

Sunday, January 4, 2026 pm

STUDIES IN JAMES (12)

Controlling Our Tongues

James 3:1-12

As we continue our study through James, a book filled with practical guidance as we seek to mature in the faith, we now come to his emphasis on the tongue. This section is about the way we talk. James has previously addressed the tongue in James 1:19-20 & vs. 26 which speaks of bridling the tongue. He will also have more to say about it in James 4:11, as well as mentioning what we say in various circumstances (e.g., James 2:14 – saying you have faith..., 4:13 – making plans verbally without God, 5:16 – confessing our trespasses, etc.). Now, in this section he addresses why controlling our conversation is so important.

I. **Let not many of you become teachers (3:1-2)**

- a. Why does James begin a discussion of the tongue by appealing to teachers?
 - i. Understand that words are the prime vehicle of the teacher's message. So the warning of James fits and transitions effectively.
 - ii. Likely, as with other points addressed, he was aware of problems related to this. Perhaps there were motives such as prejudice (e.g., against Gentiles), pride (e.g., as with the Pharisees), ignorance and inexperience, etc.
- b. Let not many become teachers – the discussion begins by noting that not everyone can or **should** be teachers. In saying, “become” he is noting that some should not even pursue it.
 - i. But doesn't being a teacher apply to all of us? Cf. 1 Peter 3:15, Hebrews 5:12-14, Acts 8:4, etc. In one sense the answer is yes. But James likely has the more formal role of a teacher (preacher, elder, public teacher, etc.) in mind.
 - ii. This is about both desire and ability. One who gives his life to teaching or is a skilled instructor has qualities that not everyone possesses. For some it is about who they are (cf. respect your boundaries/limitations – Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, 1 Peter 4:11, etc.), and for others it is about being unprepared (cf. “not a novice”, not willing to put in the necessary work to effectively and accurately deliver God's word, etc.).
- c. We will be held accountable for what we teach –
 - i. While we must all guard our character, people look up to leaders. They expect them to live what they teach. That was how Jesus began His rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:1-4. They were hypocrites.
 - ii. Of equal concern is our understanding of God's word. We have devoted considerable study to false teachers and the damage they do. If you are teaching error you are responsible for not only yourself, but also those whom you have led away from the truth. Matthew 15:13-14 notes that when the blind lead, both they and their followers will fall into the ditch. 2 Peter 2:2-3 notes that many will follow the destructive ways of false teachers.
 - iii. Be reminded of Paul's admonition to young Timothy – 1 Timothy 4:12-16. What he taught had impact on both his salvation and those who heard him.
- d. For – ties this to vs. 1. And he now begins to discuss our conversations.
- e. We will very likely stumble in words.
 - i. One who does not is “a perfect man” (without defect).
 - ii. The word for perfect (τέλειος, teleios) is exclusive to James and has been used 5 times (1:4 – 2x – patience has its perfect work making us without blemish and complete, 1:17 – perfect gifts from above, 25 – perfect law of liberty).

- iii. IF we can control the tongue (perfectly) we can control our whole body. The point of this is to note that to control the tongue is about perfecting self-control/discipline.

II. The power of the tongue (3-12)

- a. The Bible has much to say about the tongue. Entire class lesson books have been devoted to various sins and strengths of the tongue.
 - i. Sins of the tongue include lying, gossip, boasting, grumblings, criticisms, harsh language, profanity & coarse jesting, slander, angry words, spreading false doctrine, etc.
 - ii. And the Bible also speaks of how to properly use the tongue – to encourage, correct, inform, teach, communicate, etc.
- b. The power of the tongue illustrated (3:3-5)
 - i. Bits in a horse's mouth turns the whole body. Recall James 1:26 where he spoke of bridling our tongue. The bar at the end of a reign weighs very little, but it can be used to control a horse.
 - ii. The rutter of a ship can steer it where you desire. Like the bit, in comparison to the vessel, it is very small. Yet it controls the direction of the vessel.
 - iii. NOTE the wording of these two illustrations implies that direction is controlled by the pilot.
 - iv. A little fire can erupt to destroy a forest. This is something we are too familiar with in Southern California. All it takes is a spark during a drought to do catastrophic damage. It starts small, but spreads, sometimes rapidly. NOTE: Here is an example of how something small can grow out of control and do great damage. The prevention of such damage depends on controlling the fire in the first place.
 - v. So the tongue is a little member yet boasts great things. The point James is making is how powerful our words are. Let us continue.
- c. The tongue, as a little member affects the whole body (who we are)
 - i. It is a fire – that CAN burn down an entire forest. Consider that one way the dangers of fire is mitigated is with *controlled burns*. Fire is used to ensure that a fire does not intentionally burn out of control. The process requires planning and very intentional conditions, close monitoring and actions. NOTE: Your tongue “is lit”. It is up to you to control what is burned – how you use it.
 - ii. It is a world of iniquity – or unrighteousness. The word implies sinful behavior, living outside of God's law. Being “a world of...” means it is the source of many types of sinful behavior as already noted.
 - iii. It is so set that it defiles the whole body – while not literally, the point is our words reflect who we are and are a likely source of sinful contamination. This phrase is tied to the next -
 - iv. It sets on fire the course of nature – again there an appeal to fire. The NASB says, “*the course of our life*”. The LSB says, “*the course of our existence*.” Of note is the word nature which in Greek is, γένεσις (genesis). The tongue is at the foundation of who we are. The way we talk defines us. Recall the warning of Jesus in Matthew 15:11, *Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.*” Further explaining this Jesus tells His disciples *Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.*” Matthew 15:17-20.
 - v. It is set on fire by hell – the word for hell is γέεννα, geenna. The word is found 12 times in the NT. The other 11 times were in the gospels and used by Jesus to describe the place of eternal torments. Our text is the ONLY time outside of the gospel where the word is found.

The point is that all the sinful acts associated with the tongue originate with Satan and his domain. CONSIDER: Genesis 3:4, *Then the serpent said, "You will not surely die."* The first lie and first sin started with words.

- vi. So do you wonder the damage the tongue can do. These examples all illustrate how dangerous our words can be. Think of the damage that sinful words can do:
 - 1. They have destroyed relationships and trust, including churches dividing.
 - 2. They have started wars and damaged economies.
 - 3. They have caused many deaths
 - 4. They can damage one's self-worth
 - 5. They can defile a society with profanity and inflaming rhetoric.
 - 6. They can cause distrust because of lies, half-truths and failed promises.
 - 7. They will lead many to hell because of false doctrines that are being taught.
- d. It is difficult to tame
 - i. We can tame animals and birds. James illustrates this by noting man has learned much about training various creatures of the world – beasts, fish, birds, reptiles.
 - ii. But the tongue no one can tame (without help)
 - iii. James uses language that implies it is impossible to tame. Such is hyperbole (exaggeration for effect).
 - 1. Our text bears this out (cf. vs. 10, "my brethren these things ought not to be so" implies we have control)
 - 2. Previous references to controlling ships and horses imply efforts.
 - 3. James 1:19 also implies this.
 - 4. Jesus on another occasion said, *A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.* Matthew 12:35-37.
 - 5. Proverbs 21:23, *Whoever guards his mouth and tongue Keeps his soul from troubles.*
 - 6. Ephesians 4:29, *Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.*
 - iv. The tongue is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison – more descriptions of the potential danger of uncontrolled words.
- e. It can be inconsistent
 - i. With it we bless God and curse men. This is directed at believers. As we consider our speech how consistent are we spiritually? We worship God and praise Him. At home we read His word and offer prayers. Then in the next breath we curse the driver that cuts us off, or our leaders as they do things we do not like. We love each other as we gather to worship God, but gossip and criticize our brethren behind their backs when we get home. We love God and spew hatred toward men because they look different (e.g., racism).
 - ii. Out of the same mouth proceeds blessings and cursing.
 - iii. These things ought NOT to be so! This should NOT describe the Christian, in word or deed. 1 John 4:20 - he who says he loves God and hates his brother is a liar.. Apply "brother" to any form and think about it.
 - iv. In nature, a spring does not bring forth both fresh and bitter (salt) water from the same opening. What happens when you combine salt and fresh water? While it might be diluted, it is still salt water. Even worse is adding contaminated water (bitter, poisonous) to fresh water. It becomes undrinkable. We live in times where we "infuse" our water with flavors – adding lemons or cucumbers or some spice. So be it! That might make the potable water more

pleasant. But take a picture of water and add to it a sprig of hemlock, and it becomes undrinkable. That is how James describes our tongues when our language is inconsistent.

- v. Trees only bear the type of fruit they were created to produce. His final illustration is to note that what you plant is what you will get.
- vi. The Bible calls for us to be consistent in our language and conduct. We are to be dependable and true to God, ourselves and others.
 1. James 1:8 talked about the *double minded man who is unstable in all his ways.*
 2. James 5:12, *But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No," lest you fall into judgment.*
 3. Romans 12:9, *Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.*
 4. Ephesians 4:25, *Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another.*
 5. Philippians 1:27, *Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ...*

Clearly, the point James is making is that we MUST control our tongues. It is a fundamental quality of our faith and practical living. There is no more powerful passage about this subject than our present text. Do you want to gain better control of your life? According to James, you need to begin with your speech. If you can master the tongue, everything else will be easy. What about you? What does your speech say about who you are?