do you remember Richard Jewell? He was the security officer who was first on the scene when the bomb exploded at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. He acted conscientiously and courageously. He was a hero. Then, as is typical in such events, the FBI developed suspicions about Jewell and began to consider him a suspect in the bombing. The FBI was simply doing its job by suspecting everyone. However, the media went wild with the story. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution printed a story packed with innuendos and misleading comments. The New York Post called him a *“fat, former failed sheriff's deputy”* in a story that crossed the line between reporting him as a possible suspect and declaring him guilty. Even Tom Brokaw compromised his credibility by saying, *“They probably have enough to arrest him right now, probably enough to prosecute him. But you always want enough to convict him.”* As it turned out, Richard Jewell didn't plant the bomb. He really was a hero. He put his life in danger to save other people and he was ripped to shreds by the press. He sued and they compensated him--but the damage was done.

UNTRUTH is incredibly destructive.

Perhaps this is why when God gave the writer of Proverbs his list of seven sins He hates the most two of them were, ***“a lying tongue”*** and a ***“false witness.”*** We must remember that lying is the very antithesis of God's character. As James puts it in his first chapter, God is truth that ***“does not change like shifting shadow.”*** So, when we embrace deceit in word or in deed we are not acting like our Creator and Redeemer. Instead we are modeling our lives after satan himself; our adversary who ***“...does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie he speaks from his own nature for he is a liar and the father of lies.”*** (John 8:44)

B. A second way words can be destructive is when they are...UNKIND.

And the greatest example of UNKIND words that I can think about are words of GOSSIP. Now, let's be very clear in our understanding here. Gossip is not putting someone down to their face nor is it talking about someone behind their back in a complimentary way. GOSSIP is sharing negative words about a person when they are not present or not able to defend themselves. It can also involve the telling of a truth that does not need to be told for the purpose of hurting someone. Sometimes gossip involves simply asking questions like, *“Is Steve faithful to his wife?”* We even mask Gossip in *“religious activity”* like sharing a prayer request about something that was not intended for public knowledge. Sometimes we gossip by saying nothing when we hear things that we know are not true and say nothing to correct them. We also promote gossip by simply listening to it. Remember, there can be no gossip if there are no listening ears. People won't gossip to you unless they believe you enjoy hearing it.

But I think the most popular form of gossip these days is electronic--particularly the “group-email strategy.” This is when you attack or criticize someone in e-mail instead of privately face-to-face and copy others on the

same e-mail. Now why is that unkind? Well first, the goal of this electronic communication is not to restore a relationship, it's not to resolve a conflict. No, its goal is to hurt and to magnify that hurt by bringing others on board on your side. Plus it spreads information with others before the person being attacked or criticized has a chance to defend himself. I think of it as a verbal "dirty bomb."

Now—if gossip is so destructive then why do we participate in it so often? I think it is basically because it we are sinful beings and since we are, gossip brings us a sort of perverse pleasure. There is something inside us that makes it feel good to hear bad things about others and the juicier the better. Gossip also makes us feel powerful. We see the amazing affect our words have and we like being the source of so much power. It also makes us feel better about ourselves. Somehow, we think that if we can find something wrong with someone else and make it public knowledge it makes us look better. And James is right on the money here when he compares our words to POISON because gossip does spread uncontrollably—mainly because we find it easy to believe bad things. In fact, I believe that thanks to our sinful nature we tend to believe BAD easier than we do good. Gossip is also VERY destructive because people expand on what they hear until the rumor gets worse and worse—spreading like a fast-growing cancer.

C. A third way our words can be destructive is when we use the wrong TONE.

In Proverbs 15:1 it says, ***"A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make temper flare."*** (NLT) The lesson here is you can say something true; but if you say it with the wrong tone, it can wound the other person and lead him or her to follow your "harsh tone" example in their response. TONE is a powerful thing. It escalates arguments and says as much or more than the words themselves.

In the movie *The Green Mile*, Tom Hanks plays the administrative officer on death row at a prison. One of his subordinates, Percy, likes to keep things stirred up. One day he sees a mouse scurry across the floor and he goes after it screaming and cursing and throwing things, trying to kill it. In the process, he made quite a bit of noise. Afterwards, Hanks pulls Percy aside and says something along the lines of, *"Percy, we don't scare these men any more than we have to. They're under enough strain. Men under strain can snap, hurt themselves and hurt others. That's why our job is talking---not yelling."* Then he says, *"You'd do better to think of this place not as death row, but like an intensive care ward in a hospital."*

Listen. The volume and tone of your words can stir people up or calm them down. Tone can hurt or help. It's up to you.

D. Another way our words can be destructive is when they are UNSAID.

You see, we each need relationships with others—especially as Christians and one way we develop and strengthen those relationships is by simply communicating with each other. I think this is what Hebrews 10:24ff is talking about when it says, ***"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds...encouraging one another."*** The fact our fellowship as a church is damaged when we don't talk with each other. Our words are one way we build up one another and make our unity as a church healthy and strong. Unfortunately, we get so busy in well-doing as we run around the church getting things done—that we don't take the time to sit and talk and hear about each other's lives. We don't take the time to pray for one another and encourage one another. We don't take the time to divide sorrows and multiply joys. UNSAID words are damaging indeed.

For all these reasons we have to learn to control our communication for our words or even lack of them can be VERY destructive. They can lower morale and destroy the characters of innocent people. Cynical words can promote doubt and disbelief. Negative words can promote depressive moods. Relationships can be poisoned by the right words slipped into one's conversation. Proverbs 18:21 is very accurate when it says, ***"Death and life are in the power of the tongue."*** And relationships die without word-fed healthy communication. No

wonder David prayed in Psalm 141:3, ***“Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.”*** But before we go any further in our study we need to understand that this little two-ounce muscle in our mouths is not the problem.

LESSON #3 - The Tongue has the power to DISPLAY

As I said earlier, the tongue can be an indicator of our physical health. Well, James says the same thing is true about our spiritual health. Through every word we communicate, the mouth telegraphs the condition of our heart. As Jesus said in Luke 6:45, ***“The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil---for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.”*** So, the truth is the tongue is actually neither friend nor foe. Like a bucket draws fresh water from a fresh-water well, the tongue dips down and pours out whatever is in our hearts. If the source is clean, that is what the tongue communicates. If it is contaminated, again, the tongue will expose it. As James says here, the tongue displays what is in us. It shows how close we are walking to God. It identifies us either as growing Christians or as carnal Christians. So what does your tongue say? Does the way you speak DISPLAY the fact that you are walking close to God—or does it show a heart polluted by the world? Ok...James’ last speech lesson is a sobering one.

LESSON # Four – We need God’s help to control our tongues.

Look at what James says in verse 7, ***“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.”***

In this last phrase James is saying that our unkind or untrue words are like poison in that they cannot be contained. Our words slip away from all restrictions placed on them. J. B. Philips translates this phrase like this, ***“[The tongue] is always liable to break out.”*** Well, James is correct. No MAN can tame the human tongue. It is beyond our strength. We can train birds, horses—even killer whales—but not the human tongue. No, as James says, no MAN can tame the tongue—but Jesus can. The Bible teaches that only He has the supernatural power and divine wisdom that is needed to keep this little monster in check. He healed the demon of Gadara and a tongue that had cried out in blasphemy was tamed such the man, ***“...went his way and told everyone throughout the whole region the great things Jesus had done for him.”*** (Mark 5:20) Simon Peter was once known for his bragging tongue, but Jesus tamed it such that it delivered a sermon at Pentecost and thousand were led to faith in Christ. Saul of Tarsus had a wicked tongue that scoffed at the early Christians but Jesus tamed it and made it eloquent in proclaiming the love of God throughout the known world. So, when it comes to our speech what we need is not self-control but CHRIST-control. What about you? Perhaps you have a careless tongue. Let Jesus tame it. Perhaps you have a critical tongue. Let Jesus tame it. Maybe yours is a gossiping tongue. Let Jesus tame it. It could be that you have a selfish tongue. Let Jesus tame it. Are you good at using your tongue to slander others? Let Jesus tame it. Your problem may be that you have a silent tongue—one that refuses to bear witness to the love of God. Let Jesus tame it. Or you may have a lazy tongue—in that you don’t use it to encourage others.

I would like us to pray. Every head bowed and every eye closed please.

Father God, like your servant, Isaiah, we are people of unclean lips. We all need your forgiveness and cleansing for the ways we have abused the power of speech. So, cauterize our mouths as You did his. Purify our hearts. Forgive us for the many times we have used our words to sin.

*And then God, I ask that You would empower us to use our tongues in ways that will help and not hurt Your kingdom. As David says, ***“...let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in****

Thy sight Oh Lord our Rock and our Redeemer...” Now—if that is your prayer Christian. If you want Jesus to be Lord of your mouth, then will you lift your hand? Thank you.

In Jesus’ name we pray, AMEN

This morning if you are here and are not a Christian—then I invite you to use your tongue to become one. As Romans 10:9-10 says, ***“If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord...and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”*** This morning, won’t you walk forward and confess to all of us this morning that Jesus is your Savior and Lord? We sing now to give you an opportunity to make your decision public. Whether it is to confess Jesus as Lord and Savior or to join this church family. Won’t you come now, as we stand and sing?