

# *Taming the Tongue*

*James 3: 1-12*

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So the guy's sitting at the breakfast table, reading the paper, drinking coffee and eating cereal. He's totally focused. The wife comes in and begins to ask some questions, "So, you're going to pick the kids up from practice on your way home, right?" "You betcha," he says, though it's clear he hasn't heard her. She carries on. "Isn't this the weekend you plan to paint the bedroom?" "You betcha." He continues to eat his cereal and read the paper while she's tidying up. Then she smooths out her clothes and asks, "Do I look fat in this dress?" "You betcha!"

*No human being can tame the tongue*, says James (1: 8). Don't we know the truth of that? Perhaps you have been to a dinner. Later that night in your bed, you replay conversations in your mind. Did I really say *that*? Yes, honey, you told that fishing story again, even though they've all heard it five times before. Did I really tell Francis her kids would behave better if she actually set some boundaries for them? You betcha. Out they come, these words, too late to call back, that really should have stayed inside us. Why did I say that?

One of the worst I remember was at the end of my summer job at J.C. Penny's in college. Mr. Wentzel didn't want us to be bored. I had just finished moving eight piles of pants from one table to the other table right next to it. And then moved the pants from that second table back to the first one. It made no sense to me. Then behold, there came Mr. Wentzel. Next thing I know, I'm saying, "Mr. Wentzel, do you like for your employees to tell you what's on their minds?" "Sure, boy, what's up?" I thought it was time for this low level manager to hear an opinion from a Vanderbilt English major. "Well, I just think that asking me to move those pants from one table to another was really an asinine use of your legitimate authority." Mr. Wentzel then reminded me that he didn't pay me to think, and we both agreed it was probably a good idea my last day was just two days away. Why did I say that?

From my childhood, at bedtime, my mother and I used to recite the words from Psalm 19, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight." We pray that in our house now too. Boy, do I need it. Taming the tongue is so hard. In fact, James tells us nobody can do it perfectly. And simply biting our tongues will not really change us in the heart. We need to

understand more deeply how speech relates to our God. We human beings are made in the image of God and speech is unique to us among earth's created order. So we can better understand our God when we see *why* our speech connects so deeply to him. Let's first consider three aspects of God and speech.

1) *God created by means of speech.* In Genesis 1, we read the recurring work of the days of creation, "And God said, "Let there be...." And it was so. Let there be light, and it was so. Let the earth bring forth vegetation.... And it was so. Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures. So God created. His word was a creating word. By the mouth of the Lord, creation came into being out of nothing. Hebrews 11: 3 tells us, "By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible." Or as Gerard Manly Hopkins has said it, "He fathers-forth, whose beauty is without change—praise him."

2) Moreover, this God who spoke the world into being has also *personally addressed* his creatures. With wonder, Moses reminded the Israelites of the day the LORD spoke the Ten Commandments. He came down onto Mt. Sinai in fire, and the mountain trembled with the thunder and the trumpet of the LORD. Moses asked the Israelites, "Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live?" (Deut 4: 33). Our God speaks! *Our God speaks!* The law is the gift of a God who does not hide himself, but makes known his will that we might know the ways of life and peace. The Bible is the precious record of a God who has made himself known steadily through the centuries. We have a God who spoke not a private revelation to one man in a trance, but who addressed a community. He has given his Word to many prophets through the ages so that we might know who he is and what he desires of us. These words are sweet, a lamp unto our feet, and the path to life. God speaks and we find the true meaning and purpose of our lives.

3) And of course, *God spoke to us by coming to us as one of us* in Jesus Christ. we recall how the book of Hebrews opens, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power." Supremely, God spoke to us in Jesus Christ, drawing near to us in person. As Peter said to Jesus, "You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Our speaking God spoke so clearly that we could hear him, see him, and handle him in Christ.

Made in the image of the speaking God, we have been given tongues with which to respond to the grace and goodness of the Lord. With our tongues, James said, we bless our Lord and Father. Such praise has given rise to the greatest verse and music in all the world. “O for a thousand tongues to sing,” wrote Charles Wesley, “my great redeemer’s praise, the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his grace.” We have the power to glorify our God. To please him with our praise. As James says, “with our tongues we bless our God and Father.”

But with these same tongues, we can also “curse people who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3: 9). Our tongues can create and they can destroy. Paul warned the Galatians, “If you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another” (Gal 5: 15). We can kill each other with words. Whoever said “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me” was sadly, profoundly mistaken. Just think of the destructive power in these words:

I don’t think I love you anymore.

You’ll never amount to anything.

I wish you had never been born. I never wanted you.

You don’t fit here.

You’re just not one of us.

I’m leaving.

Get out.

We can rip each other to shreds with one hasty sentence.

And what power our tongues have to deceive. Almost worse than being cursed is being lied to. The flattering tongue can make promises. The tongue can pledge faithfulness. The lips can make us believe we matter. The smooth speech can slip past our defenses and cause us to give away our money, our freedom, our hearts, even our souls. What a stab it is to discover that a person close to you has been lying all along. O, the tongue can do such damage.

Psalm 34 says, “What man is there who desires life and loves many days that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.” If we love life, we need to control our tongues. If we want the good life, the life of peace and wholeness, our mouths need to be creating and not destroying, blessing and not cursing, praising and not deceiving. The wrong use of the tongue makes for an unhappy life. What more incentive could we want? You want to be happy? Turn your lips from evil to good.

As his letter to the Ephesians turns from describing Christ to how we are to live in response to the grace of Christ, Paul mentions aspects of speech. We are to get dressed according to our new station in life. We do not put on the old self any longer, but get dressed in the new self, “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” This means we put away falsehood. Paul says, “Let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.” Christians don’t lie. They don’t fudge the facts. They don’t misdirect. They don’t cover up. They don’t make false excuses. We are connected to one another, we are joined to each other. You don’t lie to your own body. Christians speak truth.

Moreover, Paul says, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion...Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice” (4: 29-31). Lord, don’t let me open my mouth unless it is to build up. Psalm 141 prays, “Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.” That’s a prayer I need to pray every day. God shut my mouth before the wrong thing comes out. If I’m burning to slam someone, it’s probably not constructive. If I’m bursting to spew it out, it’s probably not what is needed. God put some duct tape on my mouth. Put an interrupting chip in my brain—let there be a ten second delay between my feeling reaction and my mouth’s expression, so I have time to think, to choose, to detach. Help think how my words can build others up.

Further, he tells us “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” (Eph 5: 4). Convicted yet? I am. I mean if we’re not talking about somebody, or complaining, or making crude jokes, what’s left to say? Fortunately, Scripture tells us not only what not to do with our mouths, but what to do.

In Colossians we read, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Col 4: 6). We are called to be people whose mouths speak truth, whose words give praise to the Lord and give voice to creation’s praise. We are to be known for our words of thankfulness, our gracious and grace-filled speech.

Here is where learning and knowing about who our God is makes such a practical difference. It is not enough just to say, “I need to be better about my tongue.” We talk about what’s on our minds. So let’s put our minds on Christ. As we are more and more informed about who our God is, we will have more thanks

to offer. The more beautiful we see Christ to be, the more gracious will be the words that come out of our mouths. The more we see others as God sees them, and we can only do that by study of the Word and how God sees, the more we will bless them.

Isaiah 50: 4 says, “The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary.” It’s not just the tongue that tries hard not to be ugly that helps others. It’s the tongue that is taught—taught by the Word, taught by knowledge of Christ, taught by focusing on our God, that knows how to sustain with a word him that is weary.

To return to James, we see that the tongue can be a restless evil, full of deadly poison. James is echoing Jesus who noted that out of the heart comes all manner of evil. Our hearts are a spring, a fountain of words. If the source is corrupt, then the water, the words that come from us will also be filthy. So we are called to speak from the source of the new person, the new creation and not the old self. We are to develop, and then tap into, the new heart that God’s Spirit has created in us. If you feel the need for such a source, ask God for it! Jesus promises that our Father is eager to give his Holy Spirit to those who ask. We can pray that the Lord will create in us a clean heart, and do his work of new creation in our lives.

Now, one warning before we all go out and try to tame our tongues. When you start paying attention to the way you speak, it may well get worse before it gets better. Once you start listening to what comes out of your mouth, you may be shocked. Yes, it’s worse than I thought. And whenever we try to grow, to change, to get better, our enemy the devil immediately acts to discourage us. That’s normal. Don’t give up. Focus on Jesus. Focus on giving thanks. Focus on voicing your praise in your prayer time. Practice and plan how to build up those you meet with your words.

Get into the Word. Now as Lent approaches, it is a perfect time to commit to a small group or Sunday school class. In a fellowship of believers, we put our eyes and minds onto the Scriptures, and learn a new way of speaking. We pray for each other and so build each other up in the mystic bonds of Christian communion. If you want to learn a new language, you’ve got to practice until the alien pattern of speech becomes normal.

Stick with it, dear flock. Don’t be discouraged. Our tongues do get us into trouble. But with them, we can also do so much good. Speak well this week!