



Lesson 12 August 22nd, 2020

Taming the Tongue

Study Scripture – James 3:1-12

Background Scripture – James 2-3

Key Verse:

*So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.
See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!*

James 3:5

INTRODUCTION

Do you have anything worth saying?

Do you believe some of the foolish proverbs commonplace in the world which are terrible falsehoods such as, **“Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me”**.

It might be wise to check yourself on what you believe and what you repeat.

At the present time we can speak with each other face-to-face in the old-fashioned way, or we can use YouTube to tell people what we can do or what they should do; we can video conference, send text messages and use Wi-Fi, Twitter, and all kind of other platforms to make our opinions known.

James did not know all of the means of communications that we have in the modern world but the test that he gives to us shows his interest in “substance” rather than “form”. One writer says that he seems interested only

“in content not packaging. He calls on us to walk our talk”.

After his strong emphasis on works and his analysis of works he concluded **“faith apart from works is dead”**.

It is logical therefore to expect that James will continue this discussion about “works” and accordingly he tells us that the words that come out of our mouths are in fact a form of “works”.

James points to our inconsistent use of our tongues. God wants us only to use our mouths to speak blessings but instead we use our tongues mixing up **speaking blessings** at the time as **speaking curses**, a deviation from what nature does. Nature does not mix up things like that. It

is only human beings that can behave badly and that presents a massive problem for believers for the question then is

Who can help us escape this horrible problem?

Our lesson today focuses on demonstrating the living faith, which all true believers possess, in the manner in which we control our speech. The nature of our speech in the use of our tongues will now be forcefully examined in detail.

Note that James emphasizes that we are responsible for what we do. God has made more than adequate provision to help us as we journey through this earth. We cannot deny that sometimes Christians need to put on a muzzle. One well-known writer Matthew Henry tells us: **“I mean seriously, it’s embarrassing what comes out of the mouths of some of us, Name-calling, gossip, cussing. And I will be the first to admit, I too have been found guilty..... No man can tame the tongue without divine grace and assistance. The apostle does not represent it as impossible, but as extremely difficult. Other sins decay with age, this many times gets worse; we grow more froward and fretful, as natural strength decays, and the days come on in which we have no pleasure. When other sins are tamed and subdued by the infirmities of age, the spirit often grows more tart, nature being drawn down to the dregs, and the words used becoming more passionate”.**

In Chapter 1:19 James warns

“So, then, my beloved brothers, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger”.

In 1:26

“If anyone among you thinks himself to be religious while he doesn’t bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this man’s religion is worthless”.

In chapter 2:12 we are warned *“to speak as those who will be judged”*, indicating that our words should be used as a means of blessing, and all our words will be judged, according to God’s law which of course cannot be separated from His mercy. Words aimed at bringing God’s blessing are acceptable, for those words involve not only judgment but mercy. Those that did not bring both were not according to the *‘law of liberty’*.

We and our words will be judged and hence caution should be exercised.

Our previous lesson on being “Impartial Disciples” is very important, for we can and most often do express partiality with our words. So James gives us directions about our words, so that we can know the will of God in this area of our lives.

James insists that if there are no good works, we will fall under God’s disciplinary punishment. Some hold the view that the absence of good works in one’s life is a sign that such a person is not a true believer and will face the punishment of hellfire. While there is disagreement on this matter, the scriptures are clear that a Christian is to “walk by faith” and if there is no such walk



there would be disciplinary punishment which might even result in premature physical death. (See 1 Corinthians 5, 10, 11:27-30; Hebrews 12).

James warns believers against any abandonment of their 'walk by faith'. This then is a discussion in sanctification, teaching believers how to live the Christian life.

The Apostle previously discussed the importance of words, the use of which is regarded as one of the most important aspect of our works. (See chapter 1:19-27). There his readers were urged to be "*slow to speak*" and to bridle their tongues. Not doing that indicates that there is self-deception and futile religion.

James' focus in this lesson applies to the use of words generally and particularly on the misuse of the tongue in Christian worship. This is also a lesson against idle speech.

James will now aim directly at leaders that the church had called to control and guide its life and destiny. He will use two figures of speech to make his point clear, and these are the imagery of the horse's bit, and a ship's rudder.

It should be remembered that a faith without works is unprofitable and dead. It would seem from James's discourse that those who say they have faith but behave in certain unacceptable ways are most likely to be affected by sins of the tongue.

James cautions against the mischievous use of the tongue and the self-aggrandizing, demanding attitude that goes with power and position.

THE TEXT

Verse 1. This verse is structured in the form of a command to 'wanna-be' teachers. James is here pointing out that those who wish to be teachers should be cautioned that they have greater accountability and have the greater difficulty of not stumbling.

The word suggests that James is cautioning those who want to teach in the church, and it seems evident that those ministering in that role were often unworthy and should step down. This should not be interpreted that James is forbidding anyone from directing and instructing others, but it is clear that there is an evil in desiring to be a teacher while at the same time not been qualified for the office.

Note that one does not have to be scared when put in the role of teaching, for godly men and women are given a Spirit- bestowed teaching which God supplies so that His children will succeed in the work He has called them to do.

But it has to be carefully noted that a teacher is responsible to study. A teacher must meditate on the Text that they are handling. They are responsible for everything they do to honour Christ. Teaching requires much diligence for when one is dealing with Bible and communicating



truths about God there must be careful study and preparation so that the information is communicated as reliably as possible.

Note therefore that a teacher can influence the mind of the students and other brethren rightly or wrongly and if a teacher teaches things wrongly a student might never ever recover from that mis-direction.

Teaching in the church is a great responsibility and therefore it is most important that the church use the gift of discernment to discern whether or not people are being attracted to the teaching office for the wrong reasons.

The solemn admonition therefore is directed to ambitious people in the church as well as to the church itself.

The word translated “masters” has the primary idea of teaching and is used to point to an instructor or a schoolmaster. The position of a teacher therefore indicates authority not based on power per se but on superior qualification.

A look at the prevailing culture indicates the difficult and dangerous ideas which were prevalent. The Jews regarded teachers or rabbis with great respect and honored them. (See Matthew 23: 1-8). The Apostle Paul also examined this attitude in Romans 2:19-21. (See also 1 Timothy 1:5-7). We know that many of the Jewish people coveted the name or office of Rabbi and had the great desire and ambition to be doctors and teachers.

Note that today we see the same attitude displayed in the Christian church by people who do not have the dedication, ability or knowledge required. But notwithstanding that they have ambition to be teachers and exercise authority.

The general practice during the services in the synagogue was to allow men in the congregation to address the assembly and we note that Jesus took advantage of this to address His countrymen though they did not like what He said. (See also Acts 13:15 for this custom). The Christians obviously followed the same practice and it would seem that there were many in the church who though not qualified, were aspiring to teach others publicly, because of the prestige attached to teaching or for some other motive.

So James warned that God will judge a teacher more strictly than a non-teacher for the reasonable presumption was that they knew the truth and were claiming they lived by the truth.

This should not be looked at as an attack on the office of teacher or the role of teaching. James actually states that he was a teacher, so he would not be condemning himself. But he clearly wished to place this caution on the record and restrain those who were rushing to teach, even though they were not qualified. It should appear that the role of teacher can easily bring spiritual and intellectual pride and that is a great danger to everyone.



No person should rush to become an instructor in sacred matters. The position of teachers is not to be taken lightly in the church for the responsibility that comes with it is extremely serious. Teachers are more accountable than others and they will receive a stricter or literally a “more severe” trial, judgment, or accounting. To whom much is given much is required, according to Luke 12:48.

James is here reminding people who seek positions that they should think about the Judgment Seat that they will face and then determine whether or not they want to enter certain ministries. The Judgment Seat of Christ should be considered before making up one’s mind in regard to any particular ministry. Everyone should make it certain that it is the Holy Spirit that is guiding them in choosing and in doing the work of God.

The situation of being in a role in the church to which God has not called us makes our case quite awful. We will receive greater judgment than common sinners, for not only have we sinned in putting ourselves into an office to which God never called us; but because we are unable to perform that office properly, and we have assumed mastery over others and made them perish for lack of knowledge; the blood of these people will be required by God from you.

Jesus himself dealt with this matter for in Luke 17:2 on this matter of leading someone astray Jesus said:

“It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, rather than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble”.

This however should not deter those that are called by God. If we are called by God, He will show us by several things that He wants us to be in particular roles. There are personality traits, qualifications, and standards laid down in Scripture for every office in the church and those called by God should meet those standards or show such promise. Then after a person has been chosen by God, that person should learn, practice, and study so that they can serve God faithfully. One writer comments sadly:

“How many at the close of life, in the ministry and out of it, feel, when too late to make a change, that they have wholly mistaken the purpose for which they should have lived!”

It would be wise for us to consider as to whether this warning from James about severe judgment for teachers applies to parents for remember that children learn much about the world from their parents. They would pick up good or bad habits from their parents and thus it is possible that God would hold parents responsible if they do not teach their children properly or even lead them astray. Neglecting your children’s education is not a good option.

Verse 2. James says this caution is important for we all stumble, or offend, err, or fail in our duty. We all commit errors and so we should be cautious in seeking an office where we are likely to commit errors **and** cause a great deal of damage. The Apostle Paul in Romans 3:23 warns us that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. So we must be very careful in what we are doing.



This should produce a sobering attitude because of our common weaknesses. Note that the word translated “stumble” or “offend” does not imply a fatal fall. But it certainly indicates that we should make every attempt to walk so closely to God and avoid offending men, and behave with sincerity, that our lives will be marked by less and less stumbling.

As James focuses on the tongue, he introduces a measure or a test of spiritual maturity which applies to teachers and all Christian. He says that to not get tripped-up by one’s own tongue, shows true spiritual maturity. The person that has a stumbling word must be “perfect” or have true spiritual maturity. This of course is something to which teachers should pay special attention, since they have more opportunity to sin with their tongue than anyone else.

Every man seems to have the tendency to sin with the tongue. Nobody seems to have controlled or mastered the tongue except Jesus Christ. Titus 1:11 regards the misuse of the tongue as a most awful sin.

Those, especially teachers, who demonstrate using the tongue properly, is one who has dominion over himself, having complete control over himself, and is spiritually mature. If he can control his tongue he can control his body.

That man or teacher not adversely affected by sins with the tongue and who is therefore guided by God’s wisdom and grace and enabled to control his tongue, will as a direct consequence, be able to rule all his actions.

So we are advised to be very careful in governing our tongue. We must bridle it. To bridle means to lead or guide with a bit, to check, moderate, and to restrain. The sharper your tongue the more you should exert energy to control it. Psalm 39:1 states for our admonition:

“I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me.”

Proverbs 34:3 advises: *“He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openneth wide his lips shall have destruction.”*

Proverbs 21:23 state: *“Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue, keepeth his soul from troubles.”*

And of course Proverbs 34:13 commands: *“Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile.”*

Note that the Apostle Paul warned the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:30-32 that they should be careful, for from their own group men would arise speaking and teaching perversions of the truth to draw away disciples after them. The tongue is a dangerous thing because of its potential to mislead others, causing their destruction.

The adult Christian who is fully instructed in the gospel, will teach no false doctrines, and will not modify or make imperfect the great truths of Christianity. He will be able to prove himself



to be no learner or novice, but one who understands the Divine, behaving appropriately and thus worthy of being a faithful or wise servant (Matt 24:45).

So we can list some of what we can avoid doing or stumbling. One writer notes these as including:

Saying things that offend unnecessarily
Saying things designed to wound another person
Saying things intended to deceive
Saying things that would lead another person astray.

Verse 3. James now illustrates the power of the tongue. He gives us two examples which connect the tongue's impact, linking it to the totality of control.

He tells us that a strong horse, capable of great feats of strength and endurance, is otherwise unruly and ungovernable and can easily unseat; but if a tiny bit is put in the horse's mouth that powerful animal is easily controlled and can be made to obey every command. The entire body of the horse can be turned in any required direction because of this small bit.

Verse 4. The great and powerful ships, though they are great, are only driven by fierce winds which seem to drive the ships beyond control. Still, these great ships can themselves be turned, steered, and controlled by anyone having command of the very small rudder. Our very lives like these unwieldy ships can be controlled by something very small compared with its entire body.

Verse 5. The insignificant and tiny bit and rudder all have the power to direct and control, similarly, the tongue, though little, has comparable power. It is very influential and boasts all kinds of powerful sounding words.

The tongue is conscious of its influence and power and boasts of what it can do. And it can do much. It can start a very small fire which can set ablaze a great amount of material. A word spoken by it can set ablaze a town or a country and cause many to suffer the consequences. Clearly then the tongue is capable of doing a lot of good or a lot of evil. An unruly tongue brings terrible evil.

In addressing this issue Jesus said:

"That which enters into the mouth doesn't defile the man; but that which proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man".

It is understood therefore that there can be physical defilement for some sacrifices were never acceptable to God, but even more importantly there is spiritual defilement manifested in the human sphere and that is shown by what comes out at the mouth.

The great task of a Christian therefore is to learn how to properly manage the tongue, for if that is controlled the entire man can be governed appropriately. Of course, this can only be done when one places oneself under the guidance and control of the Holy Spirit.



Verse 6. The undisciplined tongue has such great destructive power that it can actually be described as “a world of iniquity”. Its effect is as a fire. Its effect is as a poison for the whole body. It has a dreadful effect on the rest of our bodies, and since it is a terrible fire and out of control it damages the rest of the body. It even sets society on fire by its actions.

It is a little world of evil, and it represents the world with every kind of evil that exists in of the world concentrated right there in that little but powerful member of the human body. One writer describes this phrase’s meaning as follows:

“Who can measure the evils which arise from scandal, and slander, and profaneness, and perjury, and falsehood, and blasphemy, and obscenity, and the inculcation of error, by the tongue? Who can gauge the number of broils, and contentions, and strifes, and wars, and suspicions, and enmities, and alienation among friends and neighbors, which it produces? Who can number the evils produced by the ‘honeyed’ words of the seducer, or the tongue of the eloquent in the maintenance of error, and the defense of wrong? If all men were dumb, what a portion of the crimes of the world would soon cease! If all men would speak only that which ought to be spoken, what a change would come over the face of human affairs!”

The phrase “wheel” or “course of nature” means literally:

“the wheel of birth- that is, the wheel which is set in motion at birth, and which runs on through life.

It may be a matter of doubt whether this refers to successive generations, or to the course of individual life. The more literal sense would be that which refers to an individual: but perhaps the apostle meant to speak in a popular sense, and thought of the affairs of the world as they roll on from age to age, as all enkindled by the tongue, keeping the world in a constant blaze of excitement.

Whether applied to an individual life, or to the world at large, everyone can see the justice of the comparison. One naturally thinks, when this expression is used, of a chariot driven on with so much speed that its wheels by their rapid motion become self- ignited, and the chariot moves amidst flames.”

So James tells us that it is because of the tongue that the evil influences of hell spread like fire through every area of life. So Proverbs 10:18-21 from which James draws advises us:

“He that hideth hatred with lying lips, and he that uttereth a slander, is a fool.

In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise.

The tongue of the just is as choice silver: but the heart of the wicked is little worth.

The lips of the righteous feed many: but fools die for want of wisdom.”

And again we read in Proverbs 26:18-19, *“Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death, is the man who deceives his neighbor, and says, “I was only joking!”*

Proverbs 18:21 states: *“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”*



Of course, Solomon warned us in Ecclesiastes 5:6 *“Suffer not thy mouth to cause by flesh to sin.”*

The tongue draws men into all kinds of destructive and terrible situations. The forces of hell promote the ‘fire’ of the tongue and inflame its diabolical schemes. This is no wonder, for the devil himself is called a liar and an accuser of the brethren, so one would expect the devil to use men’s tongues to make trouble for the innocent, for by that they bring the fire of hell to men.

Verse 7-8. James reminds us that the tongue is extremely difficult to control. It is an unruly evil. It cannot be restrained or silenced and nothing but the grace of God can bring it under control. The tongue cannot be restrained for it is evil and there is no human government that can bring it under restraint.

Note that everything that James is saying is pointing us to having God the Father be the directing hand on the reins and rudder that is our tongue. The Spirit of God must be the controlling hand.

The tongue can deliver deadly poison. Here James is thinking of the slanderer, the backbiter, the whisperer, the talebearer, and the accusers. These are more dangerous than the poison of snakes for they take away the life, peace, and reputation of men.

Man has tamed and brought all kinds of animal life under his control; teaching and controlling lions, elephants, birds like parrots speak and sing, training tigers, charming snakes, training dolphins’ things to do tricks. But though the animal kingdom can be tamed, men have never been successful in taming the tongue.

But we should note that despite these difficulties man can overcome them for God has pointed us to the way. One writer looks at man, the excuses he makes, And notes:

“The human spirit has incredible capacity for sacrifice and self-control. Sometimes we hear a desperate survival story of someone who cuts off their own leg to get free from a tree that has fallen on them, and then they make it to a hospital for medical treatment. Yet that same man can tame the tongue perfectly”.

So before you make any excuse that you cannot control yourself be careful.

There is one in using story which we will relate:

“A woman once came to John Wesley and said she knew what her talent was and she said, “I think my talent from God is to speak my mind”.

Wesley replied, “I don’t think that God would mind if you buried that talent”.

So we advise

Speaking forth everything that comes to mind is unwise, poisonous speech, says one writer.

Verse 9. The tongue is most inconsistent in its behavior. Men bless God the Father with the tongue, a most highly calling, and then they turn around and with the same tongue curse men who are made in the image of God. That is the lowest.



We just previously studied the lesson where the Apostle Peter obeyed and spoke the revelation given him by the Father declaring that Jesus was Messiah, and then immediately thereafter used the same tongue to do the work of Satan (Matt. 16:13 – 23).

It is absurd to curse men who are made in the image of the Creator and then want to turn around to bless the Creator Himself.

It is important to note that many in Israel blessed the Father several times daily with their eighteen benedictions and like others when they called the name of God always added “blessed Be He”. But of course they very quickly turned around and cursed men with the tongue.

Verse 10. Thus using the same tongue to bless and to curse is not only contrary to the will of God but to the natural order. One should not speak praises to God at the worship service and then afterwards abuse people verbally or otherwise at home, work, or any other place.

James is not amused by this behavior. He is telling us not to talk too much, not to boast, to discipline our speech, to control the tongue, not to gossip, not to insult, ridicule, slander or revile, but to change our habits of speech and to be gracious.

Verses 11-12. The natural and consistent course in nature should be reflected in the Christian’s conduct. The tongue should not be the instrument of conflicting emotion and sentiment.

Believers of God should consider it absurd to use their tongues in prayer and praise and then use them in cursing, slandering, and the like! If we bless God as our Father, it should teach us to speak well of, and kindly to, all who bear His image.

That tongue which addresses with reverence the divine Being cannot, without the greatest inconsistency, turn upon fellow-creatures with reviling brawling language.

For men to reproach those who have not only the image of God in their natural faculties, but are renewed after the image of God by the grace of the gospel cannot in turn bring railing accusation to other men. The angels also follow a similar creed. To do otherwise would represent a shameful contradiction to all their pretensions of honouring the great Original. These things ought not so to be; and, if such considerations were always at hand, surely they would not be.

The Apostle shows that contrary effects from the same causes are monstrous, and not be found in nature, and therefore cannot be consistent with grace.

The comparisons are clear. A fountain cannot produce sweet water and bitter water. Saltwater cannot be made sweet. A fig tree cannot produce olives, and a vine cannot produce figs. In the normal operation of nature some things just do not happen.

This of course specifically applies to the religious teachers who should not use their tongue dangerously. They should have the proper qualifications before they tried to wield power.



Those who are teachers should be wise, discrete and pious. They should always operate according to the will of God.

CONCLUSION

James' exhortation continues. What is it that proves whether or not a person is wise and has knowledge?

Wisdom is not proved by intellectual knowledge but wisdom and understanding is shown by good conduct. Wisdom is shown by the meekness demonstrated in one's behavior.

A teacher needs wisdom which is defined as the ability to look at life from God's perspective. Understanding involves discerning, comprehending and perceiving the truth.

We are told that one of the marks of wisdom is gentleness, which is literally the word used to describe a horse that has been broken and trained to submit to the bridle. It therefore represents strength under control.

The only controller by which a believer should be governed or have is the Holy Spirit, and if under this control of divine authority, the tongue will be placed and kept under the control of God, so He can use it as He wishes. Wisdom is a moral matter.

It is necessary for a teacher to remain humble even if it is difficult. That state of mind and way of life should be consistent with a deportment led by the Spirit, and that is what "*conversation*" means. There should be a holy life, a holy walk, holy work, and holy speech.

Learning is important but it's of little worth if it does not teach someone how to humble themselves and to be proper and correct in their conduct toward others. Humility should be a necessary trait of the teacher.

Bitter envy and strife are not brought by God and these vices are not to be in the people of God. Self-promotion and lying means false teaching which are naturally opposed to the truth. These traits are contrary to the meekness of wisdom and they cannot exist together in the same heart.

The bad attitudes rule out any boasting or glory, for the existence of these traits or motives make one unfit for the teaching office. Vain glorying and lying is not of God. This kind of behavior, this so-called wisdom comes from the world and is demon-like; interested in deception, hypocrisy, and evil. It is animalistic for it seeks to gratify the passions. It is inspired by demons and kept in a person by demonic influence. This wisdom comes from beneath, rests on earthly principles and earthly motives. It is sensual for it indulges the flesh and fulfills the lusts and desires of the flesh. Being inspired by devils who are proud and who are against God, this wisdom is condemned by God.

James teaches true religion.

Clearly, the words that we use are extremely important in carrying out our ministry. It is not easy to control our tongues and therefore we should not be too ready to take on a teaching



ministry. Instead, we should seek to master the control of this unruly member; for we are considered perfect if we do not offend by the misuse of our tongues.

The only one who can control our tongues is God and it is only He that gives us wisdom. We must however fulfill our ministry to which we are called. But the warning is that if we have the wisdom of God we will show it in humility, graciousness, and peace.

Anything or anyone that does not bear the fruits of good works will be condemned. So we with James and other writers, warn against unfruitful religion, unfruitful faith, and unfruitful wisdom.

We are commanded to teach and exhort only the things of God. This must be done conscientiously. God has given these gifts to those in the church for the benefit of the church and they must be used properly. Those who are doing the ministries of God will be recognized by their fruit. Those that are in ministries for which they are not fitted must take caution, go to God for wisdom and correction and so be pleasing to Him.

We must all remember that there will be a Day of Judgment and we will have to give an account for everything that we have been done. God is merciful. He wants us to change and do what is right. He is willing to help us. Above all, remember that we must be 'wise speakers'.

