



James 3:1-12 The Power and Peril of the Tongue

Summary: Our words are powerful and as Christians we possess the responsibility of stewarding our speech well.

This morning we are going to pick up where we left off last week and resume our study of James' epistle. We're going to be in the third chapter and we're going to see that virtually all of our passage this morning will concern the tongue, by which James refers to our capacity to speak and communicate.

As is the case with the rest of James' letter, this section is very practical and it is written to Christians to help us understand how to live and conduct our lives in light of the fact that we are saved by Christ.

Earlier in James 1:26, James said *"If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless."* As we get into chapter 3, you could think of this as the full exposition of what James meant in James 1:26. In considering this section of Scripture, we're going to be confronted by both the power as well as the peril of the tongue.

But even as we study its power and the danger that accompanies it, we'll also be confronted with our responsibility as Christians to master our tongue, to bridle and restrain it, and to live and speak as the new creations in Christ, which we truly are if we've believed in Jesus. Read along with me as we start in James 3:1 and go through verse 12.

James 3:1-12

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. ² For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he *is* a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. ³ Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. ⁴ Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. ⁵ Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!

⁶ And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. ⁸ But no man can tame the tongue. *It is* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹ With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these

things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

James begins this passage with a word of caution to those who want to become teachers. We see this in verses 1-2 where he writes:

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. ² For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he *is* a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.

It seems that James was concerned that some people wanted to be teachers for the wrong reasons. We're not told exactly, but we infer that some of those to whom James wrote wanted to be teachers for selfish motives, such as out of a desire to gain recognition, fame, and authority for themselves.

When James speaks of teachers, we understand that this is primarily addressed to those of us who are, or who desire to be, pastors and elders. At the same time, we can also recognize that if your ministry involves the transmission and instruction of God's Word, then you are a teacher, at least to some degree.

From this, we can also see that this principle applies to those who teach in other settings, such as in the Men's and Women's ministries, the Youth Group, those who provide Christian counseling, and so on. Now to be clear, the church needs teachers. One commentator remarked that at no time in history has the church had too many qualified teachers. In Ephesians 4:11-12, the apostle Paul says that God **gave** some to be pastors and teachers in order to equip the saints for the work of the ministry.

The point is that pastors and teachers are absolutely necessary, and furthermore those roles are given by God. So if you sense that God has placed a desire to teach on your heart, then you should pursue it and see if that is really what God is calling you to do. Nothing here in James is meant to discourage that.

Paul even tells us in 1 Timothy 3:1 that it is a good thing for men to desire to be elders and overseers in the church. The reason for this is that leadership and the responsibility to teach in the church are good and necessary things, and it is good for Christians, especially Christian men to aspire to them.

In fact, you would actually be in disobedience to God if you choose to resist His calling. But what you need to be cautious of, and what James is warning us against, is pursuing or entering into a teaching role in a cavalier or careless way, or for the wrong reasons. In the end, greater responsibility comes with greater accountability.

Before you enter into that calling you need to have a sober realization that you will have more to answer for. James calls this a "stricter judgment" and the reason for this is clear. Leadership is a big deal and it is weighty matter to lead people in any venture.

But it is especially significant and even dangerous to lead people in matters of the faith. When what you say and teach has the potential to affect the eternal destiny of others, then it makes a lot of sense why those of us who are teachers would be held to a stricter standard.

But what is this stricter judgment exactly? Well, James seems to have two ideas in mind. The first is that there is a judgment of our works after our time on earth is complete. In 2 Corinthians 5:10, Paul tells us “[For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.](#)”

To be clear, this judgment has nothing to do with our salvation. If we have given our lives to Jesus and are trusting in Him, then we can rest in knowing that our salvation is secure. Instead, this judgment will be an evaluation for what we as Christians have done with our lives, our resources, and the opportunities which God has given us. It’s a judgment of our works. So that’s the first reason for why those of us who are teachers will receive a stricter judgment; we will answer for it before Christ when our time in this life is complete.

But there is also a second, more practical, more immediate reason for why teachers will receive a stricter judgment; and that is because teaching involves speaking. Our words can get us into trouble and they frequently do. The more you teach, the more you speak. The more you speak, the more opportunities there are to fall on your face, to say something incorrectly, to be unclear, or to be careless.

The point is that it is very easy for our words to get us into trouble and the ramifications for a teacher are usually higher and they’re usually more immediate and widespread. In light of that, it is very appropriate that the rest of our passage today concerns the tongue and all of its pitfalls.

But before we get to that, I want to highlight James’ statement where he says that “[we all stumble in many things](#)” because this statement is a simple acknowledgement of reality as a Christian. We all sin, everyone screws up, and no one is immune from mistakes. This is why it so wonderful that we have the ability to bring our sins and failures to the Lord and receive His forgiveness.

But this statement where James says that “[we all stumble in many things](#)” is also a good reminder for us because many of us have a tendency to idolize our leaders. Now that can and certainly does take place within the local church, but it also takes place when we start to idolize those who are especially famous, such as the big-name pastors and nationally-recognized ministry leaders.

The point is that if you ever feel tempted to look to another person in an idolatrous way, sooner or later (probably sooner) you’re going to be disappointed. It can be a very dangerous thing to wrap up your identity as a Christian into that of another fallible human. Instead, the best thing we can do both as teachers and as fellow believers is to point each other to Christ and to let Him be the model which we seek to emulate. With that, let’s press on into verses 3-5:

³ Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. ⁴ Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. ⁵ Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!

James began by cautioning people against hastily becoming teachers. The reason for this is because our judgment will be stricter, which isn't helped any by the fact that we **all** stumble in many ways already. But now, he homes in on one of the primary ways that we frequently stumble by talking about the tongue.

Again, when we read about the tongue, this is referring to our capacity to speak, the words we use, and how we use them. There is great power in the act of speaking, far more than we usually give it credit for.

For instance, we read in Genesis that in the beginning, God spoke the universe into existence. Also, in the beginning of John's gospel, Jesus is first presented to us as the Word. Furthermore, the gospel itself is usually presented to others through the act of speaking in conversation or through preaching in church. Words matter and they carry great power.

To explain the power of the tongue, James uses the illustration of a bit for a horse or a rudder for a ship. The point is that both a horse's bit and a ship's rudder are **very** small in comparison to the object that they direct. Last week, I mentioned that I also serve in the Coast Guard Reserve and now that we've come across a nautical reference in our text, allow me to illustrate this using an image of a cutter in the world's best Coast Guard.



This is our new Offshore Patrol Cutter, a few of which are being constructed now. Each of these will be 360 feet long and displace between 3,700 and 4,500 tons. The white section is what you would see above the water while the red area at the bottom is the part that would be under the water.

Now here's what I want you to notice, do you see the helicopter on the aft section of the ship? That helps give you a sense of the size of this vessel, which by Coast Guard standards is relatively large. So you have the helicopter and then down and to the left are the numbers 915. Right below that is a small section that looks like an upside-down sail. That's the rudder!

In comparison to the rest of the cutter, the rudder is tiny; but it is critical to directing where the entire ship will go. The idea is the same with the tongue. It is small in comparison to the rest of our body, but it possesses an outsized influence on the course of our lives, the way we treat other people, and the view which others will have of us.

Not only does the tongue have an outsized influence in our lives, but if left unchecked, it tends towards destructive ends for both ourselves and others. James gets at this when he says that “[even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!](#)”

In California back in 2018, a man was in his field driving a metal stake into the ground. As he did that, a spark leapt from the contact point and ignited the surrounding grass. There hadn't been much rain leading up to that day and the fire quickly spread and got out of control. In the end, it ended up consuming over 450,000 acres.

What I find interesting is that fires can be incredibly destructive regardless of what the initiator intended. A fire started on purpose by an arsonist can cause just as much damage as one that was started accidentally. The same is true of the tongue. For instance, we are perfectly capable of intentionally hurting people with the words we say. No one denies this.

At the same time, it is also remarkably easy for us to cause damage without meaning to. This just goes to show how powerful the tongue is when we can so effortlessly hurt people without even fully realizing or trying to.

As an example, think of it this way. A power tool, think of a chainsaw or something similar, is dangerous regardless of whether or not you know how to use it. The damaging potential is the same for both the expert as well as for the novice. And we don't even have to use a chainsaw as an example, just think of a kitchen knife. It too is dangerous by its very nature.

The tongue is very similar and its damaging potential is seen as we continue on in verse 6.

[⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.](#)

In a minute, we're going to consider some of the ways that the tongue causes destruction, but before we delve into that, we should understand that James is primarily concerned with the sinful aspects and power of the tongue.

It is true that there are many beneficial uses of the tongue, and there are other parts of the Bible which speak to how the tongue can be used in good and useful ways, such as biblical teaching.

But that's not this section. Instead, James goes out of his way to illustrate the damage that we can cause as well as the hypocrisy that we can exhibit when we fail to keep a tight leash on what we say and how we say it. Now there's a risk that we might read all that James has said and assume

that he's being a bit too dramatic and that he's making a bigger deal out of all of this than is necessary.

So with all that said, let's consider some of the ways that the tongue destroys. We're going to consider five examples of ways that our speech causes damage and for all but the last one, I'm going to reference one of the Proverbs to illustrate. Again, these are examples to help us grasp how powerful the tongue is.

First off, **we can brutalize others through the use of the tongue.** In Proverbs 12:18 (ESV), Solomon writes that “[There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.](#)”

Rash words are like sword thrusts. It's actually a very graphic image. This proverb uses the picture of stabbing someone repeatedly with a sword as a simile for what our words can do when we unchain them, especially when we are angry.

One ancient Jewish writer wrote that “many have fallen by the edge of the sword, but not so many as have fallen because of the tongue.” Most if not all of us are perfectly capable of brutalizing others by the words we say, especially when we are enraged. Whether directed at your spouse, your parents, your siblings, your kids, or maybe even towards employees, we can all point to many times when we've done this, and we've probably all experienced it ourselves.

Now it may feel therapeutic to you to just get whatever it is off your chest and vent at that person. But remember that what may feel therapeutic to you may completely tear down whoever is unfortunate enough to be the object of your fury, and the ramifications will likely be greater than anything you suspected.

Perhaps the only significant difference between actual violence and the damage we can inflict by what we say is how easy it is verbally stab someone else. It takes a lot of effort to physically fight someone for any length of time, but it takes virtually no effort to verbally take them down.

As you begin to feel anger or resentment rising up within yourself and you start gearing up to tear into someone, I'd encourage you to remember that it almost never hurts to wait. Unleashing your tongue when you're already sinning in your heart is not a recipe for success and you'll end up saying things you wish you could take back.

Before we move on from this topic, I want to point out three things, which we'll keep looping back to. First, you can't take your words back; once they are shot out of your mouth, there is no returning them. Second, while words may be brief, their impact can be lasting. And finally, the impact that you cause may remain in the person you harmed even after you've asked for forgiveness.

All of that is simply to highlight that the tongue is powerful and it's very easy to use it recklessly against other people. This is one of the reasons for why James calls the tongue a “[world of iniquity.](#)” With that, let's move on to other damaging uses of the tongue.

Next, we see that **with the tongue, we can slander people**. When we speak of slander, we're referring to false things that you say about another person, especially things which end up damaging their reputation.

In Proverbs 16:28, Solomon tells us that “[a perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends.](#)” In the last example, we saw how we can brutalize other people by what we say. You could picture that as a frontal assault where it's just you tearing into another person.

But in this proverb, we see that it is possible to subtly subvert and harm another person by what we say about them without their knowledge. Consider yourself – have you ever lied about someone behind their backs? Have you ever started a rumor or dropped subtle comments about them in front of someone important, like a teacher or supervisor, so that they'll get held back and you advanced?

It may seem pragmatic or even funny in the moment, but the scars from that will last a long time. You may have even forgotten about it, but it's very likely that the one you slandered hasn't. I think what's especially insidious about slander is that the person being slandered often has no idea about what is being done to them until the damage is already done.

In the end, this too destroys people and ruins relationships. It's like I said earlier, you can't take your words back, the impact is lasting, and the injury may not go away even after reconciliation has taken place. Does it make sense how powerful the tongue is? It's like the earlier analogy of the rudder – it is a small member, but it has an outsized influence in our lives and in the lives of those with whom we interact.

Moving on, in addition to brutalizing and slandering others with the tongue, **we can also betray the confidence of others with it**. Again, Solomon writes in Proverbs 20:19 that “[he who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with one who flatters with his lips.](#)”

This is closely related to our prior example. In fact, slander and the betrayal of confidence are often two sides of the same coin. With the tongue, not only can we slander people by telling lies about them, but we can also use the tongue to reveal information about other people which we do not have permission to share.

This is what we call gossip; it's where you share true things, especially personal details about other people, that they themselves have not authorized you to share. At its core, gossip is a betrayal of trust. It can and does take place very easily in passing conversation or over a meal. But it can also take much more subtle and righteous-sounding forms.

The example I like to use is prayer request gossip. This could be in a small group or other setting where a prayer request for someone else is used as a means to gossip about them without appearing to.

It's where you say "we need to pray for so-and-so because she's dealing with this and that and the other thing, and I also heard that she's having a problem with her neighbor, and of course I'm sure you already heard what her kid did..."

We could go on, but I think we get the picture. Now this isn't meant to hold us back from praying for others. The Bible repeatedly encourages us to pray with and for each other. But private, deeply personal details aren't often necessary – God already knows the situation better than we do.

If you feel susceptible to this, then check your motives and ask yourself "am I really seeking to bring another person's burdens before the Lord or am I just looking for a chance to reveal things that aren't mine to reveal about someone else?" Remember, you can't take your words back, the impact is lasting, and the injury you cause may persist even after you seek forgiveness.

In addition to brutalizing, slandering, and betraying confidence, **we can also use the tongue to speak hypocritically**. James himself highlights this fact starting in verse 9 where in speaking about the tongue he says that:

⁹ With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

James homes in on hypocrisy and he uses illustrations to make the point. Fountains don't have both good and bad water; it's either one or the other. Fruit trees only produce one kind of fruit. But with the tongue, we have the power to both bless in one moment and then curse in the next breath.

The point is that this is not right. For most of us, this probably happens far more than we care to admit. Just think of an average Sunday. We enter the church, we fellowship, we sing praises to our God, we read His Word together and are edified, we pray, and then we leave.

But how many of us, after doing all of those wonderful things, then proceed to start a fight with our spouse or berate our kids or start badmouthing our coworker that we just can't stand because Monday's coming and you're going to have to deal with his shenanigans again? I suspect we've all done this to some degree.

And let me say one other thing about this. This is a hard passage and there's no other way around it. James gives us these hard truths because they are beneficial for us and they help us to be conformed into the image of Christ. We can't appreciate the power of the tongue and our responsibility to restrain it until we stop and consider all of the ways that we can and do use it to harm people. So if you're sitting there and you feel convicted and you're kind of annoyed that I'm picking on you, there are two things you need to know. First, don't ignore the conviction.

One of the Holy Spirit's ministries to us is to convict of sin so that we might confess it and be cleansed. So if any of this lands and you feel that conviction, give thanks to God that He has revealed that to you and take action on it. Be a doer of the word and not just a hearer of it.

That's the first thing. The second thing is this. Many, not all, but many of the examples that I've used or will use this morning to illustrate the destructive potential of the tongue come from my own personal failings in this area over the years. So if you feel like I'm pointing a finger at you, just recognize that I've got three pointing back at myself as well.

Everything that I've described up till now has illustrated **some** of the ways by which we **intentionally** harm others with the tongue. This certainly isn't even close to an exhaustive list as I've barely mentioned lying and haven't even talked about boasting or blaspheming. But as we consider the ways that the tongue harms people, we also need to acknowledge that **we can carelessly or unintentionally hurt people** as well.

Solomon wrote in Proverbs 10:19 (NASB 1995) that "**when there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise.**" The power and peril of the tongue is especially illustrated by the fact that we can hurt other people without even realizing it.

In fact, the more we speak, the more likely it is that we're going to say something sinful or just plain dumb. We've probably all been in those situations where we get carried away in conversation and only later realize that something we said was legitimately offensive or easily misunderstood.

Think of our power tool example from earlier. A chainsaw is dangerous by its very nature. If you have experience and expertise in handling the tool, you can limit the likelihood of something bad happening, but no amount of expertise changes the fact that the tool is dangerous. The tongue operates on a similar principle. It is powerful and dangerous by its very nature and that fact places a special responsibility upon us to steward it well.

So with all of that said, are we just supposed to take vows of silence and never speak again? Of course not and that's certainly not James' point. The reason we went through all of that is because it is important for us to recognize the damaging potential of the tongue and have an appreciation for why James spends so much time on this topic. With that, here are a few points to consider as we close.

First, remember that **words are powerful**. There's an old phrase that says "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me," but it's not really true. Yes, it is generally beneficial for us to have thick skin and let insults and caustic remarks roll off of us. But if this passage demonstrates one thing it is that what we say is incredibly important; we can use the tongue to bring great healing as well as great harm.

Second, **God enables us to control our tongues**. This is very important because we don't want to mistakenly assume that God gives us these commands and then just leaves us on our own to figure out how to obey them. Instead, God Himself enables us to obey Him through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

While it is good and useful to think of practical ways to control our speech, we can't forget that ultimately it is God who gives us the victory. In Psalm 141:3-4, David writes the following:

³Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.⁴Do not incline my heart to any evil thing, to practice wicked works with men who work iniquity; and do not let me eat of their delicacies.

The responsibility for what we do and say rests solely with us. Yet at the same time, we are blest to know the one true God who delights in leading us in the way that we should go. He desires for us to come and bring our requests to Him. He wants us to bring these issues within ourselves to Him so that He might work in and heal us.

This leads to the third point, which is that we should seek to **restrain and control our speech**. In chapter 1 verse 19, James put it like this: “**So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.**” The injunction is to be circumspect in your speech and guard what you say.

Just because you feel something does not mean that you should say it in the heat of the moment. Sometimes our desire to be authentic and real leads us to say harsh or demeaning things that damage relationships or paint others in a bad light. So instead of flying off the handle or saying harmful things under the guise of “sharing your heart,” give thought to what needs to be said, especially when dealing with combustible situations.

Don't add gasoline to the fire and make sure that you are leading your emotions rather than them leading you. It's like the image of a horse's bridle from James 1. Either you bridle and direct your tongue, or it will bridle and direct you. Like I've already said, you can't take your words back, the impact of your words is lasting, and the injury you cause may persist even after you've sought and received forgiveness.

But here's a caveat. Restraining your speech **does not** mean that there's no place for hard conversations. Jesus engaged in plenty of them – think of all of the hard conversations he had with the religious leaders of His day.

Difficult conversations are not automatically bad, and in many cases they're necessary in order to work through differences of opinion and decision-making and so on. What we need to watch out for are our motives, the actual words we say, and how we go about saying them. That's where we can quickly fall into sin.

The point is simply this, nothing I've tried to say this morning is meant to give you a free pass when the Holy Spirit is leading you to have a hard conversation or speak the truth in a difficult situation or to confront sin. You very well may need to do any of those things. But again, check your motives and ensure that the truth you speak is accompanied with grace and love.

That being said, we can all point to many times when we've sinned in what we've said. As we talked about last week, everyone sins, but what should differentiate us as born-again believers in

Jesus is what we do after we sin. This leads to the fourth point, which is that we should **seek forgiveness and reconciliation** when we've sinned.

If you've brutalized others with your words, if you've slandered or gossiped, if you've spoken hypocritically to God and to those made in His image, then you need to acknowledge that you've sinned and you need to repent. It really doesn't matter what they did or didn't do to "deserve" it in your mind – you be concerned with your own sin.

Jesus Himself said that we need to first remove the plank from our own eye before attempting to remove the speck from someone else's eye. Start by taking ownership for what you've said. Take steps to repent of your sin before God and then seek the forgiveness of those whom you've harmed.

Lastly, my final point is this: **check your spiritual diet**. What comes out of our mouths is directly related to what we first put in ourselves. Jesus said it like this in Luke 6:45 (NLT): [“A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart.”](#)

Words reveal character, so what are you filling yourself with? This is one of the reasons why we make such a big deal about reading and meditating upon God's Word. What you put in yourself will affect that which comes out of you. If you put garbage in, you'll have garbage come out.

So ask yourself, are you prioritizing the reading and internalization of God's Word, or are you instead filling yourself with worthless or sinful things? We talk about this so often it is almost cliché, but it is true nonetheless. Consider what you watch, read, and listen to and ask yourself if they are noble, true, and God-honoring.

So as we go from here, may we submit what we say to the lordship of Jesus. As we seek to restrain and control what we say, may we do so as acts of obedience and worship to our God. And may others benefit from and be blessed both by what we say and by what we choose to leave unsaid. Let's pray.