

Words have started revolutions, riots, revivals and reformations.

Join me as I pray the words of Psalm 19:14, Psalm 141:3 and some of our passage in James 3:1-12 back to the Lord: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer...Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips...because you say teachers will be judged with greater strictness, enable me to speak only what is true so I don't stumble in what I say. Use my words to build up, not tear down. Though my tongue is small it's dangerous if I don't submit it to your control. Forgive me for ways I've poisoned people with what I've said. Help us now to hear your words. In Jesus' Name. Amen."

How many of you have been tripped by your tongue?

Last weekend we learned that we're not saved by works, but saved people do God's work. Today we move from proving our faith by our works to proving our faith by our words. Here's a summary statement: Control your tongue, or it will control you.

I'm going to borrow an outline from Warren Wiersbe to help us work through the first twelve verses of James 3.

- The tongue has the power to direct (3:1-5a)
- The tongue has the power to destroy (3:5b-8)
- The tongue has the power to delight (3:9-12)

James illustrates the power of the tongue using six vivid word pictures -- a bit in a horse's mouth, a rudder on a ship, an out-of-control fire, a dangerous animal, a bubbling spring and delicious fruit.

### 1. The Tongue Has the Power to Direct

Let's look at verse 1: "Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment." Because teachers were thought of as having a prestigious position, it's likely too many were teaching topics they didn't understand. Perhaps they were impressed with the authority and prestige of the office and forgot about the tremendous responsibility.

Here's the principle: greater authority brings with it greater accountability. Because I teach on a regular basis, I will be "judged with greater strictness." The word "greater" in Greek is *megas*, meaning huge or large. This is both humbling and frightening at the same time.

Teachers are not the only ones who get tripped up by their tongues. In verse 2 we read, "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." Notice James is including himself and everyone else by using "we" and "all." The word "stumble" is the idea of falling or tripping. Literally, it means: "We all are stumbling repeatedly in many ways."

How would you feel if everything you said this past week was recorded and broadcast for everyone to hear? Jesus said we'll all be judged for the words we speak according to Matthew 12:36-37: "But I tell

you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. <sup>37</sup> For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” Remember this: your conversation reveals your character because what you say shows who you truly are.

James continues by saying if our tongues don't trip us up, we're "perfect," or complete. If we're able to muzzle our mouths, we're able to "bridle" our entire bodies. James is circling back to a theme introduced in 1:26: "If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his *own* heart, this man's religion is worthless." The hardest sins to control are the trespasses of the tongue. Proverbs 21:23 says, "He who guards his mouth and his tongue, Guards his soul from troubles."

As a good teacher, James uses some unforgettable figures of speech to help us see the importance of being wise with our words.

The first illustration is the bit in a horse's mouth: "He who guards his mouth and his tongue, Guards his soul from troubles." This relatively small piece of metal can control a very powerful animal, which on average weighs about a thousand pounds.

So the bit helps control the horse. Horses don't like the pressure from the bit and will turn to get away from it, going toward the direction you turned them. Without a bit and bridle the horse has a lot more control and most will feel like they can just do whatever they want. He will misbehave because no one is directing him on where to go.

The same way a small bit can control a large animal, a small rudder controls a large ship, which is James' second illustration.

We see in verse 4: "Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires."

Let's check out verse 5: "So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things."

While the tongue only weighs about two ounces, it receives more exercise than any other muscle in our bodies. Chuck Swindoll called the tongue a "two-ounce slab of trouble." Someone else referred to the tongue as "the two-ounce beast."

So control your tongue or it will control you.

## 2 - The Tongue has the Power to Destroy

After establishing the power of the tongue to direct, in the last part of verse 5 we're introduced to the image of an out-of-control fire that destroys: "See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!"

Few disasters in the ancient world were as feared as an out-of-control fire. Fires started easily in the dry season and were almost impossible to extinguish, leaving destruction in their wake.

A little spark causes extensive damage to an entire forest. Like a careless match thrown into dry grass, our words can incinerate individuals. Listen to what it says in Proverbs 16:27: "A worthless man digs up evil, while his words are like scorching fire."

Let's look at verse 6: "And the tongue is a fire, the *very* world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell."

Here are four truths about the tongue from these verses.

- Our words contain a world of unrighteousness. We often speak of the world as evil and it is, but there's a world of rotteness on the tips of our tongues.
- The fires we start with our mouths can quickly become infernos. Just like a small spark can ignite an entire forest, so too words can cause relationships to go up in flames. I'm reminded of Proverbs 26:20-21 which says: "For lack of wood the fire goes out, And where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down. <sup>21</sup> Like charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, So is a contentious man to kindle strife."
- Our words can defile and set the direction of our entire lives. The words we use can chart the course of our life.
- Somehow our tongues have a direct connection to hell itself. "Hell" is the word Gehenna, which was the name of the garbage dump outside of Jerusalem, where garbage and refuse burned continuously. When some of us speak, raw sewage comes spilling out of our mouths. This place became a metaphor for the reality of the ever-burning fires of eternal torment and was referred to by Jesus eleven times and once by James. Here's the main point. Our uncontrolled speech is set on fire by Satan himself.

How many people have you crippled or killed with your words? Or how about this: Do your words build up or do they tear down?

As important as it is not to speak death and instead to speak words of life, we have a problem. Verse 7 gives the fourth illustration: "For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind." The word for "kind" is the word "order" and takes us back to the classifications used in Genesis 9:2 for the animal kingdom.

Lions can jump through burning hoops, grizzly bears can ride on bicycles, and huge elephants can do handstands. We have a remarkable ability to train these beasts but we can't tame our tongues. It's like we have wild animals loose in our mouths!

Check out verse 8: "But no one can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison." This is a very strong statement meaning, "no one of man." Notice it doesn't say our tongues can't be tamed; it says we can't do it. We need outside help.

"Restless" refers to "staggering, unstable, unsteady and unsettled." The tongue is restless and incapable of human restraint. Have you heard of "Restless Leg Syndrome"? The Bible says we all have "Restless Tongue Syndrome." Because our mouths are filled with poison we should handle our words as cautiously as we would a vial of venom.

When Paul builds his case that all have sinned, he speaks of the sins of the tongue in Romans 3:13-14: "THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING," "THE POISON OF ASPES IS UNDER THEIR LIPS"; <sup>14</sup> "WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS" I read a story about a woman finding a snake in her suitcase after a 9,000-mile flight from Australia. When she opened it up, she found a python curled up inside one of her shoes. James is saying snakes don't live in our shoes but instead are coiled up in our mouths and their venom comes out through our words!

The tongue has the power to direct and to destroy. That's why we must control our tongues or they will control us.

### 3 - The Tongue Has the Power to Delight

Our tongues also have the power to delight. Verses 9-10 lay out the dichotomy and hypocritical nature of our tongues: "With it we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; <sup>10</sup> from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way."

The word "bless" is the word from which we get "eulogy," which means to speak well of. We bless God while we blast away at people made in the image of God! Some of us praise Him and then within minutes we pulverize someone made in His image.

James now draws his fifth word picture to help us see it should be impossible to both exalt and incinerate with the same mouth.

Listen to this penetrating question in verse 11: "Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?" The image here is of a fresh, flowing stream that has both sweet and sour water flowing from it. The word used for "salt" is "bitter".

James is saying just as it is impossible for a spring to have both sweet and sour water, so it is inconceivable for the tongue to send forth both righteousness and rumors, praise and pummeling, compliments and cursing.

The final image is that of fruit in verse 12: "Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor *can* salt water produce fresh." We expect a fig tree to have figs and a grapevine to have grapes. Nature reproduces after its kind because trees cannot bring forth fruit inconsistent with their nature. God is calling us to be consistent because what comes out of our mouths is a reflection of what is in our hearts. We see this in the last phrase of verse 12: "Nor *can* salt water produce fresh."

We've learned we must control our tongues or they will control us because they have the power to direct, to destroy and to delight.

### Putting into Practice

If we want our tongues to be tamed, we must put into practice what we've learned.

1. Think First. Are you speaking life on to people or are you speaking death?

Using the acronym THINK, ask these 5 questions before you speak.

- Is it True?
- Is it Helpful?
- Is it Inspiring?
- Is it Necessary?
- Is it Kind?

Related to this, let's make sure we watch our words on social media and in our texting. Once they're out there, they're on there for all to see.

2. Talk Less. Your chances of blowing it with your words are directly proportional to the amount of time you spend with your mouth flapping. King David, after seeing how his words got him in trouble wrote this in Psalm 39:1, "I will guard my ways. That I may not sin with my tongue; I will guard my mouth as with a muzzle..."

3. Memorize more. One of the best ways to change the words you speak is by getting the words of Scripture into your heart. Psalm 119:11: "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you."

4. Build others up. The Bible continuously reminds us to encourage one another with our words. Hebrews 3:13: "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

5. Speak up for life. As followers of Christ, let's continue to look for ways to speak up for those who can't speak for themselves. As it says in Proverbs 31:8 "Open your mouth for the mute, For the rights of all the unfortunate."

Proverbs 18:21 says, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits." Let's use words of life to speak on behalf of life.

6. Have Heart Surgery. This passage is really challenging. We're presented with a standard to follow and then told we can never achieve it on our own.

Why is it so hard to say kind things with our tongues? It's because the Bible says our tongues are untamable in our own efforts. Where does all the sewage come from that spews out of our mouths? Jesus is clear in Matthew 12:34 and 15:19: "You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks...for out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, lies and slander."

Someone remarked: "What's down in the well comes up in the bucket." The tongue simply delivers the will of a desperately sick heart. If there are horrible things in your heart, they will come gushing out of

your mouth. That's why Proverbs 4:23 exhorts us, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life."

If you want to be a dispenser of life instead of death, you need to be rightly related to God. Repent from how you've been living, confess your sins and receive the free gift of forgiveness. Romans 10:9-10 challenges us to use words to communicate our new allegiance: "if you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; <sup>10</sup> for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation."

If you've been tripped up by your tongue and find yourself sprawled on the ground because of your sins, Jesus stands ready to help you back up. Just as a horse needs a rider guiding its reigns and a ship needs a captain at its rudder, your tongue needs a master. Jesus is the only one who can do the job!

Words matter. And the words of Jesus really matter. He knows we're a people who forget so He instituted a memorial meal designed to help us remember what He did for us on the cross. Lock into His words from Luke 22:19-20: "And when He had taken *some* bread *and* given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." <sup>20</sup> And in the same way *He took* the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood."

Did you catch His words that speak of substitutionary sacrifice? "This is my body, which is given FOR YOU...This cup that is poured out FOR YOU is the new covenant in my blood."

The Savior died in your place, as your substitute. That means He died for you...instead of you...because of grace, He died in your place and mine.

The Lord's Supper is filled with word pictures. The bread and the cup remind us the Lamb of God sacrificed Himself for sinners, satisfying God's justice. His blood was shed so our sins, including the sins of our speech, can be forgiven.

Before we take communion it's also important to take a spiritual inventory. 1 Corinthians 11:28 says, "But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup."

- Consider your relationship with God
- Confess any sins God brings to mind, including any trespasses of the tongue

Let's pray. Thank you Jesus for this reminder of what you did for us on the cross. We're grateful for forgiveness and the freedom that come from Your salvation. Because our words can build others up or break them down, I pray would you enable our words to be life and truth. I thank you Lord for all you do in our lives. In Jesus' name I pray. AMEN

Let's close with these words found in Ephesians 4:29-32: "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let

all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”