



Catalog No. 1051

James 3:1-12

Seventh Message

John Hanneman

February 11, 1996

THE EVIL OF THE TONGUE

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

Our text today from the third chapter of the letter of James, verses which deal with the evil of the tongue, is one of the most convicting passages in the Bible. It seems controlling the tongue eludes even the most spiritual among us at times. An epitaph on a tombstone in an English country churchyard bears testimony to how difficult it is:

Beneath this stone, a lump of clay,
Lies Arabelle Young,
Who, on the twenty-fourth of May,
Began to hold her tongue.

The tongue is a mere two-ounce slab of striped muscle fibers, covered with mucous membrane, yet it is one of the most important and prominent organs of the body. The tongue is the chief organ of taste, and an important aid in chewing and swallowing. As the organ of speech, it helps form both vowels and consonants.

Charles Swindoll wrote this about the tongue:

Without the tongue no mother could sing her baby to sleep to-night; no ambassador could adequately represent our nation; no teacher could stretch the minds of students; no officer could lead his fighting men in battle; no attorney could defend the truth in court; no pastor could comfort troubled souls; no complicated, controversial issue could ever be discussed or solved. Our entire world would be reduced to unintelligible grunts and shrugs. Seldom do we pause to realize just how valuable this strange muscle in our mouth really is.

But the tongue is as volatile as it is vital. Washington Irving said: "A sharp tongue is the only edged tool that grows keener with constant use." James calls the tongue a "restful evil." Proverbs 26:28 declares: "A lying tongue hates those it crushes, and a flattering mouth works ruin." "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Prov 18:21).

Why is the tongue so difficult to control? And how can we learn to use it for good, not evil? As we begin chapter 3 of James' letter today, we find the issue of the tongue set in the larger context of another problem we face in dealing with trials. The text actually begins with a warning about becoming teachers. Verses 1-2:

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways. If any one does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. (James 3:1-2 NASB)

James begins this discussion of the tongue by referring to teachers within the Body of Christ, saying, "let not many become teachers." In this context, teaching was a position of great influence. The Jewish audience to whom James' words were addressed were well accustomed to the role of a rabbi. We remember that "Teacher" was the title given to Jesus himself. In the church, a teacher is the voice of final authority. As such, it is position that might seem desirable to some.

Here, James is identifying a problem that is key to this book and to the subject of trials. As we have already seen, this letter is all about how Christians should respond to the pressures of life. Trials are part of God's program for perfecting our faith. When the pressure is on, however, we may respond in a way that is counterproductive to what God wants to accomplish in us. We have already talked about some of our more typical responses when we are thrown into confusion: we seek wealth, we fall into sin, we blame God, we get angry, we favor the beautiful people at the expense of the poor, we forget who we are in Christ.

As we begin chapter 3, James highlights another typical response we may have to the pressures of life, and that is to seek prominence and influence. In order to rise above the confusion and turmoil of life we seek a position of status. This is how we act in the world, and this is how we act in the church. An influential position helps us feel better about ourselves when the circumstances of life make us frustrated, despairing and unimportant. We seek influence to bolster our self-esteem and self-worth. We even mask our desires by saying that we want to be influential for God, when our focus is actually on ourselves, our influence, our position.

So we all want to be influential, to live meaningful lives. This is a basic and God-given desire. But when we are confronted with the pressures of life that shake our security and make us uncomfortable, our desires often become selfish and wrongly motivated. Rather than seeking to influence mankind for the glory of God, we seek influence as a means of glorifying ourselves.

After I graduated from college I worked as an engineer for a couple of years. But I became dissatisfied, and I began to seek a job that might yield more status, influence and prominence. I decided to go to law school, because I thought being a lawyer would give me an elevated status. Now there is nothing wrong with being a lawyer, or pursuing other interests and desires, but soon it became clear to me that my motivation was wrongly directed. I was being driven by the desire to be important.

This desire to be influential is why believers sometimes want to be pastors, teachers or leaders in the body of Christ. We think we might gain in the church the prominence and significance that eludes us in the world. Oftentimes, this is what motivates people to Christian leadership.

This chapter of James is key because it deals with the issue of how we can become truly influential as men or women of God. This is clearly evident in the question James poses in verse 13: "who is wise and understanding among you?" The first 12 verses instruct us how not to seek influence; the second half of the chapter, which we will look at next week, instructs us how we truly become people of significance.

James gives two reasons why not many should become teachers. First, he says, "you will incur a harsher judgment." Being a teacher

many look glamorous, but there is greater accountability, discipline, and cost demanded. Furthermore, there is greater opposition from the enemy in terms of spiritual warfare. When I am preaching, a lot of strange things happen to me or around me. I have to make hard decisions to commit time to study and prepare.

Jesus illustrates the greater cost and accountability demanded of teachers in his comment about some who might lead children astray: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depths of the sea.”

Becoming a teacher of God’s word should not be taken lightly. It is not something we should do for selfish reasons, to be fulfilled, influential, or to gain self-importance. One should feel a clear calling from God first.

The second reason why few among the body are to be teachers is because a teacher must use his tongue. He influences people’s lives through his speech—and, of course, the tongue is a major stumbling block. James says that we all stumble in many ways. If we do not stumble in what we say, then we are perfect, able to bridle the whole body as well. Controlling the evil of the tongue, therefore, is the last level of maturity.

Now, not everyone is a teacher, but we all fall prey to thinking that we can influence others through our speech. We offer Biblical advice, telling people what they need to do. But unless we can “walk the talk,” we will not really have influence. Influence is not gained by a title or by words; it is gained through actions. Unless our lives back up what we have to say, we don’t really have anything to offer. This is where James is heading. If many people desire to be teachers, they have a wrong idea about what significance really is in terms of effective ministry. True influence is gained by what we do, not by what we say.

But first, James will describe the problems of the tongue. It doesn’t matter if we are a teacher or a president, a store clerk or a housewife, we must all deal with the tongue. It is a lethal weapon, and it is licensed to kill. Verses 3-10:

Now if we put the bits into horses’ mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Behold, the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder, wherever the indication of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! 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. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come blessing and cursing. (3:3-10a)

Here, James gives four characteristics of the tongue to show how powerful and evil it can be.

First, the tongue directs our path (3-5a). James uses two analogies. The tongue is like a bit in the mouth of a horse, or the rudder of a ship. A horse is a very strong and powerful animal. The strength of a horse is an image that is used often in the OT. And yet, even if

the horse is large and strong, such a small thing as a bit determines his direction and course. The same is true of a rudder of a ship. Even on enormous sea-going vessels, their path and direction is determined by a tiny rudder.

The same thing is true about the tongue. It is a small member of the body, and yet it directs our path and determines our course. When we speak, oftentimes we say something that will determine our future actions. For example, if we tell a lie, we may have to spend great effort covering our tracks. If we say something inappropriate to a referee, we might get thrown out of a game. If we explode at our boss, we might get fired. If we say something hurtful, we might lose a friend.

I can see this truth at work in my relationship with my wife. If I say something that hurts her, then my course is set: I have to buy her candy or flowers, take her out to dinner, or go shopping. What we say to our wives can get very expensive at times.

On a larger scale, the teacher directs the course of the church by what he says. The rabbi is like the rudder on a ship, because he has the potential for directing the lives and ministries of others. He has the influence to determine the course of the congregation. This is one reason why multiple leadership in the church is healthy for the body. If an entire congregation is following an unhealthy or controlling rudder, the church can end up on the beach.

The second characteristic of the tongue is that words spread like fire. Our words can be very volatile and flammable. Something that appears insignificant at the outset can wreak great destruction. The fires that raged in Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks over the last few years give evidence of this.

Like a fire, our words can spread and quickly get out of control. Through repetition, they leap from one person to another, from one place to another, and eventually someone will get burned. When I was working as an engineer, I marveled at how quickly stories traveled from one building to another in our company. Words seemed to have the ability to leap over parking lots!

The lesson is clear: If we don’t want something repeated, we shouldn’t say it in the first place.

James refers to the tongue as a “fire, the very world of iniquity.” The fire we breath out of our mouths is one hundred percent garbage. Its source is hell itself. Its effect is that it stains or defiles the entire body, and we get burned all over. And the result of the fire is that it sets alight the course of our lives, leaving a trail of destruction. Listen to the words of Jesus in Matthew 15:18: “The things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man.” The tongue is like the pilot light in the gas furnace. It seems insignificant, but when someone turns up the heat, the raw gas pours forth and the flames ignite. Proverbs 16:27 says: “A worthless man digs up evil while his words are as a scorching fire.” Proverbs 19:28 says: “The mouth of the wicked spreads iniquity.”

Third, the tongue is uncontrollable. It cannot be tamed. Man has trained every beast which God has created, the largest and the strongest, and yet he cannot train the tongue. One writer says:

We can tame Flipper and Trigger, Shamu and Lassie. We can train falcons to land on our wrists, pigeons to carry our messages, dogs to fetch the paper, elephants to stand on rolling balls, tigers to sit

on stools, and alligators to turn over and get their bellies rubbed. But the tongue? Impossible to train!

Why is that? It is because the tongue is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. It is restless in that it is unstable and volatile, ready to explode at any provocation, like nitroglycerin. And it is full of deadly poison in that it brings fatal results. It lunges out unexpectedly, like a rattlesnake, with fangs that sink deep and evoke a deadly poison which kills and destroys. "There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of the sword" (Prov 12:18). How often have you caught yourself saying, "I know I shouldn't say this, but..." or "Don't tell anyone this, but..."? Spinoza said: "Surely human affairs would be far happier if the power in men to be silent were the same as that to speak. But experience more than sufficiently teaches that men govern nothing with more difficulty than their tongues."

Finally, says James, the tongue is double-minded. "With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who have been made in the likeness of God." The tongue has potential for both blessing and cursing, for good and evil.

We can bless God through worship, prayer, and praise. We can speak words that encourage and build up. When they are used wisely and with control, our words have the ability to restore, heal, and give life. Speech can turn away wrath, bring sweetness to the soul, and speak wisdom and truth. Speech can be pleasant and gracious. But then we can turn quickly to tear down and criticize someone made in God's image. Like the Indians say, we speak with a "forked" tongue. We come to church and sing praises to God, but on the way home we can speak an angry word to our spouse, explode at our children, or curse someone who cuts us off on the freeway. Our speech can cause conflict and misery, stir up anger and strife, spread iniquity, destroy neighbors and separate intimate friends. Our words can be full of slander, lies and deceit.

So the tongue seems to be an uncontrollable, two-headed monster with a tremendous potential for blessing, but an even greater potential for evil. "A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit" (Prov 15:4). What a negative picture James paints. The condition looks hopeless.

But James offers a remedy, beginning in verse 10b:

My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. 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? Neither can salt water produce fresh. (3:10b-12)

These things should not be so, according to James. The tongue should not be destructive, deadly, and demonic. It should not be an uncontrollable, fast-spreading fire.

Why does James say that? Once more, he helps us with some analogies, all of which come from nature. First, the analogy of a spring. If the source is fresh, the water will be fresh; if the source is bitter, the water will be bitter. A spring cannot be both fresh and bitter, unless there are two sources. The second analogy is that of a fig tree. A fig tree cannot produce olives. It is a fig tree through and through; that is its nature. In the same way, a vine cannot produce figs any more than a fig tree can produce olives. Finally, salt water cannot become fresh, because that is contrary to its basic nature.

What does James mean here? In the analogies, the kind of water is determined by its source, and the kind of fruit is determined by the nature of the plant or tree. A spring cannot produce two kinds of water. A tree cannot bear fruit that is contrary to its nature. James

is saying that when it comes to speech, the kind of words that come out depend on the source. What flows out of our mouths is based upon the nature of our hearts. This is what Jesus said in Matt 12:34: "The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart." "He hath a heart as sound as a bell, and his tongue is the clapper; for what his heart thinks his tongue speaks" (Unknown).

Therefore, if we are Christians, these things should not be so, because we are new creations in Christ. We have a new nature, a new heart. We do not have two natures, even though it might seem that way at times. As Christians we have been reborn with the heart and nature of Christ, so we really have only one nature. Therefore, the words that flow from our lips should reflect the source. Our tongue then should not be a restless evil, but an instrument of righteousness to restore, redeem and bring healing.

There are two practical applications of this text that come to mind. First, we must take care of the source. If the source of our words is healthy, then our speech will reflect who we are in Christ. If the source is contaminated and poisoned, however, then our words will be destructive and deadly. The more care we give to the purity of our heart, the more will this purity be reflected in our speech. If we absorb our hearts with the words of Scripture and the thoughts of God, then that is what will come out when we are in need of words. Proverbs 4:23-24 agrees:

**Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life.
Put away from you a deceitful mouth,
And put devious lips far from you. (Prov 4:23-24)**

And second, we must filter our thoughts and words. As James counseled, we need to be quick to hear and slow to speak. Before we speak we need to filter our words through our hearts and allow them to be cleansed by the Holy Spirit. We can taste the words that are forming in our mouths and think about the effect they will have before we say them. And if we don't know what to say, we need to take the advice of Publius, the Greek sage, who said: "I have often regretted my speech, never my silence." Psalm 39 says: "I will guard my mouth as with a muzzle." The apostle Paul counsels: "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Eph 4:29).

So the tongue is a very powerful member of the body, both for good and for evil. James says that if we control our tongues, then we will be perfect, i.e., we will be mature. If we want to have true significance, then we need to guard our tongues. Let us use speech to promote the kingdom of God on earth, not to promote ourselves, to manipulate or control others. Let us learn to use our words so that others may grow in their relationship with God.

Our model here, of course, must be Jesus. He was master of his tongue and his speech. Let him be our model for everything we say so that we may sustain the downtrodden and the broken. As the prophet Isaiah said:

**"The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples,
That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word."
(Isa 50:4)**

Solomon, the writer of Ecclesiastes, put it this way: "The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd" (Eccl 12:11).

The words that we utter are extremely important. If we are careful to filter them through the source of our life, who is Christ, then God can use them to his glory for the growth of his kingdom on earth.

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