

Taming Your Tongue

(James 3:1-12)

(7/12/20)

Big Idea: Our tongue is so powerful that it can impact others significantly, whether for good or for bad. Although man cannot tame his tongue, God can control his tongue by changing his heart. What comes out of the mouth is a clear indication of what is happening inside his heart. Therefore, the tongue is a great measure of maturity.

Introduction

Last year during our pastoral staff retreat, one of the goals was for us to discuss some metrics in determining a healthy church. It was common for many churches to use the size of worship service, the size of the church budget, and the number of programs that the church has. These can be factors, but yet they are actually not the best factors. Surely, one can have a large crowd at worship service, but the church might not be healthy. Yes, a church can have a big budget suggesting that the church is doing a lot of ministries, but the church might still be unhealthy. In addition, a church can have a lot of programs to minister to different kinds of people, but yet the church can still be unhealthy. After much discussion, we came to some concluding metrics: 1) How many people are converted? 2) How many are engaged in a small group community? 3) How many people are actively serving the Lord? 4) How many are sharing the gospel regularly? 5) How many are making reproducible disciples? Metrics help us measure where we are. What metrics can we use to measure our maturity? As we examine James 3:1-12, we find out a great measure of maturity. It might surprise you what it is. According to James 3:2, “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.” It simply states that if one can control his tongue, then he is perfect or mature man. I will further explain this verse later.

I am going to show you from our passage why the tongue is a great way to measure our maturity. I have divided my message into three parts: 1) The tongue is the means by which teachers will be judged. 2) The tongue is a great measure of maturity. 3) The reasons why the tongue is a great measure of maturity. Let us read James 3:1, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

A. The tongue is the means by which teachers will be judged (3:1)

James is addressing Christians as he calls the readers, “my brothers.” It appears that many new believers desired to teach God’s Word, which was a highly respected position. Sometimes, we want to be recognized by others as a teacher. That is a bad motive for seeking this influential position. James warns these believers not to be so eager to be teachers because they will be judged with greater strictness. Teachers are in position to influence others tremendously. Therefore, they are accountable to a higher standard of judgment from God. Teachers can influence others in a positive way as well as in a negative way. One in authority can misdirect the followers if they are not careful. James discourages people from taking on this important position if they are not called or gifted in this way. Do take this vital role seriously. There are believers that are called and gifted in teaching. They should step up to teach. When they prepare well, teach God’s Word accurately, and apply it relevantly, then they do well. When they teach, they need to understand their responsibility. Those who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

This whole passage deals with the tongue. Teachers use their tongue to communicate God's truths. If we are not careful, we can misuse our tongue and misguide our students. How it is used will be the basis for their judgment. God will hold them accountable. Teachers are not the only ones who are tempted to misuse their tongue. Everyone must admit that we have all stumbled in many ways. In verse 2, James expounds that the tongue is a great measure of maturity. Let us read verse 2 again, "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."

B. The tongue is a great measure of maturity (3:2)

Here James uses the first person plural, "we." He includes himself stating "for we all stumble in many ways." He was not just pointing a finger at others, but he humbles himself acknowledging that he has stumbled also. The misuse of the tongue is one of the frequent ways we stumble. The second part of verse 2 is a conditional statement. Whenever we see the word, "if", we need to ask two questions: 1) What is the condition and 2) What is the conclusion? The condition is "If anyone does not stumble in what he says." That is basically saying if one can control their tongue by not stumbling others with what they say. Then we can make the conclusion: he is a perfect man. This word "perfect" means complete or mature. If a person can control his tongue and not stumble in what he says, then he is a mature man. Not only is he a mature man, but also one that is able to bridle his whole body. If he can control the tongue, he can control his whole body. That is a lot of power. That is why the tongue is a great measure of maturity. [The rest of the passage gives us three reasons why the tongue is a great measure of maturity. The first reason is recorded in verses 3-6, which reads "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."]

C. The reasons why the tongue is a great measure of maturity (3:3-12)

1. The tongue is so powerful (3:3-6)

The first reason why the tongue is such a great measure of maturity is because the tongue is so powerful. Although it is a small part of the body, it has tremendous influence. James gives two illustrations to make this point clear. We see that the tongue displays power as it does good for others.

a. Power to do good for others (3:3-5a)

James first uses the bits in the mouths of the horses and the rudder of the ship to compare it to the tongue of the body. They illustrate how a small part of the whole has tremendous influence on the whole. The rider can control and direct the horse by using the bit. At the same time, the captain can steer the ship with the small rudder.

ILLUSTRATION: One of the biggest ships in the world is the US aircraft carrier, USS Eisenhower. It weighs over 91,000 tons, is nearly 1,100 feet in length (that is almost 4 football fields), has a nuclear-powered 280,000 horsepower engine. It holds 6,100 crew members and carries nearly 100 aircraft. That is humongous. It is like a floating city. And yet it is steered by a rudder, which is tiny size in comparison to the

size of the ship. Something so significantly small can have tremendous influence over the ship.

These small objects when they are used properly have great power to do good for others. In verse 5a, “So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.” The tongue is so powerful. It can make enormous impact. We can use it to do good to others.

ILLUSTRATION: I had a rough couple of days, where I was very busy with ministry and dealing with problems. I was tired and frustrated when a Christian brother encouraged me with kind words. I was energized and renewed thanking the Lord. It reminds me Prov. 25:11, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” With the right words, it can inspire us, strengthen us, convict us, challenge us, exhort us, comfort us and soothe us. The tongue can be a powerful positive influence over others.

[In the latter part of verse 5, James uses another illustration to show the power of the tongue. It not only shows power to do good for others, but it also shows power to destroy others. Let’s read verse 5b-6, “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.”]

b. Power to destroy others (3:5b-6)

James describes the tongue like a destructive fire. With a small spark, it can set a forest ablaze. Within a short period of time, the fire can destroy a whole forest-consuming and devouring all that lies in its path; thousands of acres can be wiped out. Its ferocious flame moves quickly and does tremendous damage in the lives of others.

The tongue is just as destructive. We have all experienced the effect of harsh words, a false rumor that has been spread, a damaging accusation, an embarrassing statement and sharp or cutting remarks. Marriages have been ruined. Friendships have been destroyed. Reputations have been torn apart. And even wars have been fought from it. A harsh word does great damage as it penetrates into the depths of our mind and heart and stay there for a long time and for some, the rest of our life. There is a recording that plays back that haunting phrase. Every time those words resurface in our minds, it causes our blood pressure to go up and anger fills our mind.

ILLUSTRATION: I know of siblings and close friends that have not talked with each other for years because of destructive words that were exchanged. For our tongue is so powerful. It has great influence on the lives of others.

The tongue can stain the whole body. Our entire course of life is affected.

I like how the Message translates verses 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.”

The source of our wicked tongue is hell. Satan is the one that stirs up our inner being that ignites the fiery tongue, which pour out degrading words, heart-wrenching criticism, nasty name calling, and damaging gossips.

ILLUSTRATION: There was a man that loved to gossip. The pastor just could not convince him how destructive false rumors were. On a windy day, the minister visited the man and said, "Come with me to your barn, I want show you something." The pastor had purchased a feather pillow. He said to the man, "Open this pillow and let the feathers fly out." When the man had done so, the preacher said, "Now go pick up all the features." The point was made. The man could no more take back all his vain talk, than he could retrieve all those scattered feathers.

[The first reason why the tongue is a great measure of maturity is because the tongue is so powerful. If one can control his tongue, it can have great influence for others. The second reason why tongue is such a great measure of maturity is because the tongue is naturally untamable. Let us read vv.7-8, "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."]

2. The tongue is naturally untamable (3:7-8)

ILLUSTRATION: When my kids were little, I loved taking them to the circus. Actually, I am a little kid at heart. I enjoyed the acrobatic athletes doing their tumbling as well as the free spirited trapeze artists as they swung in the air. But I was most excited seeing the big wild animals doing tricks. i.e. tiger jumping through fiery hoops and the trainer putting his head in the mouth of a lion; elephant lifting their huge foot up as the trainer lies under it. All I could say, "Wow, how do they do that? How can they tame such big, wild and fierce animals? It is amazing. The Bible says that every kind of beast can be tamed, but no human can tame the tongue. If someone can tame the tongue, it is a greater feat than taming a lion. That is why the tongue is a great measure of maturity. Although human cannot tame the tongue, God can tame our tongue.

ILLUSTRATION: When I was a youngster, I was very insecure. In order to gain more self-esteem, I used my hot temper and loose tongue to control others. This was a way for me to demonstrate my superiority over others. But in reality, it only displayed my insecurity. I used my loose tongue to degrade people and put them in an embarrassing position. Because of my bad behavior, people distanced from me. After I placed my trust in Christ, I turned my bad habits over to Him. Through time, he helped me to change from the inside out. God show His power and authority by taming my tongue. Periodically, that loose tongue lifts its uglier head. But God has changed me so much through the years.

In verse 8, it states that no human being can tame the tongue. It has two other really bad descriptions of the tongue. It is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. The word, "restless" gives the understanding of uneasy, unstable, always roaming about. The tongue is restless and looking to do some evil. It is difficult to hold the tongue still. Another painful and penetrating explanation of the tongue is that it is full of deadly poison. Poison works slowly, secretly, and then it kills. I am sure you have experienced

someone injecting some poison into a conversation hoping it spreads and destroys the person that he is targeting.

The second reason why the tongue is a great measure of maturity is because it is naturally untamable. No one can tame the tongue without God's help. Those that can control their tongue are an indication that God is at work in their lives. And that person is mature. [We have seen the first two reasons why the tongue is such a great measure of maturity: 1) Because the tongue is so powerful. It can have great influence over others. 2) Because the tongue is naturally untamable; no human being can tame the tongue, but only God can tame the tongue. The third reason why the tongue is a great measure of maturity is because it shows the condition of the heart. Let us read vv.9-12, "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."]

3. The tongue shows the condition of the heart (3:9-12)

The final portion of this passage shows us the inconsistency of the tongue. On the one hand, it can bless our Lord. We as human beings are created to give glory to the Lord and to enjoy Him forever. Therefore, praising God is the highest and best use of the tongue. Yet on the other hand, out of the same mouth, we witness believers cursing people, who are made in the likeness of God. This misuse of the tongue is the lowest form of using the tongue to attack God's representatives. Witnessing these two extreme usages of the tongue for good and for evil reinforces the untamed nature of our speech.

Jesus in Luke 6:43-45 says, "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." Jesus is saying that we are like fruit trees. We produce either good fruit or bad fruit. It is one's inner nature that determines what kind of fruit his life will yield. Each tree is known by its own fruit. An apple tree produces apples, not oranges; a good person produces good fruit, not evil. Just as trees produce fruit in keeping with their nature, so also do people. The fruit of our heart can be seen through our speech. Our words reveal what is in our heart. The mouth speaks from that which fills the heart. The hidden things of the heart are revealed by our visible actions and audible words. What comes out of the lips depends on what is inside the heart. The problem is not the tongue, but the heart. Our tongue is the best indicator of the state of one's heart.

ILLUSTRATION: Two months ago, Ellie started a new hobby of gardening. She planted long beans, squash, zucchini, cucumber, sweet potato leaves, and tomato. She consults with members that are gardener and looks up Youtube to learn how best to plant and help it to grow. First thing in the morning, she waters it and takes a picture of it. We were amazed at how fast it grew. She got very excited as flowers bloomed, which indicates that fruit is coming soon. We had our first harvest of long beans this week. It was fresh and delicious. The tomato plant produces tomato and the long bean plant

produces long beans. The tomato plant does not produce long beans. That does not make sense.

Likewise, James is saying the same thing in v.12 with a rhetorical question: Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Absolutely not! He uses a third illustration to make this point claiming a spring cannot bring forth both fresh and salt water at the same time. The bottom line that James is saying is that the tongue is inconsistent. The only way that it can change is for God to step in to change our tongue. We are reminded in v.2 that if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect or mature man. The tongue shows the condition of the heart. Our tongue is a great measure of maturity.

As we yield ourselves to the Lord, God can change our hearts. It is when our hearts are changed, then it will affect our speech. The first step is to place our trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Most of us do not have good control of our tongue. No matter how hard we try, it will not result in much change because our natural nature is to sin. We are selfish and we place ourselves above others. The only way for us to change is for us to be a child of Christ by placing our faith in Jesus, acknowledging that we have sinned and we cannot save ourselves. Jesus came to pay the penalty of our sins by dying on the cross and raising again three days later to show that God has accepted what Jesus did on our behalf. By faith, we put our trust in Him and we will be saved. Then we can invite Him to do some reconstruction in our life. As our heart changes, our speech will change also.

ILLUSTRATION: I had a loose tongue that got me into a lot of trouble. It wasn't until I placed my trust in Christ when I was 15 that Christ started changing my heart. I found my security in Christ and I did not need to use my tongue to degrade others so that I could be elevated and be secure. That was just wrong as James has taught in this passage. My loose tongue did not change overnight. But gradually in the next couple of years, I noticed a change in my attitude toward others. Instead of focusing on myself, I valued others. Instead of wanting others to serve me, I wanted to serve others. As my heart changed, my tongue also changed. The tongue shows the condition of our heart.

We need the Lord to tame our tongue so that we can use it to build up one another by encouraging each other, by affirming each other, by praying for one another, by supporting one another. May we reflect Christ in us showing others that God is working in our hearts, changing us inside out. God specializes in breaking our bad habits, particularly our untamed tongue.

Our tongue is so powerful that it can impact others significantly, whether for good or for bad. Although man cannot tame his tongue, God can control his tongue by changing his heart. What comes out of the mouth is a clear indication of what is happening inside his heart. Therefore, the tongue is a great measure of maturity. How is your tongue doing? May we show others what God is doing in our lives as we use our tongue to praise God and to honor men.