*James: Truth that Hurts · Sermon Seven*

# The Untamable Tongue

*What Your Mouth Reveals About Your Heart*

James 3:1–12

James is often called the Proverbs of the New Testament because every line seems to hit hard and fast, bringing revelation, conviction, and truth that hurts. Remember the context. James is writing to Jewish Christians who have been persecuted to the point that they've been scattered from their homes, families, and communities. And rather than simply comforting them in their hardship, James confronts them. He understands that hardship has a way of exposing what is really happening inside of us.

That fits the theme we've seen throughout this entire book. James is confronting the gap between what we say we believe and how we actually live. He's calling Christians out of half-hearted devotion and double-mindedness into maturity, wholeness, and a faith that actually affects the way we live.

Last week we finished chapter 2, where James told us that saving faith is living faith. Genuine faith does something. Our works don't save us, but saving faith produces a different kind of life. James leaves absolutely no room for a Christianity where we believe the right things but live however we want. Today James is going to show us one of the clearest places our faith, maturity, and heart become visible: our mouth. Open your Bibles to James 3:1–12.

*i.*

## The Weight of the Teacher's Words

> Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.
>
> James 3:1, ESV

This feels like an interesting place for James to start a teaching on the tongue. But teachers primarily exercise their ministry through words, and their words have the ability to influence an entire group of people. So James starts with the people whose words carry the greatest influence.

Apparently there were people who wanted the position of teacher, and James gives them a warning. Don't be too quick to want the microphone. Don't be too quick to want the platform. Increased influence brings increased accountability. And notice that James includes himself: "we who teach." He isn't standing above everyone else here. He knows he will stand underneath the same judgment.

As someone who teaches Scripture, this verse should scare me a little. Every week I stand in front of you and essentially say, "This is what God says." There's a massive difference between "here's my opinion" and "thus says the Lord." If I misrepresent myself, that's one thing. If I misrepresent God, that's something entirely different. There's a huge weight that comes with teaching the Word, and it isn't only the weight of having right character. It's the weight of handling the Word accurately, because teachers don't simply answer to the people listening. They answer to the God they're speaking for.

And this verse is usually only read through the lens of Bible teachers. But it includes anyone who positions themselves to teach the people around them, whether they have a formal title or not. Are you teaching on social media, in a small group, or to friends and coworkers who will listen? That counts.

*ii.*

## Your Mouth Will Tell on You

> 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 3:2, ESV

Again, notice James's humility: "we all stumble." Nobody gets out of this sermon. Not me. Not you. Not the person you're currently thinking really needs to hear this.

Then James singles out our speech as a particular measurement of maturity. The person who doesn't stumble in what he says is a "perfect man." We've already seen this word in James. *Teleios* carries the idea of maturity, completeness, and wholeness. James isn't talking about sinless perfection. He's talking about Christian maturity.

In other words, if you want to know how mature somebody is, listen to them talk. Not when they're leading Bible study. Not when they're praying. Listen when they're angry. Listen when they're frustrated. Listen when somebody disagrees with them, or when someone's name comes up who they don't like. Pressure has a way of revealing what's actually inside us. Your mouth will tell on you.

*iii.*

## Small Things Steer Big Things

> If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 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. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.
>
> James 3:3–5, ESV

James gives us two analogies: a horse and its bit, a ship and its rudder. In both, the thing doing the directing is tiny compared to the thing being directed. A small bit directs a powerful horse. A small rudder directs a massive ship. His point is pretty obvious: small things can determine the direction of big things.

Your tongue is tiny, but it can steer your entire life. One sentence can change a marriage. One sentence can destroy a friendship. One sentence can fracture a church. One sentence spoken to a child can stay with them for decades. One sentence can destroy someone's reputation. But the opposite is also true. "I forgive you." "Please forgive me." "I was wrong." "I love you." Words are small, but words steer our lives.

*iv.*

## A Small Fire

> How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 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.
>
> James 3:5–6, ESV

First a bit. Then a rudder. Now fire. James changes the analogy because he isn't only concerned with where your tongue can take you. He's concerned with what your tongue can do to everyone around you.

Nobody has to torch the entire forest. All you need is a spark, and the fire does the rest. That's gossip. That's slander. That's repeating something you don't actually know is true, or sharing information that wasn't yours to share, or exaggerating a story because the exaggerated version makes somebody look worse. And once the fire starts, you don't get to control where it goes. You can apologize. You can clarify. You can repent. But you cannot unsay what you said.

Then James uses incredibly strong language: "set on fire by hell." The word is *Gehenna*. James is saying there's a kind of speech that doesn't smell like heaven. It smells like hell. So let's get clear on the difference between heavenly speech and demonic speech.

Heavenly speech isn't always positive, and demonic speech isn't always negative. Jesus said some incredibly hard things. Sometimes the most loving thing you can say is painful, and sometimes flattering someone is actually wicked. Heavenly speech isn't always calm, and demonic speech isn't always angry, either. You can destroy someone with a smile. Gossip can sound compassionate. Manipulation can sound gentle. And truth can sometimes come with tears, urgency, or even righteous anger.

So the test isn't, "Was it nice?" The test is, "What kind of fruit does it produce?" Heavenly speech tells the truth, builds what is good, corrects toward righteousness, protects the image-bearer, and produces peace, repentance, reconciliation, and life. Demonic speech lies or distorts, tears people down, slanders and gossips, degrades the image-bearer, and produces division, bitterness, destruction, and death. Heavenly speech isn't defined by how it sounds. It's defined by what it produces.

*v.*

## The Tongue No One Can Tame

> For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.
>
> James 3:7–8, ESV

James says humanity has managed to tame the animal kingdom: beasts, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures. But there's one thing humanity has been unable to tame. The tongue. And notice that James doesn't say it's difficult to tame. He says, "no human being can tame the tongue."

That means this isn't ultimately a self-discipline problem. Try harder. Count to ten. Learn better communication skills. Bite your tongue. Those things can be helpful, but none of them solve James's fundamental problem, because the tongue isn't ultimately the source. The heart is.

*vi.*

## Blessing and Cursing

> With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.
>
> James 3:9–10, ESV

Now James gets to the contradiction. We worship God with our mouth, and then we use the same mouth to destroy people made in His image. Think about how insane that is. We sing worship songs about how much we love Jesus, and then we gossip about and slander His bride on the way home.

James specifically reminds us that the person we're talking about is "made in the likeness of God." You cannot claim to honor the Creator while casually destroying His image-bearers. And James says, "My brothers, these things ought not to be so." That's it. No caveat. Not, "But you don't understand what they did." Not, "But what I said was true." Not, "I was just venting," or "I needed to process," or "I was only asking for prayer."

Christians have become really good at baptizing sinful speech. We don't gossip; we "share concerns." We don't spread rumors; we're "asking for prayer." Now, I'm not talking about any person in this room. I'm speaking from my experience in churches over the last eighteen years. Putting "pray for them" at the end of gossip doesn't magically make it prayer. Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is shut your mouth.

*vii.*

## The Spring and the Stream

> Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 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

This is where James finally gets underneath everything. A spring produces water according to its source. A fig tree produces figs because it's a fig tree. A grapevine produces grapes because it's a grapevine. So James isn't ultimately diagnosing a vocabulary problem. He's diagnosing a source problem.

And this is exactly what Jesus taught. "There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him" (Mark 7:15). Then Jesus explains: "For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery" (Mark

7:21). The real problem isn't primarily what's getting into you. It's what's already inside you. "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34).

Your mouth is an overflow. "I only said that because I was angry." Exactly. Anger didn't create it. Anger revealed it. "I said it because I was exhausted." Exhaustion didn't put it there. Exhaustion exposed it. Circumstances don't create the condition of your heart. They expose it. So when something sinful comes out of my mouth, I shouldn't only ask, "Why did I say that?" I need to ask, "Why was that in me?"

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*Your words don't create the condition of your heart.*
*They reveal it.*

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So stop trying to control the stream while ignoring the spring.

*viii.*

## What Christian Speech Looks Like

Speak truthfully. "Having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor" (Ephesians 4:25). Don't lie. Don't manipulate. Don't exaggerate. Don't intentionally tell half the story. And don't repeat something you heard as something you know. If you don't know it's true, don't present it as truth.

Speak to build, not destroy. "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up" (Ephesians 4:29). That doesn't mean we never confront. James has been confronting us for three chapters, and sometimes love says incredibly difficult things. But biblical correction has restoration as its goal. Before you speak, ask: am I trying to build something or burn something?

Speak with grace. "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4:6). Grace doesn't mean weakness, dishonesty, or avoiding hard conversations. It means remembering that the person I'm speaking to or about bears the image of God and is worthy of dignity on that fact alone. If you don't speak with grace, you run the risk of being completely correct in what you're saying and completely sinful in how you're saying it.

Be slow to speak. "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (James 1:19). You don't have to respond immediately. You don't have to send the text right now. You don't have to correct everything, share every opinion, or tell everything you know. Not everything that is true needs to be said. And not everything that needs to be said needs to be said right now.

Refuse gossip and slander. "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you" (Ephesians 4:31). Gossip almost never introduces itself as gossip. It disguises itself as concern. There are obviously situations where sin, abuse, danger, or serious wrongdoing needs to be reported to the appropriate people, and biblical silence does not mean protecting sin. But there's a massive difference between bringing something into the light to deal with it and spreading information because we enjoy possessing it. Here's a helpful rule: if they aren't affected by the problem, part of the problem, or part of the solution, why are you telling them? Before repeating something, ask: Is it true? Is it necessary? Am I telling the right person? And what am I hoping happens because I told them? That last question will expose your heart.

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Christian Speech

Truthful › Building › Gracious › Slow › Refusing Gossip

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*ix.*

## Come to the Table

Every week we come to the table and remember the body and blood of Jesus. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 11 that before we do that, we should examine ourselves. So that's what we're going to do. Sit quietly before the Lord and ask Him some questions.

### Before You Come to the Table

What does my speech reveal about my heart? What comes out when I'm angry, when I'm tired, when someone hurts me, when someone else succeeds? Have I used my words to wound someone: my spouse, my children, my friends, someone at work, someone in this church? Maybe I was right about the issue but sinful in the way I handled it. Have I spoken about someone in a way I wouldn't speak to them? Have I gossiped, slandered, or repeated something that wasn't mine to repeat? Have I enjoyed sharing information because it made somebody else look smaller?

Is there someone I need to ask forgiveness from? Maybe repentance doesn't end at this table. Maybe it starts here. Maybe there's a conversation that needs to happen this week. Not, "I'm sorry if you were offended." Not, "I'm sorry, but you made me angry." Simply, "What I said was wrong. Will you forgive me?"

And finally, ask: Lord, what is happening at the source? Maybe you've spent years trying to control the stream while ignoring the spring. Maybe the gossip is coming from jealousy. Maybe the criticism is coming from pride. Maybe the cutting remarks are coming from bitterness, the constant need to correct people is coming from insecurity, or the anger is coming from unforgiveness.

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*Don't just ask Jesus to change what comes out.*
*Ask Him to show you where it's coming from.*

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*Soli Deo Gloria*

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