

Intro: We had lots of animals on the farm when I was growing up. It was fun to try to tame them. I taught an 800 pound Hereford calf, once, to raise its back leg when I wash washing him. We tried to tame racoons another time. Recently, we've been having fun training our black lab puppy. One challenge has been to lay a piece of food in front of her, and say, "Wait!", and not let her eat until we give her the Ok. That's a challenge to teach an animal to put its mouth in subjection to its Master's will.

Dogs aren't the only creatures that struggle with their mouths. People do, too. This evening, we are going to start a new topical series dealing with the tongue. How do we tame the tongue? The Bible has much to say about the tongue. The prince of all passages dealing with the subject of the tongue is found in one of the most practical books in the Bible--James 3.

In James 3, James goes for what Swindoll calls the "jugular vein of the Christian life" (Swindoll, Bible Study Guide: James, 47). We have incredible power in our tongue. I've seen parents destroy their children with a sarcastic, critical tongue, and I've seen other parents equip their little ones for life with the same instrument. I've seen people who have been won to Christ by the proper use of the tongue, and I've others who have left church to never return again because of someone's flippant use of the tongue. How can we learn to tame the tongue? It's obvious we need to, and we'll find out how in the next 4 weeks as we explore God's counsel in James 3.

READ James 3:1-8

Lehman Strauss, well known Bible teacher, speaker, and writer, made this observation (James, 120), "This author is thoroughly convinced that no portion of the Epistle of James is more urgently needed in our churches than this section before us (chapter 3). There are many earnest Christians who consider themselves to be utterly unaware of the ways in which they sin with the tongue. These same Christians cringe from the very thoughts of using tobacco, dancing, card playing, attending the theater, and the like, but they engage in talebearing, gossip, slander, and backbiting. I consider the teaching in James, Chapter Three, to be a key to the solution of most of the ills in church life today."

Proposition: Tonight, as we look at James 3:1-2, we're going to discover three lessons that are essential if we're going to learn to tame the tongue.

I. God holds me responsible for my tongue (1-2a).

- A. Teachers are responsible.
- B. All of us are responsible.

II. My tongue is a barometer of my spiritual maturity (2).

What comes out of my mouth reveals what's in my heart (Matthew 12:34).

A. Brash words reveal a proud heart.

e.g.--Peter (Mt 26:33)

e.g.--James & John (Lk 9:54)

B. Malicious words reveal a self-seeking heart.

e.g.--Diotrephes (III John 9-10)

- C. Timid words reveal a fearful heart.
e.g.--Timothy (II Tim 1:6-8)
 - D. Sarcastic words reveal a bitter heart.
e.g.--Michal (II Samuel 6:20)
 - E. Complaining words reveal an ungrateful heart.
e.g.--The Israelites (Ex 16:2-3; Num 20:2-6)
- III. There is great potential in my tongue (2).
- A. For bad (we can "offend")
 - B. For good (If we can control the tongue, we can control the whole body)

The first lesson is undeniable even from a casual reading of the text.

I. God holds me responsible for my tongue (1-2a).

The author of this book is James (see 1:1). James was a popular, first century, Jewish name ("Jacob"). There are at least four men in the New Testament by this name. The most likely candidate seems to be James, the half-brother of Jesus. He was a pillar in the early church in Jerusalem (Paul calls him such in Gal 2:9). Tradition tells us he was martyred in A.D. 62.

To whom did James write this letter? 1:1 says, "to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad." The phrase "twelve tribes" indicates James was writing to Jews, namely, Jews that had been forced to leave the Promised Land. They were furthermore Christian Jews (19 times he calls them "my brethren").

James is a very early book, quite possibly written only 15 years after Jesus' ascension (A.D. 45-47). It's also a very practical book. One of the great themes of the letter is this: If faith is genuine, it must be seen. Faith must be seen in:

1. Our response to trials (1:3)
2. Our treatment of widows and orphans (1:27)
3. Our treatment of the poor (2:1).
4. Our response to worldiness (4:1)
5. Our plans for the future (4:13)
6. Our attitude towards money (5:1)

There's another area in which faith must be seen. In the way we use our tongue. God holds us responsible for the way we use our tongues.

Who specifically does James say is responsible?

A. Teachers are responsible.

V 1 "My brethren, be not many teachers..." The early church, in many ways, patterned itself after the Jewish synagogue. In the synagogue, there were rabbis who taught the people. The rabbi taught Jewish doctrine. He was a teacher, an instructor. He was highly respected and honored by the people. The early church had teachers, too. It, too, was a position of honor and prestige. And it could be sought for the wrong reasons.

So James said, "Don't be many teachers." Not that being a teacher is bad. Teaching is good. Being a teacher of God's Word is good. But aspiring to teach is not

something to approach glibly. Why not? V 1 tells us, "Knowing that we shall receive the greater judgment."

Notice this is "family business." James addresses the "brethren." He has a family talk with them. He informs them that the tongue is a big deal in God's sight, especially for teachers. Teachers will be "judged more strictly" (NIV).

Why? Because those who teach are a higher casualty risk than non-teachers. Why? For one simple reason. They use their tongues more. The more you use your tongue, the greater the odds you're going to slip up!

I learned that truth early on. Back in 1981, I traveled as a student preacher with the Swordbearers. After a message, a person came up to me, and said, "I hope you didn't mean what you said tonight." I responded, "What did I say?" He said, "You said, 'You can bet your bottom dollar on this.' But betting is wrong!"

God holds teachers responsible for the use of their tongues. In light of that, I'd like to pose some questions to our teachers (anybody who teaches the Word of God-- from the pulpit, in Sunday School, with our youth, small groups):

1. Do you take your teaching seriously?
2. Are you diligent in your preparation?
3. Do you view teaching as a job, as an obligation, or as an opportunity to impact lives for eternity with the truth of God's Word?
4. When you teach, is it your aim to please your listeners, or God?

Don't be hasty to assume a teaching position. Don't be flippant if you already hold one. We shall be judged more strictly. To whom much is given, much shall be required (Lk 12:48). Jesus said of the Jewish scribes, in Mt 12:40, "They will receive the greater condemnation."

God hold the teacher responsible for his/her use of the tongue. Who else is responsible?

B. All of us are responsible.

V 2 says, "For in many things we ALL stumble." James didn't point a finger without including himself. We all stumble, especially with our tongues.

The word "stumble" means "to slip up, to trip." It's amazing that a piece of flesh that is only a few inches long can reach all the way from our mouth to our feet, but it's true. James says we all stumble over our tongues. We trip over them. We also use our tongues to trip others. Some are really good "tongue-trippers."

The story is told (Stowell, 33) of a young man during the Middle Ages who was sent to a monk. He said, "I've sinned by telling slanderous statements about someone. What should I do?" The monk replied, "Put a feather on every doorstep in town." The young man did just that. He then came back to the monk, wondering if there was anything else he should do. The monk told him, "Go back and pick up all those feathers." The young man replied excitedly, "That's impossible! By now the wind will have blown them all over town!" Said the monk, "So has your slanderous word become impossible to retrieve."

God holds all of us responsible for our tongues. Jesus said in Mt 12:36-37, "But I say unto you that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account

of it in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned."

Do you want to learn to tame your tongue? Here's the first lesson. God holds me responsible for my tongue.

II. My tongue is a barometer of my spiritual maturity (2).

This lesson is not so much stated in the text as it is assumed. V 2 reads, "For in many things we all stumble. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man."

There's an underlying principle in v 2. It's based on what Jesus said in Matthew 12:34. What comes out of my mouth reveals what's in my heart.

The following picture illustrates this truth...(see transparency)

Suppose someone says to you, "I've noticed that your kids aren't as gifted as mine. My children excel in every way. Maybe some day your children will be as good as mine." What kind of words are those? Brash. What kind of heart do they come from? A proud heart.

A. Brash words reveal a proud heart.

For a couple of biblical examples, see the following.

e.g.--Peter (Mt 26:33)

e.g.--James & John (Lk 9:54)

B. Malicious words reveal a self-seeking heart.

e.g.--Diotrephes (III John 9-10)

Let's consider a current day example. If someone comes up to you after church, and says, "I don't like the direction the church is going. The problem around here is that the leadership isn't as 'spiritual' as you and I are. I know what the church needs. My program will work better than the one we're using now."

What kind of words are those? Malicious. What do they indicate about the person's heart? Self-seeking.

C. Timid words reveal a fearful heart.

e.g.--Timothy (II Tim 1:6-8)

D. Sarcastic words reveal a bitter heart.

e.g.--Michal (II Samuel 6:20)

E. Complaining words reveal an ungrateful heart.

e.g.--The Israelites (Ex 16:2-3; Num 20:2-6)

The point is this. My tongue is a barometer of my spiritual maturity. My tongue is a gauge that reveals the condition of my heart. Socrates said to a young student (in Strauss, 127), "Speak, friend, that I may see thee." Our speech reveals our hearts.

III. There is great potential in my tongue (2).

A. For bad

Notice that phrase in v 2, "If any man offend not in word." The tongue is small, but how influential! We'll see in the next few weeks how much so. James offers three illustrations. Like a bit with a horse (3), a rudder with a ship (4), and a spark and a forest fire (5-6), the tongue may be small, but it can sure cause a lot of damage.

Conversely...

B. For good

V 2 continues, "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man." Complete. Mature. Full grown. "And able also to bridle the whole body."

What's the point? This. If we can learn to control the tongue, we can control the whole body. Prov 21:23 says, "Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue, keepeth his soul from troubles."

What does that mean? For one, it means there is a world of GOOD potential in our tongues. We can encourage with our tongues. We can praise God with them. We can soothe one who is grieving. We can motivate one who is fearful.

What's more, if we can tame our tongues, we can bring any of our body parts into submission to Christ! The person who controls his tongue is "perfect," not sinless, but mature, and well-rounded. Christlike.

Caution: I need to remind you of what Christ said. "Without Me, you can do nothing (Jn 15:5)." Taming the tongue is not something we can do on our own. It's possible only by the power of Christ.

Challenge:

What must we do if we are going to tame our tongues? I challenge each of us to do what David did in Psalm 39:1. Listen to David's resolution, "I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue; I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me." We must make two resolutions:

1. I will not, by God's help, sin with my tongue.
2. I will keep my mouth with a bridle.

What does a bridle do? A bridle controls. That means, I must take specific steps to bring my tongue under control. Like what? One, I must yield my tongue to Jesus Christ every day. Two, recognizing the inherent danger in my tongue, I must make myself accountable to other, godly people who can help keep my tongue in check.

Next Week: James 3:3-5 "The Inherent Power of the Tongue"