

Can Anyone Tame the Tongue?

[James 3:2-12](#)

James, Day 15

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.

- James 3:2-12, ESV

Sometimes the Bible doesn't mean what we think it means at all. For years, I had heard that James 3 taught about the importance of taming the tongue, that James 3 is all about how important it is for you to tame your tongue. I'd even heard people say that James 3 tells you how to tame your tongue. I would read James 3 and be left scratching my head, until I realized something: I'm sure all these people were well meaning and sincere, but they were wrong.

James 3 does indeed tell us much about the power and perversity of the tongue. But it most certainly does not tell us that we can tame our tongues, much less give instructions on how we can tame our tongues. So what does it say?

If we come to James 3 without preconceived ideas and just allow it to speak to us, the message is very clear: James 3 says first, "*we all stumble in many ways.*" And then it says, "*And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.*" In other words, everyone stumbles in what they say. No one is flawless in what he says. Remember, this is in the context of why not many people should be teachers.

Reading on, verses 3-6 of James tell us about the great power of the tongue. James uses the bit on a horse's bridle and the rudder on a ship to show how great and powerful things can be controlled by very small things. Similarly, the tongue is very small but has great power. In fact, James takes it one step further and tells us how great forests can be set ablaze by very small fires, and that our tongues can set on fire the entire course of our lives.

After such powerful word pictures, we surely expect James to tell us, "So, make sure you control your tongue so it doesn't set your life on fire!" But that is exactly what James does not say. Instead, he says, "*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.*"

So, the power of the tongue is matched only by its perversity, and in the transition from the tongue's power to its perversity, James emphasizes emphatically that "*no human being can tame the tongue.*" The restless evil of the tongue is characterized by the fact that "*With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.*"

So, the tongue is incredibly powerful and deeply perverse, and no one can tame their tongue. That's the message of James regarding our tongues. You might be thinking, "How is that helpful?" And this question gets to the heart of the issue: If we approach the Bible as a self-help manual full of practical life advice, we will be sorely disappointed. James 3 does not tell us how to tame the tongue; it tells us no one can tame the tongue.

If we will accept this message, then what James says next is very helpful, but it's most definitely not self-help. Why not? Because we cannot help ourselves. We don't need self-help; we need salvation, and salvation comes from the Lord and not from us. We'll see more of that truth next time.