

Kirkwall Presbyterian Church
'Is your tongue behaving?'
James 3:1-12, Matthew 12:34-37
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By Keith Marcy

In his letter to Jewish Christians scattered across the known world, James, a half-brother of Jesus, writing about 20 years after Jesus returned to Heaven, gives powerful instruction on what people say and the tone – or the intent of what is said. The New International Version entitles this section, *'Taming the tongue.'*

After warning teachers that they will be judged more harshly than others if they teach what is contrary to Scripture, James begins to instruct everyone on the evils of using their tongue in an ungodly manner. He begins James 3:3 with the example of controlling a horse. Here is a bridle. This goes over a horse's head, its ears protrude through these openings, and the bit goes in the horse's mouth. A rein, my dad called a *'line,'* a strip of strong leather attaches to each side of the bit. A well-trained horse will respond like this: pull the right rein and the horse will turn right; pull the left one and the horse turns left. Pull both and the horse will slow and stop. Loosen the reins and the horse will go faster. A 2,000-pound work horse can be controlled by a small person through the bit.

Likewise, a large boat can be turned when the pilot adjusts a small rudder at the rear of the ship through ropes or cables attached to the wheel in the control room. His point – a large mass controlled by a very small object. So, says James – a person is controlled by a small, slimy, very flexible part of the body called the tongue. Just how significant is this *'tongue?'* Jesus told the Pharisees, recorded by Matthew: *"The mouth speaks out of the overflow of the heart."* He further explains, *"The good man speaks good things from the good stored up in him; the evil man speaks evil from the evil stored up in him. But I tell you,"* said Jesus, *"that men will have to give an account on the day of judgement for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted and by your words you will be condemned."*

Why?

Because your words reveal what is stored up in your mind!

James says in verse 8, *“The tongue corrupts the whole person because through the words which it forms, the mind of a person is revealed.”*

Commenting on this, *Enduring Word Commentary* says there are 3 categories:

1. To not stumble in word – in what we say – shows true spiritual maturity. It is very rare – if ever – to find someone who never stumbles.
2. We stumble in word about ourselves – when we boast, exaggerate and selectively report, known as telling a half truth.
3. We stumble in word about others with our criticism, gossip, slander, cruelty two-facedness and careless, uncontrolled anger, and gossip – or with flattery and insincere words meant to gain favour.

James comments that a whole forest is consumed by a fire started by one small spark. Likewise, the tongue can destroy a whole person because it reveals the evil in a person’s heart, mind and soul. Some monks of old were aware of this so they vowed not to speak. Some went for years without speaking. Yet there was still evil within them. They just did not reveal it in words – but by actions.

In the last paragraph, verse 9, James goes on to say that *‘we praise God with the tongue and we curse men with the same tongue’* – men who are made in God’s image like us. We cut them up verbally. We insult them. We lie about them. We can make them feel worthless. James says we reveal a contradictory heart when we praise God and curse our neighbour in the same breath.

As children, we were taught a catchy little rhyme,

*“Sticks and stones can break my bones;
names will never hurt me.”*

It is a lie. Verbal abuse is more dangerous than physical abuse. Physical injuries heal; emotional wounds caused by unkind comments may never heal – not on this side of heaven. A mean, cruel personal comment can destroy a person’s self-esteem; a kind word of encouragement may boost a person’s self-worth for the rest of their lives.

In verses 7 and 8, James gives the horrible results of exploratory surgery: *‘many wild animals have been tamed by man, but the tongue cannot be tamed, because it is a restless evil full of deadly poison!’*

Really, James?

No hope??

A Sunday School teacher was attempting to get this topic across to a class of grade 9's and 10's.

Two dogs were fighting. One was the junkyard dog, a dog that was trained to be mean and out for blood.

The other was a German Shepherd guard dog trained to protect lives and property.

He paused for the picture to sink in.

One curious grade niner asked, “So, *which one won?*”

The teacher replied, “*The one you feed.*”

If we are content to let Satan control us – if we allow evil intentions to occupy our minds, evil will control our thoughts, and our words will tell what our hearts are like.

But if we say, I do not want to be like this, but I feel trapped. Like Paul, when he said, *‘the good that I want to do I do not do, and the evil I do not want to do, that I do. Oh, what a wretched man that I am. Who will rescue me?’*

In Romans 7:25 he answers his own dilemma, “*Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*”

John describes abiding in Christ in 1 John 2:4-6 and 1 John 4:13-15.

How can we gain control?

How can we tame our tongue?

The Holy Spirit will help us if we truly want Him to.

John Wesley – example:

Lady: I have discovered my talent to use for God.

Wesley: Oh, and what might that be?

Lady: I am going to start just telling it like it is!

Wesley: Ma'am, I don't think God would mind if you buried that talent.