

Tame Your Tongue (James 3:1-12)

Expository Lessons from the Letter of James

I. Introduction and Review

- a. This is an extremely *practical letter* to help Christians who are striving to follow the way of life laid out by Jesus.
- b. In the prior lesson, covering the second half of **James chapter 2**, we discussed the well-known passage that explains that both our faith and our works (obedient action on our part) are necessary for us to be saved.
 - i. This is the only passage in the New Testament where we find the expression “faith alone”. It says in **James 2:24** that “a man is justified by works, and not by *faith only* (or ‘*faith alone*’)”.
 - ii. Salvation requires more than simply believing in Jesus. We need to do what He said.
 - iii. We also documented that this statement by James is entirely consistent with what Jesus, Peter, and Paul taught.
- c. In the passage we will study today, from the first half of **James chapter 3**, we will look at some very challenging statements regarding what comes out of our mouth.

II. A Warning that Not Many Should Become Teachers

- a. Read **James 3:1**.
 - i. “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive *a stricter judgment*.” (**James 3:1**, NKJV)
 - ii. The end of that passage is rendered, in other English translations:
 - 1. “...you know that we who teach will be *judged with greater strictness*.” (**James 3:1**, ESV; RSV similar)
 - 2. Other translations say that teachers will receive, “...*a greater judgment*” (LEB) or “...*a heavier judgment*” (ASV).
- b. **Question:** Does this passage indicate that those who teach will be judged by *a stricter standard*, or that if they sin, they will face a *greater punishment*?

- i. **My Answer:** I am not sure which of those (or perhaps both) is in view. Either way, it serves as a sober warning.
 - ii. For the good of the person involved as well as for the good of the church, we need to be careful about who is allowed to teach in the church.
 - iii. Jesus, Peter and Paul all warned us that false teachers will come, and that God will deal with them severely.
 - iv. Also, in **Matthew 23**, Jesus spoke at length against religious leaders who want to be teachers, who are religious hypocrites. He refers to them repeatedly as “blind guides.” He says they travel over land and sea to make converts, but make them “twice as much a son of hell” as themselves (**Matthew 23:15-17**).
- c. I appreciate that there are many men in our fellowship who desire to become teachers.
- i. The first things I ask of aspiring teachers who may show some promise in teaching include:
 - 1. How are they doing in terms of personal righteousness (purity, unified with his wife, integrity, etc.)?
 - 2. Are they personally devoted to studying and following the Word of God?
 - 3. Are they solid on the basics of the apostolic faith?
 - ii. Having hypocrites or false teachers, regardless of how talented or eloquent, will destroy both the church and the teachers themselves.
 - iii. Being a good teacher in the church is not a matter of academics or scholarship. After all, Peter and John were “uneducated and untrained men” (**Acts 4:13**).
 - 1. The Christian faith, as handed down by the apostles, is hard (but *not* impossible) to live out; however, it is not complicated. In my opinion, the original faith is actually rather simple.
 - 2. In my opinion, the ideal Bible teacher should be viewed as a spiritual warrior who knows how to use the offensive and defensive weapons. Not as an ‘ivory-tower’ type academic or bookworm!
 - 3. Certainly, no one is flawless, but a teacher cannot be a hypocrite. He needs to be the same on the inside as he appears

to be on the outside. He needs to be honestly striving for personal righteousness.

iv. We need to take this sober warning from James to heart!

III. Taming the Tongue

- a. This is a powerful passage, where James uses some rather memorable analogies to make a very important point.
- b. Read **James 3:2-12**.
 - i. He explains the power of the tongue for harm, despite its small size. James then uses several analogies to convey this concept.
 1. It is like a bit in the mouth of a horse that directs the entire animal.
 2. It is also like the small rudder that steers the course of a large ship as it travels across the ocean.
 3. It is like a small flame that can end up consuming and destroying an entire forest.
 - ii. James then explains how hard it is to control the tongue.
 1. The tongue can defile our entire body.
 2. It is “set on fire by hell”.
 - a. Here, the word translated ‘hell’ is *gehenna*, the lake of fire into which the condemned will be cast.
 3. It is “an unruly evil”, full of *deadly poison*. (Think of a poisonous snake).
 4. It is *harder to tame* than wild birds, reptiles or sea creatures.
 - iii. For a Christian who claims to be following God, who blesses God but curses other men with his tongue...
 1. There is something terribly wrong about this. This is not possible.
 2. Just as it is not possible for the same spring to produce both pure, fresh water and undrinkable, bitter (or salt) water.
 3. Just as it is not possible for a fig tree to bear olives, or for a grapevine to bear figs.

- a. This is similar to the illustrations used by Jesus and John the Baptist. They both taught that the fruit of a tree reveals what kind of tree it is, whether good or bad.
- iv. James uses analogies that touch on a broad range of human activities (including horses that pull heavy loads, agriculture, ships crossing the sea, forestry, and animal training) to make the following points:
 - 1. Our tongues, though they are small, are incredibly powerful and dangerous. They can determine the outcome of our entire lives, and can lead to utter destruction if we are not vigilant.
- c. **Question:** This is very difficult. Do we have an 'out' here? Might there be an excuse we can use in the face of failing to meet this challenge?
 - i. **Some Might Say:** "Yes, we do have an 'out'; James admits this is impossible." Perhaps based on one or more of the following ideas:
 - 1. Doesn't it say in the Bible that we are saved by "grace through faith" or by "faith alone", and NOT by works?
 - a. If you think that way, please see **James 2:13-36**, where James says that "...a man is justified by works, and *not by faith only*".
 - b. (Also see the previous lesson in this series, where we discussed that at length.)
 - 2. Doesn't James admit that it is impossible for us to tame the tongue? Is he simply expressing an ideal that no one is expected to actually achieve?
 - a. After all, he did say: "For we all stumble in many things. *If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.*" (**James 3:2**, NKJV) Also, he said, "But *no man* can tame the tongue..." (**James 3:8**, NKJV)
 - ii. **However, in Response:**
 - 1. First, James had already explained that we must control our tongues, or else our religion is USELESS.
 - a. "If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless." (**James 1:26**, NKJV)
 - b. According to James, controlling our tongues is not optional for a Christian. If we refuse to do that, our

religion is useless. It may be very difficult, but he did not see it as impossible. He saw it as essential.

- c. The truly impossible thing, according to James, was to think that we Christians could bless God and then turn around and curse men (who are made in God's image)!
2. Second, in **James 3:2**, where James speaks of the "perfect man," the word translated "perfect" (*teleios/τέλειος*) here means "complete, lacking nothing, brought to its end, entire, full-grown"; rather than "flawless" (without any sin).
 - a. The confusion for many of us is that our modern English word "perfect" can mean EITHER "complete" (as in a 'perfect tense', indicating that the action has been completed), OR it can mean "flawless".
 - b. We can get a clearer picture of the meaning of this word 'perfect/ *teleios*' based on how it is used elsewhere in the Scriptures. For example:
 - i. "...he who fears has not been *made perfect* [*Gk. lexical form: teleios*] in love." (**1 John 4:18**, NKJV)
 - ii. "Therefore let us, as many as are *mature* [*Gk. lexical form: teleios*], have this mind...." (**Philippians 3:15**, NKJV)
 - iii. "... though He [*Jesus*] was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And *having been perfected*, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him...." (**Hebrews 5:8-9**, NKJV)
 1. Obviously, Jesus was never guilty of committing sin. However, he was "*perfected*", meaning made complete for his mission, through His suffering.
 3. **Bottom Line:** This teaching about the necessity to control our tongues is not optional. It is essential. We need to put this hard teaching into practice so that we might become mature, complete, for the purpose of the task set before us.
 - a. And while this is difficult, *it is not impossible*. James expects us to do whatever it takes to do this.

- i. Jesus told us that the way would be difficult (not impossible).
 - 1. “Enter by the narrow gate... Because *narrow is the gate and difficult is the way* which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (**Matthew 7:13–14**, NKJV)
 - ii. Likewise, Paul assured us that God will never allow us to face more temptation than what we can bear (with His help).
 - 1. “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, *who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able*, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” (**1 Corinthians 10:13**, NKJV)
 - b. Change the way you consider what comes out of your mouth. In the eyes of God, this is not a minor offense!
 - c. See your tongue as you would a viper (dangerous, filled with poison). If allowed to unleash in an uncontrolled way, it can destroy your entire body and can destroy others as well. Like setting a fire in a dry forest.
 - d. Think about what happened last year in Southern California, with fires burning out of control and destroying thousands of homes. Your tongue can do the same or worse to your family or to the church. And God will hold you accountable for that.
- d. Specific sins of the tongue that James hits in his letter.
- i. Cursing or speaking ill of other people.
 - 1. “With it [the tongue] we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God.” (**James 3:9**, NKJV)
 - ii. Boasting, lying (**James 3:14, 4:16**)
 - iii. Grumbling and complaining against others (**James 5:9**)
 - iv. Swearing; not just letting your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’. Not keeping your word. (**James 5:12**)

IV. Jesus, Peter and Paul Taught the Same Thing Regarding the Severity of Sins of the Tongue

- a. We first discussed this topic in the message covering **James 1:26** in the current series.
 - i. For a more detailed topical lesson on this topic, see “*For Every Careless Word*”, a message given in March 2025.
- b. This was the first specific sin Jesus addressed in the Sermon on the Mount, in **Matthew 5:21-26** (regarding being angry with a brother without cause, calling him “you fool”, and the urgency of doing everything you can to reconcile).
- c. Jesus also addressed not swearing, and the importance of keeping our word in all things, “let your yes be yes and your no be no”, in **Matthew 5:33-37**.
- d. Jesus said: “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 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 12:33-37**, NKJV)
 - i. This is a very sobering teaching of Jesus, one that most Christians ignore at their peril!
 - ii. He says we will have to give an account for, and will be judged by “every idle word” on the Day of Judgment!
 - iii. Not all sins are the same in terms of gravity. However, sins of the tongue are very significant according to Jesus.
 - iv. The “good tree bears good fruit” statements come into focus here. The fruit is (or certainly includes) what comes out of our mouths.
 - v. Francis de Sales, a French bishop who was renowned as a spiritual mentor to many, published his classic work, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, in 1608. In it, he gave practical spiritual advice for Christians seeking to grow spiritually, drawing from a solid knowledge of Scripture and keen insights into human nature. From that work, in part 3, chapter 27, “Of Unseemly Words and the Respect Due to Others”, he quotes **James 3:2** and then offers worthwhile insights on how we should speak to one another

1. "The body is poisoned through the mouth, even so is the heart through the ear; and the tongue which does the deed is a murderer, even when the venom it has infused is counteracted by some antidote preoccupying the listener's heart. It was not the speaker's fault that he did not slay that soul. Nor let anyone answer that he meant no harm. Our Lord, Who knows the hearts of men, has said, 'Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks (**Matthew 12:34**).'" And even if we do mean no harm, the Evil One means a great deal, and he will use those idle words as a sharp weapon against some neighbor's heart."
 - a. Francis de Sales explains that if we say idle words (including gossip, slander and foul language), we are essentially spiritually guilty of *poisoning others (through their ears)*!
 - b. Even if we do so without consciously intending to do harm, Satan can and will use this to destroy our neighbor who hears it.
2. "...Those impure words which are spoken in disguise, and with an affection of reserve, are the most harmful of all; for just as the sharper the point of a dart, so much deeper it will pierce the flesh, so the sharper an unholy word, the more it penetrates the heart."
 - a. De Sales explains that when we couch a harsh statement in the midst of several positive or kindly comments, this is especially wicked.
 - b. It will penetrate into the other person's heart more deeply, although it is disguised or partly hidden.
3. (Source of the two quotes above: Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, part 3, chapter 27, pp. 149-150; Vintage Spiritual Classics / Random House, 2002)
 - e. "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 15:18-20**, NKJV)
 - f. "For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the

evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For *out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.*" (**Luke 6:43-45**, NKJV)

- i. Here in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus again teaches that our heart is like the tree, and what comes out of our mouths is its fruit. The fruit reveals what type of tree we are!
- g. Jesus' instructions of what to do when you are sinned against, and when you encounter sin in a brother (**Matthew 5:21-26** and **18:15-17**). These instructions also make it clear what one SHOULD NOT do when faced with these circumstances.
 - i. Go straight to the person (rather than gossiping about or slandering the offender). Get only those who need to know involved. If necessary, the last step is to bring the entire community in.
 - 1. There is no place for gossip, slander, or divisive talk in the church.
 - ii. Deal with conflict promptly and do what it takes to bring things to resolution, to bring about true repentance and reconciliation. Don't 'sweep it under the rug' and pretend everything is ok, when you know it isn't. Don't be a conflict avoider or a coward.
 - 1. As far as it is possible with you, seek peace with all men (**Romans 12:18**).
 - iii. Paul taught likewise in **1 Timothy 5:19-20** regarding what to do when the elders are involved in sin.
 - 1. Don't cover it up or pretend.
 - 2. Truth and sunlight are the best disinfectants. Elders in sin need to be publicly and openly rebuked in the church (rather than gossiped about).
 - iv. Peter pointed to the example of Jesus on the cross, in not retaliating when being mistreated (**1 Peter 2:20-24**).
 - v. Paul taught in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13** the lessons from the Wilderness, of the sin of grumbling/complaining. It spread like wildfire among the people, and thousands were put to death in the desert because of this sin. Paul says these things happened as a warning for us!

V. Conclusions

- a. This is hard, but not impossible.

- b. It is necessary for us to heed this teaching, for our salvation. Jesus and the apostles (not just James) addressed this.
- c. Don't make excuses for yourself.
- d. Hate gossip, slander, complaining, speaking evil of others, and not keeping your word. Take stock of your life, repent where you need to, and don't be defensive when others point out these sins in your life!