

James 3:1-12 The Message (MSG)

When You Open Your Mouth

3 ¹⁻² Don't be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends. Teaching is highly responsible work. Teachers are held to the strictest standards. And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths. If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true, you'd have a perfect person, in perfect control of life.

3-5 A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse. A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain sets a course in the face of the strongest winds. A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it!

5-6 It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell.

7-10 This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue—it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth!

10-12 My friends, this can't go on. A spring doesn't gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it? Apple trees don't bear strawberries, do they? Raspberry bushes don't bear apples, do they? You're not going to dip into a polluted mud hole and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you?

Today's passage from James addresses the importance of teachers in our lives, and the impact of a teacher's word on the life of those who are taught. They speak in the class setting. They use their tongues.

James presents two metaphors: a horse's bit and a ship's rudder (3:3-4). He makes a similar point for each of these. Rudders represent a very small portion of a ship, and bits are not much larger than a horse's hoof. Yet, each of these small items controls the direction of the much bigger body to which they are attached.

Then, James speaks about the tongue, in this instant as an instrument that controls the direction of a person.



Is there Decisive Influence of the Tongue in your life?

James makes application specifically to the tongue because he sees the controlling of one's tongue as a decisive matter, influencing the entirety of one's life. He explains this fact first, **before** instructing his readers in the specific errors of an uncontrolled tongue.

To explain this, **first** James states his basic principle: If you control what you say, you can control the rest of what you do. The intent seems twofold:

- to prove that we all stumble in many ways (for we fail even in the simple everyday matter of speaking) and
- to motivate us to diligence in speech (because it is so influential over the rest of our lives).

Second, James illustrates his principle with two analogies--the horse's bit and the ship's rudder. Both images have to do with steering, and so refer to the directing of one's whole life. Both images emphasize the size of the accomplishment (*the whole animal* and the ships *so large . . . driven by strong winds*) and so emphasize the magnitude of the tongue's influence.

Third, James concludes the analogies with the summarizing principle in 3:5. Thus far his emphasis is largely positive, describing the tongue's potential for good, in keeping with his intent to motivate us to diligence in this matter of speech.

- Positive application should be made: that learning godly ways of speaking will help us learn godliness in other ways. Therefore, the issue of speech should not be put off while one works on other areas of behavior.
- If you want purity and Christlikeness to characterize your life, here is a valuable secret of strategy: start with your tongue!

What does it mean to think that your tongue controls your whole being?

What does it mean to think of one's entire being as controlled by what you post on social media? Consider how your words, **spoken or digital**, affect your life, both in the wider society and within the community of faith.

Don't we all teach?



James shifts metaphors again, this time comparing the tongue to a flame that lights a forest on fire. James even contends that through the tongue, the unjust world enters the faith community, that the tongue can set fire even to the cycle of nature itself until it is consumed in Hell.

Pure and undefiled religion remains unstained by the world (1:27).

James argues, **the tongue has the capability** of destroying one's religious practice and that of one's community. Here, James invites meditation on destructive "speech," more broadly defined. One might, for instance, think critically about racist speech, vitriol against immigrants, or the practice of "trolling" on social media.

James considers the tongue a "restless evil full of deadly poison" (3:8)? Consider, says James, how we the church speak. We bless God and with the same tongues we curse one another (3:9).

Thus, the irony in the human tongue. At the heart of God's creation story, we hear of the power of God's "Word" to bring about all that exists. **(Is this God's tongue in action?)**

It is God's Word of promise that has established, restored, and sustained God's rich creation and a faithful people. Among God's gifts to humans is the ability to participate in that word, both through its power to create and sustain human community, and its ability to speak God's word of promise to one another.

Such capacity can hardly restrain what now becomes a kind of poetic rehearsal of the images and powers of the tongue, to be noted especially in the contrasts of size and power. The hearers' imagination is teased out in contemplation of this "small member" capable of "great exploits." Our fears, too, are tapped: "the tongue is a fire." Carefully chosen images arouse our emotions and at the same time call forth the richness of human knowledge of the extent of creation: the human body, iniquity, stains, cycle of nature, the fires of hell, all the species of air, land, and sea, the ability of humans to tame the world for its use -- the whole culminating in a telling yet almost despairing turn of irony: we can tame the whole world, but no one can tame the tongue, this restless evil, full of deadly poison! (James 3:5-8).

Blessing and curse

How do we manage (control) our tongue?



If the purpose of God's gifts of creation is that we should live in accord with the double command of scripture: to love God with our whole heart, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, then the tongue bears testimony to the fact that as humans we have not lived up to the potential of God's gifts and purpose. "With it we bless ... and with it we curse." "From the same mouth!" (James 3:9-10). Unbelievable! The author invites us, as it were, to gasp for breath at the shocking wonder of it all. Again, it has to do with the Word, and our words. They bind us in blessing and worship of the creator, and they call us to speak congruent words of blessing to one another in community.

Yet our words so often fall short. With the same mouth we curse and harm those who like us are made in the image of God. There is such a thin line between blessing and cursing. The picture is sobering.

James makes the observation that no human being is perfect may be commonplace, but James insightfully links authority to greater risk of harm stemming from imperfection in speech.

James returns to a figure that recalls that of the bit in the horse's mouth -- but with a difference. The horse is tamed by human beings in order to be controlled by a bridle; likewise, other creatures of all species can be subdued by the human species. The tongue alone remains untamable, "a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (verse 8).

Do we assume that James sees the tongue as inherently evil, controllable with effort but incapable of real change?

Or should we read the other side of his metaphors, to recognize, for example, that the spark that starts the raging inferno can also light the home fire that cooks our food and warms our weary bones? Such is the nature of metaphorical language that we must make our own determination as to which way the images should turn. It seems, however, that if we do not allow these metaphors to be multivalent, the next section of the passage is unrelieved cynicism. If the tongue -- that is, human speech -- is inevitably evil, our attempts to do good in our speech are self-deception at best, at worst insults to God.

It does not seem likely that James intends the picture to remain so gloomy. Rather, verses 9-12 open new possibilities in James's metaphors, signaling a shift in perspective from what comes before, and may signal a major shift in the sermon as



well. Despite our own experience that the tongue is unruly, that controlling our speech is a never-ending struggle, we can affirm other, quite different experiences.

We do, in fact, bless God with our voices, and we do so sincerely, without reservations or false motives. And if this is the case, then we begin to imagine a situation in which all the dire warnings James has issued about the tongue may not necessarily doom us. In fact, if we *are* able to bless God with our tongues (and we are), it should follow that we are not the kind of people whose tongues lead them astray -- a point James immediately follows up, as before, with images drawn from nature. If we are fig trees, we cannot bear olives. If we are grapevines, we cannot bear figs. No more can we bless God and curse people made in the divine image.

James calls on us to examine ourselves closely -- an examination *focusing largely on the words* that come out of our mouths -- and determine who we truly are. We will either be one or the other (a theme to be developed more fully in next week's text). Perhaps we can control that unruly tongue, after all. But to do so will require constant attention to who we are and what God has made us to be.

Use your tongue with wisdom ... we are all teachers.

