

**Taming the Tongue**  
**James 3:1–12**  
**February 26, 2023**

When we were beginning the book of Acts a few years back, we attempted to make the argument that Acts is about the Kingdom of God, or more specifically, the *King* of that Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> And just in case we're too man-centered and miss that emphasis, Acts 1 begins with the disciples' question about Jesus restoring the Kingdom. And while Jesus does critique their question, He also answers it. In essence, He replies, "Do you want to know about the Kingdom? Watch this." And He ascends to rule (Acts 1:9). How do we know *that's* how the disciples took it? In Acts 2, Peter declares that the resurrected and ascended King Jesus *is* the One pouring out the Spirit at Pentecost. So—the way we taught it—as the Spirit of God works through the book of Acts, we recognize that it's the rule of King Jesus being spread.

Because of *that* reality, early in that study we asked some questions about reign or rule. What shows more power? Someone *merely* bending the knee to a king? Outward conformity alone? Or someone *gladly* bowing their heart? Which one shows more power? And, of those gladly bowing their heart, what would bring more honor to the One being bowed to? People from one era/one zip code? Or glad submission from hundreds of eras and host of places? Wouldn't that peoples' unity bring more honor to the One who'd united them?

That kingdom framework helped us work through the book of Acts. Maybe you say, "But what does this have to do with James? Or what does it have to do with the way we speak?" Quite a bit. And I hope to make that clear by the time we finish.

**1. See the Demands of the Tongue** (vv. 1–2)

Verse 1: **Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.** Because of the Jewish influence upon this particular group of Christians, the "teachers" James referred to would've been roughly equivalent to a rabbi, at least in terms of recognition. In a society where few could read, that kind of role brought with it a certain amount of esteem.<sup>2</sup> As far as career paths go, this would've been a respected one.

Now, whether these readers' motive was esteem or not, it seems that many aspired to the role. James says, quite plainly, "Less of you should." Who thinks we could talk one of our seminaries into making James 3:1 their motto? Maybe they could put it in large font at the top of their application. Or they could chisel it into a column at the entrance to campus: **Let not many of you become teachers.**

It's so counterintuitive to the evangelical enterprise. Surely, we should just encourage those that seek that kind of role. Yet, James isn't concerned about enrollment; he's concerned about more important matters. Only a few of them should become teachers because, v. 1, **knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.**

Some would say this is a "harsher" judgment. I think, however, that "stricter" is a good translation. What does James mean by, "stricter"? Verse 2 explains, beginning with the word, "for." Here's the basis:<sup>3</sup> **For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.**

---

<sup>1</sup> While many might call that history of the first-century church *The Acts of the Apostles* or *the Acts of the Church*, it might be best to describe what Luke records as *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus*. See Alan Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus*.

<sup>2</sup> Doug Moo, *The Letter of James*, 185.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Vlachos, *James*, EGGNT, 105; Moo, 186.

To explain why fewer folks should aim to be “teachers,” James begins by gently pointing out the variety of ways we stumble. But, then, he narrows the focus. Though there are a variety of ways we might stumble, one of the ways we will *definitely* stumble is with our speech. And, in fact, if anyone *doesn't* stumble in that way, he is a perfect man. You can almost hear the incredulity. That is, if you've succeeded flawlessly with your speech, come on up, we'll parade you before the masses. We'll get you a T-shirt with an arrow pointing up, declaring, “*This* is a perfect man.”<sup>4</sup> We've found him!

James is hinting at the dangers of the tongue that he'll soon elaborate upon. But note that he's *also* saying that this aspect of our lives is so difficult to conquer that—if we were, theoretically, able to conquer it—we'd *also* be able to bridle the rest of our body. The ability to control our speech assumes the ability to control everything else.<sup>5</sup>

So why should not many of you become teachers? Why is the judgment for teachers going to be stricter? Because teachers are more regularly engaging in the arena that is almost impossible to keep from sin.<sup>6</sup> They speak more. And more words likely means more errors.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, there will be more to judge. It's not unlike saying to a firefighter, “Your job is more dangerous than others.”

So, those of us that teach ought to be sobered. The demands are high. To be quite practical, I'm so deeply grateful for what was modeled for me here when I arrived in my early 20s. Many of you have thanked me for putting together a manuscript each week. I'm not so sure I'd want to do it otherwise. Some can speak faithfully without notes, I'm sure. I don't think I can. Because, when we don't think hard *before* we speak, we might be playing with matches.

See the demands of the tongue. Note secondly,

## 2. See the Dimensions/Direction of the Tongue (vv. 3–5)

Is this whole passage directed to teachers *alone*? I don't think so. Instead, I think he uses the desire for many to be teachers as a jumping off point to address more broadly the tongue itself. And as James is prone to do, he's lined up some masterful illustrations.

Verse 3: **Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.** I grew up with horses. This might be personal taste, but there aren't many more beautiful sights in the animal world than a chiseled horse galloping across a field. I wrote “chiseled” horse; but I'm not sure there's another kind. Horses are strong. You can see it. And yet, as a 50-pound kid, my brother and I could sit on one of those magnificent animals, grab reins attached to the bit, and direct it.

James is illustrating his point from verse 2: what's in the mouth can direct the entire body. Does it matter that the bit is tiny, and the horse is jacked? No, it doesn't. The dimensions of the bit do not diminish its ability to direct.

James is my kind of guy. He's made the point with the horse, but wouldn't it be fun to make it another way, to see this principle illustrated elsewhere? Verse 4: **Look at the ships also. You could say, “Behold, also the ships!” James continues, Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.** Again, James is contrasting sizes. The ships are great in size. The winds are strong, violent even.<sup>8</sup> And yet wherever the pilot desires to go, the *very small* rudder directs.

---

<sup>4</sup> A good translation of the phrase, Vlachos, 107.

<sup>5</sup> Vlachos, 107.

<sup>6</sup> Moo, 106.

<sup>7</sup> Moo, 187

<sup>8</sup> Vlachos, 108.

You could have a nine-deck, 50,000-ton cruise liner directed through a storm by a 15-foot rudder.<sup>9</sup> Again, like the bit, the dimensions do not diminish its ability to direct.

And maybe at this point we're thinking about horses and ships to such a degree that we've forgotten the point of the illustrations. James hasn't. Verse 5: **So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.** Though your tongue might weigh a couple ounces,<sup>10</sup> does that diminish its ability to affect?<sup>11</sup>

Now that James has reminded us of the point of the horse and ship illustrations, he's got one more image for us. And, again, he calls upon the reader to "behold." Verse 5b: **See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!**

This text reminded me of the fire that engulfed the area around Gatlinburg/Pigeon Forge in 2016. I remember a terrifying video of two guys driving down one of those mountains with sparks flying into their windshield and cabins aflame on both sides. At certain points, trees had fallen in the road, and they had to drive *through* the inferno. During that fire, thousands of acres were burned, more than 2500 homes and businesses destroyed, and 14 people died. The most dominant theory was that the fire began when a couple teenage boys started a small campfire.<sup>12</sup> **See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire.** Once again, does the size or dimensions of the spark diminish its ability to direct or affect? Note third,

### 3. See the Danger of the Tongue (vv. 6–8)

For the moment, James is done with the similes, as in, "this is *like* this." He's pointed our eyes to the horse, the ships, and the fire *so that* he might plainly state verse 6: **And the tongue is a fire.** You say, "James, that's not very nuanced." It's tough to dodge that sentence or its implications. The word doesn't let us off the hook. We ought not underestimate the tongue because of its size. Small things affect large things. And, like a fire, the tongue can destroy.

Because of v. 6, it is **the very world of iniquity.** One reason we struggle to bridle the tongue is because it's a barometer of our sinful heart. It's the "heart's publisher."<sup>13</sup> Jesus said as much in Luke 6:45: **out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.** The tongue is the very world of iniquity.

And James isn't letting up. He goes on in v. 6, **the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body.** James already told us that one aspect of true religion is to keep ourselves *unstained* by the world (1:27). The tongue opposes that goal. It's set among our members, and can accomplish a different purpose. Like the rudder of a ship or the bit in the horse's mouth—the tongue can affect—or defile—the entire body.

What else can it do? Verse 6 goes on, saying that it, **sets on fire the course of our life.** As a fire destroys, our tongue can destroy. And *where* does this destructive power come from? Verse 6 ends, describing the tongue as, **set on fire by hell.** The devil knows the degree to which the tongue inflicts pain, fractures relationships, and sets trajectories. And, for that utterly depraved and sinister being, that's sufficient motivation. By means of the tongue, hell can set on fire the course of our life.

Verse 6 is gut punch after gut punch of realism. We wish it weren't so deeply true; but we know it is. We don't have to give examples of the destructive power of speech. We've all experienced it.

---

<sup>9</sup> See Jeff Robinson, *Taming the Tongue*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, 25.

<sup>11</sup> The boasting here seems to carry negative connotations. Vlachos, 110; Moo, 193.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson, 25.

<sup>13</sup> David Gibson, *Radically Whole*, 126.

Why does it run roughshod over relationship after relationship? Verse 7: **For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.** James seems to be taking us back to the fourfold division of the animal kingdom in Genesis 1.<sup>14</sup> For thousands of years, animal after animal has been domesticated by humans for our purposes: to plow fields, for transportation, for companionship, etc. Even if the animal was bigger and stronger than us, the ox would do humanity's bidding. The wildest of horses has been ruled. Humanity's resumé of taming is quite extensive. And yet . . .

Verse 7 again: **For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.** Verse 8: **But no one can tame the tongue.** It's as if James writes, "Every species has been tamed. . . the *tongue*, on the other hand."<sup>15</sup> Our translations seem to assume we carry the idea of humanity over from verse 7. And that's fine. But we should know that James repeats the word for humanity in verse 8, modifying the word "no one." In essence, he's saying that what the human species has been able to do over and over again within the created order, "no one from among humanity" is able to do with the tongue.<sup>16</sup> That's an important nuance.

Why can't we humans tame it? Verse 8b: **it is a restless evil.** It's uncontrollable.<sup>17</sup> It's a forest fire. On dry mountains in East Tennessee in 2016, fierce winds picked up sparks, carried them, and spread them. You couldn't harness that inferno to warm your home. It, instead, would turn your home to ash. It aims to destroy. The tongue, verse 8b, **is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.**

See the danger of the tongue. Note, fourth and finally,

#### 4. See the Division of the Tongue (vv. 9–12)

When I first began studying this book, I wasn't so sure that the double-minded, or divided, person was as great of an emphasis as some writers maintained. And yet every week I've preached it's been emphasized in the text.<sup>18</sup>

Like 2:1 when James wrote, **do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism,** James 3:9 indicates that our double-mindedness is a blatant contradiction of our faith. And, once again, he's moved away from imagery. He's walked into our worship service and heard a divided tongue. Verse 9: **With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God.**

If James is going to compare the tongue to a fire, call it a world of iniquity as well as a restless evil full of deadly poison, this verse seems to imply that the dangers of the tongue have much to do with how we speak about others. He's not *just* talking about the word you said when you slammed your finger in the door. He's concerned about the way believers talk about one another. As he's noted, we can't hold our faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ while *at the same time* showing favoritism. That's a contradiction. That's to divide faith from works. As is praising God while at the same time cursing those He made.

James seemingly just referenced Genesis 1 with the animals. And now he's taking us back to the first page of the Bible again, reminding us that those we speak ill of were, and are, made in

---

<sup>14</sup> Moo, 199.

<sup>15</sup> Tongue is first in the original, likely giving emphasis. Vlachos, 113.

<sup>16</sup> Moo, 200; Vlachos, 114.

<sup>17</sup> Vlachos, 114.

<sup>18</sup> Wrong again, Matt.

God's likeness. With the book we just completed on Wednesday nights, *Practicing Affirmation*,<sup>19</sup> we repeatedly said that *if* we were going to use our words toward others rightly, we had to—first—see them rightly. James is saying the same thing.

So, how do we *see* them rightly so that we might speak rightly *to*, and *of*, them? We're to be reminded that day 6 was the pinnacle of creation. The crowning achievement of God's world is not the French Alps, nor the elegant stallion, nor the expansive constellation, it's the person sitting next to you. Is that how you view your spouse, your child, your fellow church member?

Maybe you say, "What about sin? Is the image of God still visible?" As you might guess, most of the passages about the image of God in the Scriptures come *after* the fall. Genesis 9 is one. James 3 is another. To be clear, the fall *did* affect the image of God. But it did not eradicate it. R. C. Sproul writes, "In the fall of mankind, something ghastly happened. The image of God was severely tarnished. . . The Fall, however, did not destroy our humanity."<sup>20</sup> I've asked classes here before, "If Adam and Eve were a 10 on the image of God meter, where are we today?" It's an impossible question to answer precisely, but we *can* say that it's not a 10, and nor is it a 0.

James affirms that here in verse 9. We've been made in the likeness of God. We're *still* in the likeness of God. And, if that's true, he asks, "How can you belt out, 'O for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemer's praise,' and then use that same tongue to curse that which He fashioned to reflect Him?"

Some would say that verse 10 is the central statement of the passage<sup>21</sup>: **From the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.** I hope you're not skimming the "my brethren," clauses. Back in 2:5, James wrote, **Listen, my beloved brethren.** In last week's passage, he wrote, **What use is it, my brethren (2:14).** At the beginning of our passage today, **Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren (3:1).** He'll say it again in verse 12. Those "brethren" references aren't filler, or flattery. In fact, each syllable is inspired. James knows he's saying hard things. So, he's reminding those reading that he's *with* them. He's been united to them inseparably. And his warning of them concerning the tongue is an act of familial affection.

Verse 10 again: **From the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.** In other words, "this is not right."<sup>22</sup> What's not right? Just the cursing? No, what's not right is the *division* of the tongue, that *both* blessing and cursing come **from the same mouth.**

He's troubled by contradictory things proceeding from the *same* source. The tongue ought not be divided like this. To continue making the point, James asks questions we all know the answer to. Verse 11: **Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.** Each of these illustrations point out how absurd it would be for a source to produce something of a completely different kind.<sup>23</sup> You'd be shocked if you opened a ketchup packet and mustard came out, right?

What's James saying? He's not only being pastoral by calling them "brethren" he's being pastoral by reminding them of what God has done on their behalf. He's the source of something that ought to change their speech. Recall what James wrote back in 1:18: **In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits**

---

<sup>19</sup> By Sam Crabtree

<sup>20</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths*, 136. Moo, 204, writes, "the fall did not entirely erase the 'image of God' in humans."

<sup>21</sup> Vlachos, 104.

<sup>22</sup> NLT.

<sup>23</sup> Moo, 205.

**among His creatures.** The source of every good thing (1:17) chose—freely—to give us life. He brought us forth. He’s the source. He did this *by* the word of truth. The seed of this new life was the gospel. From among His creatures, He implanted the word (1:21) within those He loved. Because of that, the gospel has begun its uniting work *within* them. We’ve seen that throughout James. They, as redeemed first fruits (1:18), foreshadow the restoration He’ll one day bring about in all of creation.

So, if He’s done *that*, if *He’s* the source of new life, and the seed implanted within His people was the word of truth, can a fig tree produce olives? From the same mouth, should both blessing and cursing come?

## Conclusion

So, what do we do with the tongue, set among our members? On our own, it’s clear that we can’t control it. It might be small in size; but it better not be underestimated. It’s a fire. What do we do? Do we staple some figs on a branch and call it fruit?<sup>24</sup>

Maybe the answer is to return to how we began, asking, “What kind of kingdom brings the most honor to the King?” Is it outward conformity alone? Begrudging obedience? Or is it someone *gladly* bowing their heart?

And, of those gladly bowing their heart, what would bring more honor to the one being bowed to? People from one zip code, or from one era? Or glad submission from hundreds of time periods and from a host of places?

And to go one step further, what if this King’s rule applied, not to a *few* areas of our life, but in *all* things? Meaning, not only does He unite nations and cultures, He—as the source of all that’s good—*enables* those men and women to gladly bow before Him as they consider their hopes, their bodies, their stuff, their relationships, and *even* the words that proceed from their mouths.

Does our speech picture His rule? Have we *gladly* bent the knee, so that He might give life to our words? The tongue, James makes plain, is a restless evil. Who can tame it? Only One.

---

<sup>24</sup> Paul Tripp, quoted in Jonathan Leeman, *The Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 306.