

TAMING THE TONGUE

James 3:1-12

Sermon for Peace Church

June 7, 2009

PURPOSE – To have God’s people, through the reality of their words, look at the heart – and turn to Jesus in repentance for misuse of the tongue and faith for God-honoring use.

MAIN IDEA – The reality of the tongue is that it is powerful, destructive, uncontrollable and inconsistent – so turn in repentance & faith to Jesus to gain God’s control over it.

I. INTRODUCTION

Let’s open our Bibles to James 3 (p. 1883).

1. “Taming the Tongue” is today’s subject in our journey through this letter.

Thank you, Friends of the Groom, for displaying to us “tongues tamed” for the glory of God! May such taming continue to grow in our lives through this Word, especially beyond the walls of this sanctuary.

2. The reason that James jumps into this subject ties back to chapter 2:18.

He has just taught about the organic relationship of faith & deeds. If you have true faith, it WILL BE shown in deeds – like fruit organically arises from branches abiding in the vine. The fruit shows that there’s life, just as deeds reveal true faith.

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

(i) James has taught about this organic relationship because someone somewhere somehow – 2:18 – decided to erroneously pull it apart and say:

“You have faith; I have deeds” – as if they can be separated - “You’re the “faith-type of Christian / I’m the action-type”

... NOT!! Faith alone counts with God – and true faith will manifest itself in deeds.

3. Having clarified that in the remainder of chapter 2, we now understand where James is coming from to begin chapter 3.

“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers – (That’s what this someone / somewhere / somehow had done!)

... because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

(i) Jesus said in Matthew 12:35 that we’re all responsible for the words we say:

You will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word you have spoken.

But those who TEACH have a particular responsibility – for they are entrusted with AUTHORITY behind what they say. They will be judged more strictly.

4. ... which then brings James to the subject of the TONGUE!

= the MAIN TOOL in a teacher’s ministry toolbox ... but it also happens to be the part of the body most difficult to control!

“We all stumble in many ways” – v. 2 (= you have your sins; I have mine)

(i) ... But there’s one category of sin ALL OF US have in common = sins of the tongue

*Verse 2 – If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he’s a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check ... **BUT WHO IS?!***

= NONE OF US ... cause here’s what the tongue is!

Read vv. 3-12

5. THE TONGUE – “A 2-OUNCE SLAB OF TROUBLE” (as Chuck Swindoll has put it!)

- It brings life ... But it also brings death.

- Prov. 10:11 – *The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but VIOLENCE overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.*

(i) LIFE OR DEATH – What do your words bring to others?

Proverbs 12:18 – *Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*
= HEALTH or INJURY?

(ii) V. 10 – *“Out of the mouth comes praise & cursing ... both fresh water and salt water*

- Every human being has spiritual thirsts – to love & be loved

- Do your words quench or deepen that thirst, like drinking fresh or salt water?

THAT’S OUR QUESTION IN HAND TODAY - and further, How can we BECOME a tongue-tamed family of people whose words bring life to others?

To answer that, James first presents some IMAGES & DESCRIPTIONS of the tongue:

II. DESCRIPTIONS

1. IT'S POWERFUL, he begins.

- Though very small – like a rudder on a ship or a bit in a horse's mouth – it can do BIG things: The rudder steers the whole ship

THAT BIT – How many here have ridden a horse? –steers a powerful beast.

= small instrument, big impact.

(i) Think of those words, "I DO" – at a wedding ceremony = 2 small words, with big impact:

They create: A covenant, a family, children ... grandchildren

Support, companionship, partnership in serving God ... all from "I DO". (= POWERFUL!)

(ii) Winston Churchill knew the power of the tongue:

1940 – England's on the verge of collapse. Hitler had come close to wiping out their army at Dunkirk (miraculous escape). German warplanes bombing England every night. In that darkness Churchill's TONGUE saved England.

Addressing his nation in the House of Commons & later on radio:

"We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be;

We'll fight on the beaches; we'll fight in the fields;

We'll fight in the streets; and we'll fight the hills

WE SHALL NEVER SURRENDER ... never, never, never!

Though a small instrument, the tongue is powerful.

2. Second, IT'S DESTRUCTIVE

- James would not subscribe to the Dictum: *Sticks & stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me!*" ... = NO WAY!!

Verse 6 – *The tongue 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 is itself set on fire by hell.*

(i) Every year we see those California wildfires – begun with a spark - a lightning strike or small campfire or sometimes even an arsonist – a small flame growing ... ENGULFING hillsides in blaze, mansions, communities - forcing evacuations.

The tongue is a flame of fire – it can burn up your whole life.

(ii) ... AND OTHERS:

This week I read the story of a young family from a small town in North Dakota. They were known in the area as a happy family, even though the mother had not been entirely well since the birth of their second baby. But everyone in the town knew, because of the way they treated each other, there was warmth in the family.

Then one day the town gossip started a rumor that the husband was being unfaithful. It wasn't true, but the story spread. Eventually it reached the ears of the young wife.

It must have been more than she could bear. That night when the husband came home, he knew something was wrong. No one greeted him. The house was silent.

Down in the basement he found the three of them, hanging from a beam. In despair, the sick young mother had taken the lives of her two children and then her own.

THE TONGUE IS A FIRE – with destructive capabilities

A. Prov. 16:28 – *“A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends.”*

3. Third, IT'S UNCONTROLLABLE, at least BY MAN.

Verse 7 – This is in contrast to animals, birds, reptiles ... even creatures of the sea: SHAMU the killer whale at Bush Gardens!

Humans can train him to do backflips on command!

Humans can stick their heads into the mouths of lions

We even trained Jefferson, our dog, to shake a paw! ...

... but no man can tame the tongue.

(i) Set on fire by hell, *it's a RESTLESS evil* = the Greek word means “unstable, unruly”
...full of deadly poison – like a snake's tongue & bite that poisons & kills.

4. Fourth, James notes that the tongue is INCONSISTENT – even HYPOCRITICAL.

Verse 9 – *With it, we praise the Lord & Father ... and with it we curse men, who've been made in God's likeness.*

= we sing a BIG HYMN here in church > “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty ...”

Then exit the doors of the sanctuary > “Did you see what she was wearing? ...”

(i) WHY? God's image is in that person.

Sure – it's marred by the fall into sin ... but shouldn't the fact that she bears the mark of God be enough to make you want to LIFT HER UP with your words – even as you've just lifted up God Himself?

A. Being made in the image of God means – above & beyond animals - humans can think / reason / laugh / love / choose / sacrifice ... = HOLY ACTIVITIES

Should we not lift up those so endowed?

Does that not go hand in hand with praising the One who so made them?

(ii) BUT WE DON'T!

We GOSSIP – we say things about others behind their backs which we would never say to their face. (If you think what she's wearing is inappropriate, go tell her – and why, in love. Or if you don't know her well enough to do such ministry ... build your relationship with her!)

Or we FLATTER – That's saying things to their face that you'd never say behind their back!

Gossip & flattery are hypocrisy – being 2-faced.

THIS SHOULD NOT BE (v. 10)! - Praise & cursing coming from the same mouth!

It happens but it SHOULD NOT BE!

- So how do we rid ourselves of this?
- How does GOD tame our tongue?

A. In our own power, we can't! We're too self-serving! The tongue (v. 6) has been set on fire by hell.

- The fallen human heart is PROUD – so we're naturally judgmental toward others
- It's BROKEN / DAMAGED – We're unsure where we stand with God, so we measure ourselves by others & prop ourselves up by putting them down.
- It's MANIPULATIVE – through words, we USE others for our security.

The sinful heart CANNOT CONTROL the tongue – it's uncontrollable.

B. But the REGENERATE HEART CAN! What man can't do in himself, God can by the POWER OF THE HOLY Spirit.

By showing US HIS WAYS ... showing us HIS SON ... and giving us a NEW HEART – whose words become life-giving!

BY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, we CAN tame the tongue!

So let's transition to the HOW

III. HOW GOD CONTROLS YOUR TONGUE

1. First, let's be clear with what God wants with our tongue:

Ephesians 4:29 – *“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”*

God wants our tongues to BUILD OTHERS UP = “edify”

(i) Someone once put that command this way: Before you talk, T.H.I.N.K.

- Is what you're about to say TRUE? HELPFUL? INSPIRING? NECESSARY? KIND?
= a good acronym ... THINK!

2. Having done that, we realize there's a lot of wisdom in keeping your mouth shut!

Prov. 21:23 – *He who GUARDS his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity!*

James himself wrote in chapter 1:26 – *If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself & his religion is worthless!*

(i) President Calvin Coolidge was famous for having a tight rein on his tongue.

One day, at a White House party, a beautiful woman came up to him. She said, “Mr. President, could you please help me? ... My friends have bet me that I can't get 3 words out of you.”

Coolidge replied, “You lose.”

A. “I have often regretted my speech, never my silence” said Publius, the Greek sage.

3. Recognizing what God wants with the use of our tongue, we then realize that it's THROUGH REPENTANCE that He tames our tongue.

- We're always changed by repentance & faith.

(i) It's significant that, when Isaiah saw the holiness of God in his vision in the temple – Isaiah 6, BENDING BEFORE IT, he cried:

“Woe is me ... I am ruined ... For I am a man of UNCLEAN LIPS ... and belong to a people of UNCLEAN LIPS.”

= His repentance had first to do with his words. He could have repented of his thoughts / actions / feekubgs ... he began with his words. = Things said reveal things within.

A. That's a prayer to use when God convicts us of things said that are not in His will:

Woe is me, Lord – I'm a person of unclean lips

(ii) God will not TAME YOUR TONGUE if you don't really care to have your speech transformed. If you don't grieve about how prone to self-exaltation it is. If you don't repent, then your tongue will not be tamed.

4. Repentance ... and FAITH!

The overall theme of the book of James is the "TESTING OF TRUE FAITH".

The TONGUE TESTS WHAT WE really BELIEVE ABOUT JESUS ... in this way:

(i) He is God's Word to us. In a sense, He comes from the tongue of God.
He is the "Word made Flesh" – who dwelt among us – full of grace & truth (Jn. 1).

A. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT? REALLY BELIEVE?

- Cause that's a life giving word. God's words EDIFY ALWAYS:
- IN THE CREATION – He spoke ... and it was made ... and it was good!
- In the RE-CREATION – God spoke – and Christ & those in Him are raised to new life ... and it is even better!

GOD'S TONGUE brings life. Whenever he speaks to you, it's life-giving.

(ii) If we truly believe that, IT WILL IMPACT the words we speak!

How can I speak words that invoke destruction if I truly know a God who speaks life?

THROUGH FAITH = knowledge of Christ & trust in Him, God tames the tongue.

(iii) And so for us to become a tongue-tamed family of people, we want to treasure God's word.

Christian living is not primarily MORALITY – I.e. > "You shouldn't say such things ..."
... IT'S FAITH = being love-captured by this God who speaks life to me

- A. Historically, through Scripture
- B. Ultimately, through Christ
- C. Daily, through His Spirit

(iv) If you want God to tame your tongue, you must grow in treasuring His Word.

That speech transforms ours!

Psalm 19 – The words of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes ... They are more precious than gold ... they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb!”

Love God’s Word, abide in God’s Word, be nourished by it to begin each day ... and your tongue will grow tamed!

No man can tame the tongue, but GOD CAN - through a repentant, active love-relationship with Him in Jesus Christ!

V. CONCLUSION

It’s *“Out of the abundance of the heart, that the mouth speaks”*, Jesus said in Mt. 12.

Let’s use our words to recognize what’s in our hearts – and bring that, when necessary, before God in repentance.

But more than that,

Let’s treasure God’s Word in Jesus – DRINK OF THAT LIVING WORD

= cultivate a listening relationship with Him, by the power of the Scriptures & Spirit – and FILLING OUR HEARTS with His Words - TO OVERFLOWING ...

... so that our tongue is tamed and we bring “fresh water” to thirsty people all around us!

AMEN!