

Guarding the Tongue

James

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Bible Text: James 3:1-12

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Our gracious God and heavenly Father, gather as we pray now as a Father would gather his children to listen to his counsel. Give us listening ears, we pray. Give us supple hearts that we may respond with amazement that you speak to us, grace to receive what you say to us, courage to work it through in practice in our daily lives. And so, by your Word so magnify the Lord Jesus Christ before us and assure us of the power of your Holy Spirit that as your Word searches us, we may have hope and not despair and as you call us to follow the Lord Jesus Christ with steadfastness, we may have confidence that he will complete the good work that he has already begun. So, teach us, we pray, by the power of your Spirit and through your sacred Word. In Jesus Christ our Savior's Name, we pray. Amen.

We're returning this morning after several weeks' absence because of extraordinary services, although I hope this is as extraordinary as any of them, we're returning to our series of studies in the little book of James and today we come to the third chapter of James 3:1-12. You'll find the passage in the pew Bible in front of you on page 1,012. I think it will be helpful for you to follow along in the passage there and if you have your Children's Bible with you today, it's on page 1,509. James chapter 3, and we begin in verse 1 and return to this book that is a wonderful manual for practical Christian living.

“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 and are 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.”

I wonder if you would think about yourself or, indeed, if you would think that others would think this about you, that you are what people would call a mature Christian. You’ve been a Christian five years, ten years, twenty years, forty years, some of you sixty years, even seventy years. But we all recognize, don’t we, that maturity in the Christian life is not a matter merely of age. And that’s why it’s one of James’s concerns as he writes this little book. It looks as though, to Christians who were once members of his congregation in Jerusalem, but are now disbursed or scattered throughout the ancient world and he’s following-up, he’s wanting to encourage them to keep on going in the Christian life. And one of his great concerns is obviously that they are growing to be clearly mature Christians.

In the first section of his letter, he had taught us how we grow to maturity through the way in which we respond to trials. And so, in chapter 1:4, he was anxious that steadfastness in the face of trials would bring us to be perfect or mature and complete, rounded, balanced, growing Christians. So, we grow to maturity through the way in which we respond to difficult providences in our lives, to tests and trials. But, we grow to maturity also, James had been emphasizing, in the way in which we respond to the Word of God, like Abraham in chapter 2:22. In his life, faith gave birth to obedience. You see that faith was active along with his works, the way he was willing to obey God and his faith was completed, his faith was brought to maturity through that obedience to the Word of God. So, we’re brought to maturity by the way in which we respond to the providences of God, especially the more difficult providences of God, and we’re brought to maturity by the way in which we respond to the Word of God. We develop, mature Christians develop, an instinct to say to the Lord as he speaks to them in his Word, “Right away, Lord. That’s just what I was thinking I maybe should do myself.” That glad, instinctive obedience to the Lord’s Word is a great mark of spiritual maturity. When your children stamp their feet and don’t listen to you as their father, then you understand that they haven’t grown into a mature relationship with you.

Now James is coming to develop this thought of what it means to be a mature Christian and he says from this point onwards that a great mark of a mature Christian is that a mature Christian practices a consistent Christian life. A mature Christian practices a consistent Christian life. And it’s fascinating that the first thing he speaks about in this section in his little book is the use that we make of our tongues. One of the clearest evidences that you have grown to maturity as a Christian is that you have developed a certain mastery of the tongue. And he gets into discussing this by responding to, what I take, was a situation that may have arisen in these different churches to whom he was writing. Perhaps he’d heard about it through mutual Christian friends.

There seem to have been people in the churches who were saying, “Why don’t I get my tongue to be a teacher? I should be a teacher.” They saw in whatever equivalent these early churches had of their Sunday School, it was the same old people teaching the Sunday School class and they said, “I should be the teacher. I need to have opportunity,” they said. And James is saying to them, “Let me ask you a question: do you also wish to be judged more strictly?” I don’t know what our elders ask when they supervise our Sunday Schools and recognize individuals to be teachers, but this would be a good question to ask, wouldn’t it? “Are you prepared to be judged more strictly?”

He’s not just speaking at the human level, although that’s obviously true. Among ministers, people sometimes joke and say, “You know, my congregation went home and they had roasted preacher for lunch,” or, “roasted Sunday School teacher for lunch.” The fact of the matter is, that the most human level if you teach, you will be judged more strictly. If I devoted my life to living in total silence, people might think I was strange but they would never judge me as strictly as I’ve been judged throughout the course of my Christian life in service. But that’s not what he’s thinking about. He’s thinking about a far more careful assessment. He’s thinking about God’s judgment on my life.

And so, you see, he understands there are people who say, “I want to be a teacher because people need to listen to me.” And James is saying, “Ah-ha, but the greatest you is, have you really listened to God? Have you really listened to God in such a way that there are at least the beginnings in your life of a mastery of the tongue?” Now, we need to understand that by mastery of tongue, James does not mean the ability to hold your tongue. That’s part of it and some of us doubt this by upbringing, by disposition, by culture, we need to learn to hold our tongues and to be silent. Even the Proverb says, “You know, if you can develop the ability to be silent in company, many people will think you’re actually wise.” And it’s true. It really is true. If you develop the ability to be sanely quiet when people are talking about something, the day will come where they’ll assume that you’ve got something very important to contribute to the discussion. But, you see, when I open up my mouth, all my folly may simply pour out.

But, he’s speaking about far more than that. The mastery of the tongue is not simply the ability that some of us have by nature to say very little. The mastery of the tongue is best expressed not when we are silent but when we speak. And when we speak it becomes evident that there is much in our hearts of the grace of Jesus Christ that we’re able to say. I used to belong to a congregation where in another place where it was simply part of life to greet people on Sunday morning and to shake hands, “It’s so good to see you! How are you doing?” And sometimes I would hold onto the hand and I realized that wasn’t what was expected. I realized if I said, “Actually, I’m not doing very well,” I would be engaged in an arm-wrestling match because “How are you doing? Great to see you!” did not indicate that there was a largeness of Christ’s grace in the heart that would be able to dispense spiritual medicine to somebody who wasn’t doing okay. You see, the real evidence I’ve grown to spiritual maturity is in terms of what comes out of my mouth, that I have the resources of God’s truth and God’s Word and in different situations when people are joyful or sorrowful, when people are in darkness and needing light, confused and needing wisdom, I’m like one of those ancient apothecaries who’s able to go to those

marvelous jars of truth that there are in Scripture and I'm able to select just the right thing to say. Just like my Lord Jesus Christ.

And you can see that Jesus' teaching had rubbed off on James. You remember how his brother, the Lord Jesus, had said, "Dear ones, it's out of the heart and its abundance that the mouth speaks." And every time we speak we actually reveal what's in our hearts. Remember these old-fashioned movies before the modern technology where if some news item burst upon the day, you would see the reporter scurrying to the banks of telephones on the wall and putting their finger in the circle and dialing the number in New York, The Times or the Washington Post or whatever and then the editor listening and then the screen would kind of whirl before your eyes with newspapers flashing. And it was all the way in the old-fashioned technology, they tried to communicate that the news was being spread everywhere.

Dear ones, our tongues are the reporters of our hearts that spread everywhere we go what is in our hearts. And so you understand why James is saying mastery of the tongue is not just something that's to be reserved for those among you who teach, mastery of the tongue is essential for anyone who would really grow as a Christian believer. It seems he develops his thinking in three stages in the rest of this chapter. The man or woman who can master the tongue can master him or herself. And he says three things: 1. He points out, he underlines, the disproportionate power of the tongue. You see this in verses 3 and 4. He uses two simple illustrations: the bit in a horse's mouth, the rudder at the back of a great ship. He hadn't seen the movie Ben Hur but he'd seen races. He'd seen people on these powerful animals, sometimes more than one horse and a chariot. He'd seen these men holding on and guiding these powerful horses, one, two, three, four, sometimes more. How did they do it? By a little piece of steel that was put into their mouths. And he knew of the great ships and there were great ships in the first century that sailed the Mediterranean. When Paul was shipwrecked, there were 276 passengers shipwrecked. There were sailing boats that took 1,000 people in the first century. What enabled them to move across the Mediterranean Sea and its waters in the midst of the wind? It was a little fellow sitting at the back that was moving a piece of wood that was connected to the rudder and as the rudder moved, so did the whole ship with its 300 or even 1,000 people on board it.

This little bit of flesh between the jaws, as Martin Luther liked to call the tongue, this little bit of flesh between the jaws is like the rudder of a great ship. Mastery of it is mastery of the whole person and the reason is because this instrument is the reporter of what's in my heart. It's a great thing, isn't it, to ask yourself by way of self-examination. Somebody passes me with an aftershave that I've never smelt before or a perfume that I've never known existed and as they leave the aroma lingers in the air as a kind of after-presence of that person. What lingers in the air when you and I leave a room? What aroma? Do people say, "How that scent reminds me of Christ." Or, as James is going on to say in these words, "Like salt water that tastes bitter and just leaves me thirsty."

So, he wants to emphasize first of all the disproportionate power of the tongue in verses 3 and 4. And then in the verses that follow, from verse 5 through to verse 8, he emphasizes

a second thing: the devastation that can be caused by the tongue. And you can see either that this man had a very quick mind or that he had preached a whole series of sermons on the subject of the tongue because there just now comes from him a whole series of images that vividly describe the devastation that can be caused by the tongue. He says it's like a spark that causes a forest fire in verse 5 and 6. He says in verse 6, it's a whole world. I once in one of these quizzes, you know, that you sometimes see in inflight magazines saw a photograph and the question was, "What is this?" I was sure it was the moon. It had craters and crags and mountains and it looked dark and sinister and I turned to page 153 or wherever, it was a picture of the tongue. Such a vivid illustration of what James is saying here.

Your tongue is the conduit to a whole universe in your soul and yes, sadly he says, verse 6, the tongue can be like a stain. And if just as you were coming out this morning having a last gulp of coffee to wake yourself up and oops, onto that carefully pressed white shirt or your new dress and whatever your husband said you said to him, "You can't possibly go to church dressed like that. You've spoiled the whole thing." And it's true, isn't it? It's true that this little instrument that has no bone but can mud a reputation, can stain my whole life. I can be superbly intelligent, I can have an outstanding profession, I can have a great success and yet this little instrument can stain the whole and make me so unlike the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so he says very vigorously in verses 7 and 8, it's really like an untamed beast. Every animal or beast, he says, you can tame it. They could tame beasts in the ancient world, you know that. It's not just in Sea World they can do these things. They could tame beasts. You see, some of these great athletes who have tamed their physique, can do extraordinary things and then you hear what comes out of their mouth and you think, "O, James was right."

Nobody has ever been able to tame the tongue. It is, verse 8, a restless evil and a deadly poison. Now, that's an interesting description, isn't it? Some of us have restless tongues. Some of us have restless tongues, don't we? And really James is saying that is actually a sign of a restless heart. It's a sign of a restless heart. It's a sign that we haven't really rested in Jesus who said, "Come unto me and I will give you rest." You see. Now, of course, some of us are more that way by nature and by upbringing, by disposition, by the idiosyncrasies of our personality and some of us are the very reverse. Some of us have not got resting hearts, some of us have got stuck hearts and stuck tongues. That's not what he's speaking about. He's speaking about the restlessness of my tongue that expresses the restlessness of a heart that has never really found rest in Jesus Christ and, therefore, it's not surprising that sometimes I'm like one of those snakes with the little sack of poison under my tongue and just occasionally I'll bite and the poison seeps out and I can't get it back and the words go everywhere.

Is it gossip he's talking about? Is it slander he's talking about? Is it as Paul says in Philippians 2 just murmuring and complaining he's talking about? "Do everything without murmuring and complaining," he says to the Christians. Do you and I do that? We go home, especially if we're parents, and the words come out. We complain, we

moan, we groan usually about incidentals in the life of the church, at least so it's been in the history of the Christian church. And it's poison, really. It poisons everyone it touches. Our children drink in the poison and they have the same disposition. Here's mastery of the tongue in the life of the Christian fellowship: I am committed and by God's grace never will murmur and grumble. Now, my dear friends, if you and I say, "It's my right to do that because things have gone wrong," it's not against the church to which we belong that we're grumbling any longer. It's against the Lord Jesus who loved the church and gave himself for the church and rather than grumble about the church, weeps for the church.

Then there is this third thing, there is the disproportionate power of the tongue, there is the devastation caused by the tongue and O, may God help us, there's the tragic inconsistency of the tongue. One minute we're praising him... I wonder if this will happen to any of us as we drive home today, somebody will cut in on us and these lips that praised him will blast his image out of Jave Street. How dare you?

Do you know, I have never in my life, thankfully, I have never preached on the subject of the tongue when I thought this is the sound that the congregation needs to hear. I've never, ever done that, ever, ever, ever, done that nor am I doing it now. But this is a word that breaks right through us from James, doesn't it? If this doesn't wound me, what is going to wound me? One of the four occasions I believe I've ever in my life preached from James's teaching on the tongue was in the seminary in which I used to teach. Somewhere in the 1980s, I preached a blistering sermon on the subject of the tongue, went back to my office and phoned the mortgage company who were making such a mess of the arrangements for the refinancing of my mortgage, chewed out whoever was on the other end of the phone and put the phone down and said, "God be merciful to me a sinner." You've done that, haven't you?

One of my close friends from my teenage years became a missionary in South Korea. He had a leather briefcase, satchel, that he prized very much. It was broken. He heard there was a little shop where they could mend his satchel. It was an hour away on the bus. He took his little satchel for an hour on the bus, he went to the shop and said, "Can you repair it?" "Oh yes, sir, we can repair it." "When will you repair it?" "Next Tuesday, sir, we will repair it." "Are you sure? I've spent an hour on the bus to get here. Will it be ready next Tuesday?" "Yes, it will be ready next Tuesday, sir." Next Tuesday on the bus, the long weary journey through the crazed streets of South Korea where the people drive in frenetic ways and he gets to the shop and says, "You have my..." and could see in their faces, no, they didn't have his.... "Oh, we are so sorry, sir, we quite forgot it." He really developed fluency in Korean that day. They took him into the back room. They sat him down. They gave him a cup of tea, ginseng tea and then they said to him, "What are you doing in South Korea?" where he was a missionary of Jesus Christ. "What are you doing?" And he felt the stain of the tragic inconsistency. The words from the old movies my Mum and Dad used to take me to on Friday nights, John Wayne, the cowboys and the Indians, great days: "White man speak with forked tongue."

And so, alas, ourselves. And you see James has already taught us why it is so inconsistent. Remember how he'd said in chapter 1:18, he'd said, don't you realize that you've been born-again by God's grace and you're the firstfruits of a new creation. And so, you speak differently from other people. You have different treasures of which to speak in Jesus Christ and you are indwelt by the Lord Jesus Christ who will enable you to speak well as you rest in him and find his grace.

How are we to do this? O, my friends, I wish I had another half-hour this morning to take you into practical details about how we can do this but here's one way: do you remember those poems in the second half of the prophecy of Isaiah that are speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ? There's one in Isaiah 50:4-9 where we hear, as it were, in advance, Jesus speaking to his Father and he says this, "Morning by morning you awaken and my ear is opened to listen to you and that is why I have an instructed tongue that is able to bring the Word of grace and mercy or the word of reproof and correction just at the right time, just in the right place, just to the right person." That's what you and I need; that's one of the reasons we place ourselves under the ministry of the Word of God and pray that the Holy Spirit will really plant it deep into our souls because no man can master his tongue. But God's Word can break into our lives and not only press out of our lives the poison of our heart but then to fill us with the most amazing resources that enable us to speak for Jesus Christ so that more and more in our lives people will say to us, "You know, six weeks ago, two years ago, nine years ago, twenty years ago, thirty years ago, you said just the right thing to me."

You and I can't do that unaided. I certainly can't. My life is a litany of misspoken words. There are times when I walk down that center aisle and I say to the Lord, "O Lord, can this center aisle not just swallow me up because I've not spoken as well of you as you've called me to speak of you." We're all like this. That's why we need our mouths shut, as Paul says, our ears opened, our hearts softened and our wills bowed and God's words, God's words, empowered by God's Spirit will bring mastery of the tongue. O my dear friends, that will mean that throughout this city people will begin to say, "You remind me of somebody. I'm not sure who it is." But the person of whom you remind them will be the Lord Jesus.

One more minute. The reason this may be true of me, that my tongue is uncontrollable is because I've never had my mouth shut before God. But the Gospel shuts my mouth and before him I've got nothing to say except to bow my head and cover my face and say with Isaiah who happened to be the most eloquent preacher in Jerusalem, if not in the whole world, "I'm a man of unclean lips." And when you thus confess your guilt, your sin, your need that's come to expression in your lips, he brings something from the altar of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, promises to cleanse your lips, to use you for his glory as you trust in the Savior. Let's speak as well of him as we ever can.

Heavenly Father, minister to us through this Word. We thank you that your Word that is a sharp knife also heals and the weight that crushes is also the weight of your glory and the Savior who shows us our sin and our need does so because he wants to save us more and more and more in every part of our lives. And so, we pray that by your grace we,

from the youngest to the oldest, may become masters of our tongues because in submission to Jesus Christ we have become his servants and yet masters of everything. Bless us, we pray. Help us to work this out in Jesus our Savior's Name. Amen.