

TAMING THE TONGUE

TEXT: JAMES 3:1-12

INTRODUCTION:

1. Not long after I was saved, the man who led me to Christ became a Pentecostal. He put much emphasis on "speaking in tongues." But after studying the Bible and thinking this over, I became convinced that I'd be better off controlling the one tongue I had rather than speaking in some new ones.
2. There's an old saying: "Loose lips sink ships." Here is another one: "Watch your tongue. It's in a wet place where it's easy to slip!"
3. There is a lot in the book of Proverbs about the danger of a loose tongue, a slippery tongue, an unruly tongue, etc.
4. Proverbs 15:28 says, "The mouth of the wicked poureth out evil things."
5. "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21).
6. "An ungodly man diggeth up evil: and in his lips there is as a burning fire" (Proverbs 16:27; cf. James 3:5, 6).
7. The closest thing to Proverbs in the New Testament is the epistle of James. Referring to this epistle, the *Scofield Study Bible* says its "style is that of the Wisdom-books of the Old Testament."
8. James has dealt with this subject before (1:19, 26; 2:12) and he does again in the later chapters (4:11; 5:12) but it is in chapter 3 that he deals thoroughly with this matter of taming the tongue (3:7, 8).
9. D.L. Moody said: "Government of the tongue is made the test of true religion by James. Just as a doctor looks at the tongue to diagnose the condition of bodily health, so a person's words are an index of what is within."
10. Our Lord said in Matthew 12:36 and 37, "But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned."

I. TEACHERS NEED TO WATCH THEIR TONGUES (3:1)

1. I did not say "wash their tongues" but watch their tongues, although in some cases this might be a good idea. There is a pastor in Seattle named Mark Driscoll, who is known for using profanity when he preaches. Despite being crude and vulgar, over 3,000 people attend his church. This says a lot about Christianity in America.

2. James uses the word "masters" in James 3:1. The *Scofield Bible* margin says the Greek word translated "masters" means "teachers," and says this means teachers "shall have the more severe judgment."
3. Scofield refers to Mark 12:40, where our Lord says this about the scribes: "Which devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers: these shall receive greater damnation."
4. We can only wonder how many young impressionable pastors look at the phenomenal success of Mark Driscoll, and think they too can grow a large church if they talk dirty.
5. James 3:1 says, "My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation."
6. Our Lord says, "These shall receive greater damnation."
7. James is not restricting this warning to pastors but all teachers of the Word of God.
8. James is saying: Do not be ambitious to be a teacher; do not take this important ministry lightly. Those who teach the Word of God will receive greater judgment, especially if they fail to practice what they teach.
9. Our Lord condemned the Pharisees because "they say, and do not" (Matt. 23:3).
10. A teacher can never hope to lead others beyond what he himself has experienced. That is why so many pastors have problems – they themselves are not in the Word of God and so people under their ministry drift away to other churches where they can grow.
11. I am totally against all of this church-hopping that is so prevalent today, but sometimes there are Biblical reasons for leaving a church. And one of them is this: the pastor is not obeying the Word, i.e., he is not preaching the Bible right or he is not tithing or praying or soulwinning, etc.

II. THE TONGUE IS LITTLE BUT VERY POWERFUL (3:2-8)

1. James goes on to say that at one time or another we are all guilty of offending people with our tongue (3:2). Once a word escapes from your lips, it is impossible to take it back.
2. The person who is "perfect" (mature) is well-disciplined and has learned to control his tongue.
3. A lady walked up to Harry Ironside one time and said: "Brother, that is a horrible necktie you are wearing!" He excused himself and returned with a pair of scissors. He then handed her the scissors and said: "If it offends you so much, you can cut it off." She seemed

- surprised and then he said: "And when you are finished, hand me back my scissors and let me cut off your tongue!"
4. There was one lady who was always talking and gossiping and cutting people down and one night she came forward at the invitation and said: "Preacher, I am going to lay my tongue on the altar!" He said: "Sister, the altar's not big enough for your tongue!"
 5. One preacher said that it was a miracle in Balaam's day for an ass to speak, but today it is a miracle when he keeps quiet.
 6. In my message on Sunday morning I mentioned two men who are always in the news. One is famous for using his tongue to give glory to God (Tim Tebow), and the other was notorious for blaspheming God (Christopher Hitchens).
 7. James uses several colorful figures of speech to drive home his point.
 8. He compares the tongue to the bridle bit one puts in the horse's mouth (3:3). Connected to the bit are the reins. Even though the bit is very small, if the rider controls the bit he controls the horse.
 9. Likewise, if he loses control of the bit, he loses control of the horse. In other words, your tongue will direct your life – either for good or for evil.
 10. David 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" (Ps. 39:1). That is the wise way too maintain one's testimony. Not like the fellow who said: "I'm going to give him a piece of my mind!" and someone said, "Are you sure you can afford it?"
 11. The second picture given by James is that of the "very small helm" of a ship, which though they be small, control and direct great big ships (3:4).
 12. Next, James says "the tongue is a fire" (3:5, 6). Many huge fires have been started by just one little match, and many lives have been destroyed by just one little tongue. One of the worst fires in American history was the great Chicago fire on October 8, 1871. Tradition has it that it started when Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over her lantern. Whether that is how it started or not, the fact is that the fire raged for three days and it destroyed over three and a half square miles of the city, killing over 250 people.
 13. Before that great fire could be contained, 17,500 buildings were destroyed and 125,000 people were left homeless.
 14. James says the tongue can be just as dangerous (3:5, 6). The uncontrolled tongue is "a world of iniquity...it defileth the whole body...it is set on fire of hell" (3:6).

15. Proverbs 16:27 says, "An ungodly man diggeth up evil: and in his lips there is as a burning fire."
16. Proverbs 26:20, 21 says, "Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth. As coals are to burning coals, and wood to fire; so is a contentious man to kindle strife."
17. These Scriptures warn us that the tongue can be quite devilish! One preacher said, "The tongue is always better used to warm others rather than scorch them."
18. We should use our tongues to help others, not to hurt them. We should use our tongues to encourage people, not to discourage them.
19. Job had to deal with his three friends and their discouraging words. He said to them, "How long will ye vex my soul, and break me in pieces with words?" (Job 19:2).
20. David said, "Thy tongue deviseth mischiefs; like a sharp razor, working deceitfully" (Ps. 52:2).
21. And, "Thou lovest all devouring words, O thou deceitful tongue" (Psalm 52:4).
22. In fact, David had much to say about the danger of a sharp tongue. He said in Psalm 55:21, "The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords."
23. "Behold, they belch out with their mouth: swords are in their lips: for who, say they, doth hear?" (Psalm 59:7).
24. "Who whet their tongue like a sword, and bend their bows to shoot their arrows, even bitter words" (Psalm 64:3).
25. "They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adders' poison is under their lips. Selah" (Psalm 140:3).
26. "Nevertheless they did flatter him with their mouth, and they lied unto him with their tongues" (Psalm 78:36).
27. "For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is very wickedness; their throat is an open sepulchre; they flatter with their tongue" (Psalm 5:9).
28. The apostle Paul referred to these three Psalms, Psalm 5:9; 78:36; and 140:3, in Romans 3:13, "Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips."
29. "Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips" (Psalm 141:3).

30. "My soul is among lions: and I lie even among them that are set on fire, even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword" (Psalm 57:4).
31. The apostle Paul said, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers" (Eph. 4:29).
32. Another simile or figure of speech that James uses is that of a wild, untamed beast (3:7, 8). Ancient writers wrote of how men in their day had tamed wild lions and tigers and other ferocious animals, but James says, "But the tongue can no man tame" (3:8).
33. You can go to the Bronx Zoo and see all kinds of dangerous animals, tamed and in cages but listen to the filthy disgusting mouths on the people as they walk by. Some of them should be put in cages!
34. But even though man cannot control his tongue, God can! Many a man could stand up and testify how God cleaned up his tongue and gave him a brand new vocabulary.
35. Finally, James calls the tongue "an unruly evil, full of deadly poison" (3:8b).
36. Romans 3:13, 14 says, "Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness."
37. Tongues can poison minds; tongues can assassinate characters.
38. Back when Ronald Reagan was president, there were untrue charges of labor racketeering brought against his Labor Secretary, Ray Donovan.
39. Mr. Donovan had to spend over \$1 million fighting these false charges and after being found "not guilty," he asked the judge, "Now who is going to give me my reputation back?"
40. I read an article in yesterday's newspaper about a Marine named Ilario Pantano.
41. In April 2004, 2nd Lt. Pantano was leading his squad in Iraq's dangerous Sunni Triangle when they stopped two Iraqis fleeing in a car from an insurgent ammunition dump. Pantano ordered the pair to search their own vehicle to make sure it wasn't booby-trapped. When they charged at him instead, he opened fire and killed them.
42. It should have been a simple case of self-defense, but a dishonest and disgruntled sergeant who Pantano to discipline more than once, claimed the two men had been kneeling and that Pantano shot them from behind.

43. The lying witness kept changing his story and there was no evidence to back him up, so the charges were dismissed in May 2005. But Pantano's career as a Marine was over.
44. This brave Marine was viciously slandered and attacked by the liberal news media and crazed Internet bloggers.
45. He received death threats from Muslim terrorists, and two retired Marines volunteered to maintain a security watch around his house. Eventually he was forced to leave New York City where he was born and raised, and he relocated to North Carolina.
46. William Rodriguez of the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, was bothered by the unfair attacks against Lt. Pantano, as well as the fact that there'd been no autopsy of the two Iraqis. After five years of trying, Rodriguez finally convinced the Marines to exhume the bodies, and this last month proved that the two men had indeed been shot from the front, not the behind.
47. Here is yet another story of how a man's life was turned upside down because of devilish tongues.

III. IT IS BETTER TO USE OUR TONGUE FOR BLESSING RATHER THAN CURSING (3:9-12)

1. It is both inconsistent and unnatural to use the tongue for both good and evil purposes. Man was created in the image of God and therefore it is wrong to curse a man (3:9, 10).
2. General Robert E. Lee had an adversary who was always putting him down. One day, he was asked by Jefferson Davis his opinion of this same officer and Lee commended him. Overhearing the conversation, another soldier said to General Lee, "Sir, do you know that the man of whom you speak so highly to the President is one of your bitterest enemies, and never misses an opportunity to criticize you?" "Yes," replied General Lee, but President Davis asked my opinion of him; he did not ask for his opinion of me."
3. James is saying that the same tongue that blesses God ought to help men, not hurt them. A fountain does not send forth both sweet and bitter water at the same time (3:11), and neither should we!
4. James gives these simple lessons from nature to remind us that our speech should be consistently good (3:12).
5. A careless word may kindle strife;
A cruel word may wreck a life.
A bitter word may hate instill;
A brutal word may smite and kill.

- A gracious word may smooth the way;
A joyous word may light the day.
A timely word may lessen stress;
A loving word may heal and bless. – author unknown.
6. It has been truly said that churches have been more damaged by the termites on the inside rather than by the woodpeckers on the outside.
 7. We need to watch out for gossip, slander, unclean speech, and every word we speak, realizing that God is keeping a record.

CONCLUSION:

"The boneless tongue, so small and weak,
Can crush and kill," declared the Greek.
"The tongue destroys a greater hoard,"
The Turk asserts, "than does the sword."
"The tongue can speak a word whose speed,"
The Chinese say, "outstrips the steed";
While Arab sages this impart,
"The tongue's great storehouse is the heart."
From Hebrew wit this maxim sprung,
"Though feet should slip, ne'er let the tongue."
The sacred writer crowns the whole,
"Who keeps his tongue doth keep his soul!"
– from Spurgeon's *Salt Cellars*, cited by J. Vernon McGee.