

Taming the Tongue

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[0 : 0 0] So we're in James chapter 3 tonight and we are talking about the tongue. So we're gonna read, I'll read the passage for us and then I'm gonna tonight just kind of do an expositional bit of a verse by verse teaching through these 12 verses that deal with the tongue. So if you have your Bibles turn to James chapter 3 starting in verse 1. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness, 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. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so large driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 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 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. For 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. It is a restless evil full of deadly poison. 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. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. This is God's word.

Now let me make sure I can share my screen real quick. I have some slides for you and pulling at Thomas Davis tonight. There we are. Can you all see that? Yes, okay good. Very good. Alright, so we're going to begin by looking at just kind of chunk by chunk. We're gonna look at the first two verses. Not many of you should become teachers, for teachers will be judged with greater strictness. Now I just want to notice a couple things here. I will spend less time in this section and then the later sections. Teachers, teachers of the Bible particularly in a church context are judged according to their words. They're judged with a greater strictness. And we all probably know that. I mean teachers primarily talk.

It's what we do. So of course the words that we say are really important. But I just want to draw this out. This is really important that teaching in a church is more about responsibility than it is a privilege of status. And so I just want to say quickly that your ministers need your prayers more than they need your admiration. Now I think you already know that. But it's a good reminder. I think the Lord wants us tonight to remember our teachers in prayer.

I think that's very important. And not just of course our preachers, although I cover your prayers too. But you know if you're plugged into St. Columbus you're in a city group most likely. Your city group has one, two, maybe three teachers who teach occasionally. If you're joining the Abide Studies you're gonna have you know four, five, or even six different teachers next month in the next two months. They all need your prayer. You know the women who teach it at women of the word in all these different contexts we need to be lifting up our teachers with prayer because it's a serious business. It's a very serious business.

But notice also that James doesn't restrict this passage to teachers. He's not just talking about teachers, the Bible. You know those of us who don't teach don't have permission to check out at this point. He actually follows that up by saying you know we all stumble with what we say. We all stumble with the tongue. So it is important for teachers but it's important for all of us as well. So James goes right into introducing the topic at hand. He's talking about the tongue. He's talking about the words that we say and he teaches us that if you can master the tongue you can master your whole self.

[5:11] Now he says that the one who can control the tongue is a perfect man. And remember from our conversation about James chapter one I think it was our first engine room on James. When James talks about perfection he's not talking about sinlessness. He's talking about maturity. He's talking about growing into the sort of person God intends for you to be. And James one shows us that you know he talks about perfection or maturity there and actually the whole letter of James is deeply concerned all throughout the whole thing with wisdom and maturity. It's a letter about Christian maturity. So that's kind of the first gleaning we get from that section is that mastery of the tongue is a mark of Christian maturity. Now let's look at the next section versus three through five A the first half of verse five. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also they're so large and are driven by strong winds but they are guided by very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member yet it boasts of great things. So James is using here two images to illustrate how something so small can have such a great impact. The tongue is small but it has great potential. The bridle just a bit that goes in a horse's mouth is a small little piece only about that long but you can steer this huge horse with it. You know a ship's rudder is tiny in comparison to the size of the ship. You get the idea. But there's a danger with these illustrations. An uncaredful maybe a hasty reading could set us often in a bit of the wrong direction. You know James as I think we talk about this a lot

James is wisdom literature which means it's literature meant for careful study and long reflection. You know you read James and then you brew a cup of tea and you have a you have a sit and think where you go for a walk and you just chew on it. You think it over. So let's reflect on this together. It's easy to think that James is saying that the whole horse is controlled by means of the bit or that the ship is controlled by means of the rudder. Now of course in actuality that's true but that's not the image he's drawing out because if it were the inference would be that the whole Christian is controlled by means of harnessing their tongue. But that's clearly not the case. If you can get a hold of your tongue and control your tongue that is not the sum total of Christian maturity. Right? If you can master your tongue that doesn't mean that therefore your work is done. James chapter one makes this clear when he says that maturity or perfection is achieved by letting steadfastness have its full effect when we're in trials. So of course they can't be mutually exclusive. Okay so so he's not saying that the whole Christian is controlled by means of controlling the tongue. What is he saying? Well we need to read this in light of verse two. So on the screen you can see verse two there he says well there's a very careful word there that is able. It's a very important word. He says if anyone does not stumble in what he says he's a perfect man able also to bridle his whole body. He doesn't say he's a perfect man by bridling his whole body. So I think we can kind of rephrase this and how and understand these two images of the horse and the ship in this way. If the rider can control the horse's mouth she can surely control the whole horse. If the pilot can control the rudder he can surely control the whole ship. If the Christian can control that unruly tongue they can surely control the whole self. So there's really two gleamings from this section then. If you can master your tongue you can master the whole self. If you can do that what can't you do? It's that hard and the small tongue has great potential. Now let's move to the next section. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire. 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. Let's stop there for a moment. So with those two illustrations of the horse and the ship

James taught us that though the tongue is small it has great potential but now now he's talking about fire and hell. Now we learn that the kind of great potential that the small tongue has is this kind of great potential that a spark has in a dry forest. With merely a word just a rumor a murmur we can destroy life. We can watch someone else's world come crashing down because of careless words. Our own world can come crashing down around us because of things that come out of our mouths. It's a world of unrighteousness set on fire by hell. Now when I was a kid growing up in Washington State I had a little pellet gun. It was actually kind of a high-powered one like a handgun and just you know and one day I was out shooting trees and branches and stuff in the yard and I saw this little robin. North American robins are about twice as big as the robins that are out here in Scotland but they're beautiful with the orange breast. It's just a lovely bird and on a whim I took aim and I shot kind of carelessly actually and I hit that robin in the neck and it fell over and started flopping around on the ground and it took a long time to die and I really can't... I'm a bit of a softy I suppose. I'm still kind of haunted by the guilt and the shame that I felt in that moment. It's vivid for me still you know 20-25 years later. There was no going back from that moment. That bird was dead or dying and there was nothing I could do to undo what I had done and I felt awful about it. And like a bird in its last throws of life or like a forest fire raging out of control our tongues can cause damage that is not easily mitigated. Sometimes there's just no going back from our words. The Westminster larger catechism question 135. Does anyone have that memorized? Thomas? No? Okay.

Question 135 asks what are the duties involved in the sixth commandment? Now the sixth commandment out of the ten is thou shalt not kill. What are the duties involved? Well the answer is long and I'm not going to read it all for you but one of the surprising duties involved in obeying the command to not kill is that we have mild and courteous speech. Isn't that interesting? The Westminster Divines understood that the great potential that the tongue has to destroy.

They understood that to obey the commandment thou shalt not kill. We didn't just have to avoid killing. We had to actively seek to give life with our whole bodies including our tongues. That we use our tongue to give life not death.

[13 : 43] We use our tongue to build up and encourage not to destroy and tear down. We use our tongue to be mild and courteous not to be brash and to trample people and make them feel small. Now look at verses seven and eight. This is the bad news. You thought that was bad. This is the bad news. For 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. It is a restless evil full of poison.

Deadly poison. Excuse me. That small tongue has great potential. We just learned that from the last section. Now he's telling us the small tongue has great potential for evil. The potential inside the tongue is for destruction and there's nothing you can do about that. No human being can tame it. Well where do we go from there? So those are our two gleanings that small tongue is great potential for evil and you can't tame tongue. Now our final section verses 9 to 12. With our tongue 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. And by the way James didn't need to say that part about these things ought not to be so. We should all have the clarity of sense to see that. It's almost like he couldn't help himself. He's like this is awful. We shouldn't be you know berating our children or our spouses on the morning on the way to church and then lifting up that same voice and praise of God. There's something awful and evil about that. Something double-minded to use the language of James 1. My brothers these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Of course the answer is no. It's kind of fig tree. My brothers bear olives or a grapevine produce figs. Again no. Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. Okay so earlier we saw two illustrations followed by a teaching. The horse and the ship followed by his teaching on the tongue. Now we see the teaching followed by three illustrations. Okay so the first illustration is or the teaching is that from the same mouth come blessing and cursing. He's just telling us what we're like. This falls under the category of we all stumble with what we say. We all do this. So no one's getting out here including me. That's the teaching from the same mouth come blessing and cursing. Now the three illustrations. One does a spring give forth fresh and salt water. Fig tree produce olives. Salt pond give fresh water. In other words James wants us to be thinking about and reflecting on not just the tongue but the source. The tongue's source. In all his illustrations this is the case. The horse has a rider. The ship has a pilot. Water has a spring. A fig has a tree.

And the tongue has a heart. James wants us to understand that the tongue gives expression to what's in the heart. Let's flip that around and think about it from the other perspective. If the tongue gives expression to what's in the heart then you can know a man or a woman's heart by how they use their tongue. Isn't that a bit terrifying? So I have here a bottle of hand sanitizer. St. Columbas brand so it's extra holy.

You know it's very purifying cleansing. Now this is liable to get a little messy. This is you. You are this bottle. Okay. Life comes along. This is life. This big grabby hand. And life sometimes just squeezes you. Right? Just squeezes you with stress and frustration and anxiety. What comes out? What comes out of the bottle is what's inside the bottle. My hands are very clean now by the way. My apologies to Hamish who's gonna have to clean that mess up later. I'm kidding. When life squeezes us what comes out of our mouths is what's in the heart. That's a good diagnostic for you to ask yourself in all honesty in your times with your in your times of prayer with the Lord and talking to your spouse, your friends.

It's good to reflect on what comes out of your mouth and ask is that is that the state of my heart? Because a spring cannot pour forth fresh and saltwater.

[19:16] Alright I'm gonna stop sharing my screen. Here we are. So the real question is now how do we use our tongues to not destroy? How do we not light the forest fires? How do we not tear down the people around us? You know we're decades into these bad habits. All of us are. How do we undo it? Well James doesn't just come out and give you the answer I'm afraid to say but if we read this passage in context of the whole letter because remember it's just a letter it's meant to be read kind of at once and understood as a whole then I think the answer will become fairly clear. James is guiding us toward thinking about the source of the tongue the thing that controls the tongue which is the heart and when he talks about the heart he always talks about wisdom. For instance the next two verses so verse Invitation in your hearts do not boast and be false to the truth. See wisdom and the heart go hand in hand for James. So throughout the whole letter of James as

I said that one of the threads that runs through it all is wisdom and this is really important for James. Wisdom does not spring out naturally from us. We aren't just born with this natural wisdom you might have some common sense to you but you don't have godly wisdom innately. Wisdom comes down to us from God. For example James 1.5 if any of you lacks wisdom let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach. James 1.17 every good and every perfect gift comes is from above coming down from the father of lights. James 3.17 but the wisdom from above is first pure then peaceable gentle open to reason full of mercy and good fruits etc. If there is any hope for us to grow in maturity as

Christians and to sow seeds of life and peace with our tongues rather than using our words to light the fires of hell then we must have hearts full of the wisdom that comes down from God. So let me start to wrap this up with a few points of application something hopefully a little bit less theoretical and more practical. So just four short things that we can remember for application here ask receive do and think. I didn't try to put that in a clever monomic device if you tried to pronounce it it would be art so that doesn't work but ask receive do and think okay. So number one ask James 1.5 that I just read is just a marvelous invitation we never get beyond this in the Christian life if anyone lacks wisdom that's me if anyone lacks wisdom let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given him excuse me when he says that God gives generously without reproach he means that God's not going to belittle you for asking. So if you come and say

Lord I can't get my tongue under control I need help and I need your wisdom he's not gonna say yeah you do it's about time you ask for help you've really messed this up haven't you that is not the heart of God the heart of God is deeply generous his impulse is generosity and warmth and kindness he loves it when we ask him for wisdom and if that doesn't seem true to you go read the story of Solomon he's deeply generous so we ask we just ask number two we receive we just receive the wisdom from above what I mean is with kind of the empty hands of faith saying I don't have the wisdom Lord but you do we just we receive this wisdom by hearing the word hearing the word of God the Spirit makes it come alive we can receive that wisdom number three do so ask receive do our theme for this year is be doers of the word and not hearers only that's our whole theme as a church if we if we ask for the wisdom and we hear it in God's word we see the wisdom there and we do nothing what use is it we must then put in practice what we see in the word of God we must receive and hear and go do it we need to live out the wisdom that we see even when it's hard ask receive do number four thank if you follow this if you ask the Lord for wisdom and you receive it and you begin to put it into practice it's all by his grace Philippians says to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you both you're willing and you're working in other words every mark of progress we make in the Christian life we can look back on where we just came from and say I'm not there anymore praise God he did something in me he's so faithful and generous I can't take credit for that you can't take credit for your own spiritual growth that's God's work in you that's marvelous so that's that's how we end that application we ask receive we do and we thank him for what he's doing in our lives you know when we first moved to Scotland which was almost two years ago now every day we thought so often about the difference in accent and dialect we all had such different ways of saying things and such different words for all sorts of normal things now of course obviously I still don't sound like you I probably never will but when I talk on the phone to my friends in Nashville I don't sound like them either as we spent time with you all our speech began to change our imperceptibly we began accidentally adopting phrases that we never would have said in the States so a trash can became a rubbish bin you know instead of saying hello we say hiya instead of saying come on in we say in you come instead of saying thanks you say cheers these are all entirely foreign to the

Nashville dialect but that's what happens when we spend time with people we love you start to talk like them friends if we let the word of Christ dwell in us richly you will pick up the accent and dialect at the kingdom of heaven without Christ our tongues are set on hell by fire with Christ our tongues are doused with the waters of baptism as we're united to Christ by His Spirit and they can be a spring of life not just for us but for those around us too Amen