



James 3:1-12

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Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

July 16, 1945. Does that date mean anything to you? That's a monumental date in the history of the United States. July 16, 1945 was the day the United States successfully detonated the first ever nuclear device. The detonation took place in South-Central New Mexico, and it was the result of the several-years-long Manhattan Project. Robert Oppenheimer was the director of that project and he's since become known as the "father of the atomic bomb." As he witnessed that first successful detonation from afar, he ominously said, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."

What if I told you that you have in your arsenal another powerful weapon that can leave paths of destruction? A weapon that also leads to death. Of course, you've probably figured out on the basis of our scripture reading that I'm talking about your tongue. It's the words that proceed from our mouths that have the power to destroy. It's the speech that our tongue produces that has the power to lead us even into eternal death in hell. With our tongues, we destroy worlds.

How can we tame our tongues? We can't tame them simply by "minding our p's and q's." It's not going to be tamed by practicing "if you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything at all." No, there needs to be a more permanent solution than that, and thankfully, God provides that solution. The theme we'll be considering this morning is:

The Power of the Spoken Word

- I. With our words, we have become death
- II. With His Words, Christ has become life

There's a common idea these days, that it's refreshing when people just, "Tell it like it is." You've probably heard someone remark things like, "That person is so honest, they say whatever is on their minds." "I'm not concerned about what other people think. I'm not concerned with being politically correct. I call it as I see it." And it's held up as this honorable quality. It's become a common idea that we should always say whatever we think or feel, no matter how unkind, no matter how much trouble

it might cause. Just tell it like it is, if someone gets offended, that's their problem. And that really is not something we should be striving for. God is speaking through James here in our text and telling us that we need to be so careful about what comes out of our mouths or what we type on the internet, and not just think we can say whatever we want and disguise it as some noble quality. The words that we speak are powerful. They can be for good, *or* they can be for evil—leading even to death.

James begins in our text saying, ***“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers.”*** He's not anti-teacher, but his point is that if you're a teacher, you're going to talk a lot. And if you talk for a living, you're going to have a lot of opportunities to put your foot in your mouth. I know what that's like. That goes for me as a pastor, but also for teachers and Sunday school teachers and for parents and really for all Christians—if you spend a lot of time talking, you need to be extra careful about what you say.

And James shows why this is so important with a few illustrations in verses 2-4 of our text with the pictures of the horse and the ship. His point in all of that is this: ***“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.”*** If we could get our tongues under control entirely, we'd be perfect. You'd be a perfect person just like Jesus, who never used His tongue to be unkind, who never just told it like it was without any care for the hearer, who always spoke the truth in love. Even when He spoke words which were painful to hear as He rebuked sin, He did so in love for the hearer's soul. If *you* could tame your tongue, you'd be perfect just like that. And to illustrate this, he points to the ships. Think of those great big wooden ships that they had even back then, driven through the choppy seas with the wind in their sails. But they are steered simply by a small rudder underneath the waves. So, a little thing controls a great, big thing. Or think about the great strong horse, able to pull wagons and other heavy loads, yet you can guide it or get it to halt simply because of the bridle that it holds in its mouth. Again, a little thing controls the whole body. So, James says, if you were able to control your tongue, you'd then be able to control your whole body—you'd be perfect.

But the bad news for us if we're pursuing that perfection is this little truth about our tongues: ***“Every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue.”*** Our tongues, little though they are, cause great damage. They say that “talk is cheap.” They say that “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” “Au contraire,” says James. Talk can be extremely costly. Words have great power to harm. James writes in the middle of verse 5, ***“How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.”*** Skip a few verses, ***“It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”*** And that is how we've often used our tongues. When we use our tongues to argue with the goal of winning the argument at all costs, we are setting fires with our tongues. When we lash out in anger at a loved one after we've had a long day (and they just don't understand what we've been through), we are shooting poisonous darts at them. When we speak about something or someone in truth, but we speak it without love, we are destroying worlds. That's how we use our tongues.

And in our connected world of today, with the countless opportunities for us to spew uncensored loveless speech on the internet, using our phones, or in person—our tongues have become weapons of mass destruction for the devil. Make no mistake, **With our words, we have become death.** For that is where this unfettered use of the tongue leads because God says that this use of the tongue ends in ***“staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.”*** When we

say unkind words, when we curse, when we speak carelessly, then we're using our tongues the exact way the devil did in the Garden of Eden when he said to Eve, "You will not surely die, but you'll be like God!" And she ate from the tree and Adam ate from the tree, they sinned, and brought death. And that's the kind of power that our words have.

You've heard the saying, "You kiss your mother with that mouth?" That's what someone might say after they hear another person saying something vulgar. Well James takes that one step further, basically pointing the finger of the law at each of us and saying, "*You bless God with that mouth?*" ***"With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so."***

We have a problem, very clearly, and the heart of the problem is our tongues. Actually, let's back that up, is that true? Is it really our tongues that are the heart of the issue? They're not. The way we speak is just the smoke that's billowing up from a different fire. The heart of the issue when it comes to our inability to tame our tongues is not our tongues themselves; it's our sinful hearts. That's what Jesus said, ***"Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil."*** (Matthew 12:34b-35) When we with our words bring forth death, it is because our hearts are evil. This was the realization David came to when he cried out in his psalm, ***"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."*** (Psalm 51:10) Like David, we also need new hearts. We need a heart transplant.

God was speaking through the mouth of the prophet Ezekiel when He said, ***"I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."*** (Ezekiel 36:26) And this is a surgery which does not involve any pain for you. The wounds were inflicted on Christ. He went under the knife of the cross, and now God says the surgery was a success, for you. Through the Apostle Paul God says, ***"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."*** (2 Corinthians 5:17) When Christ Jesus went to the Cross to carry away the old weight of sin, He granted to you a new heart; you've been given new life—you've been given new opportunities to use your tongues, through Christ Jesus.

And we can really see **The Power of the Spoken Word** when we consider Christ's use of Words. Consider this: with just a Word, God created the heavens and the earth. With just a Word, Jesus healed those who were sick. With just a Word, Jesus cast out demons and raised people from the dead. When Jesus was growing up as a child, He learned God's Word so that He would have the words to give to people that were weary, to uphold them. And He did that His entire life in countless interactions.

Like when He spoke to Nicodemus the Pharisee who was very concerned about his soul's salvation, Jesus assured him, ***"Whoever believes in me will have eternal life."*** To the repentant woman who had been caught in adultery, He reassured her, ***"Neither do I condemn you."*** To the little children with whom the disciples were growing weary, Jesus said, ***"Let the little children come to me, for of such is the kingdom of God."*** To the confused disciples, He said, ***"Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. . . Because I live, you will live also."*** To the woman grieving in the garden, He reassured her simply saying, ***"Mary."*** To the fearful disciples in the upper room, He said, ***"Peace be to you."*** To His church He says, ***"I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*** And to you—He who bore your

sins and did so without ever speaking a word in His own defense, He who never cursed even when He was being crucified, He who always spoke the truth in love—to you He says, ***“Your sins are forgiven.”***

And it is that forgiveness which allows us to use our tongues for good. The final verse of our text says, ***“Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.”*** Well, it is the full forgiveness in Christ Jesus that turns salt ponds like us into fresh springs of righteousness and changes the words which come out of our mouths from those which lead to death to those which bring life.

The prophet Isaiah was struggling with the same guilt over the use of his tongue when God showed Him a vision of heaven. In this vision he saw the Lord God sitting upon a throne with the seraphim, the angels before him crying out ***“Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!”*** (cf. Isaiah 6:1-7) And Isaiah reacted as any of us would, saying, ***“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”*** And in this vision, God had one of the angels fly with a burning coal which he touched to Isaiah’s lips and announced, ***“Behold. . . your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”***

And it is precisely that which Christ has done for you and for me. Through His *perfect* use of His tongue, through His perfect *death*, He has taken away all your sins. **With His Words, Christ has brought life** to you and to me. He’s cleansed our hearts, given us a new heart in His own image, and He’s cleansed our lips so that with them we can now bless the Lord.

It is still true that ***“No man can tame the tongue.”*** But God can tame the tongue. And just as He is the answer for the guilt of your sin, He is also the answer for the stranglehold your sin has on you. As we recognize how we’ve often used our tongues for evil, let us drop to our knees in repentance, and let us also use that opportunity to ask the Lord to tame our tongues. His response will be, ***“Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”***

And then, rising up, continue to listen to God’s Word. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, (Colossians 3:16) so that you, comforted by Him, will have a word of comfort to share as well. And may God fill our mouths with *His* Words, the Words that lead to life. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.