

June 3, 2007

James 3:5-12

Alright good morning. Hope you had a good “short” week if you had that blessing. I’m glad that you are back today. Go ahead and grab your Bibles and let’s move forward in our study of James. Last week we started chapter 3 and looked at verses 1-5 about our tongues, our mouths, and the way we use them. And today we’ll continue that theme in verses **5-12**.

While you turn there, let me read you some quotes from bumper stickers you may have seen around town.

Bumper Stickers

This one we’ve all seen and smiled at:

Your kid may be an honor student, but you’re still an idiot.

Or how about: He who laughs last, thinks slowest.

Or this one I like: I love cats. They taste like chicken.

Work is for people who don’t know how to fish.

And then here’s a last one – I’ve held this over my mom and dad for a long time: Be nice to your kids. They’ll choose your nursing home.

See one of the realities of bumper stickers is that the words on the outside are a sign or we take as a sign of the kind of person on the inside – whether they are mean or nice or funny or weird or whatever. Which in a real surface-y way is what James was getting to last week. **We can’t separate who we are from what we SAY**. We may think we can and we may put up good fronts around certain people, but the truth is that we can’t separate who we are from what we say.

And evidently that was being forgotten here in the book of James. You’ve got a group of people James is writing to who thought they were spiritually mature – were claiming to be growing believers in Jesus Christ – but they weren’t. Because they were constantly failing to control their speech. They weren’t seeing how their faith in Christ had much to do with the way they lived their lives and in particular with how they spoke to one another.

So James writes this chapter and mentions the tongue in every chapter in his letter to say we may minimize the importance of godly speech, but God does not.

So we saw last week that **we need to pay attention to the words we say first of all because our tongue has such great potential to CONDEMN us**. James points out that we are going to be held accountable. Jesus said in **Matthew 12** that we are going to give an account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word we say. And that ought to make a difference to us. Accountability changes

things. When people aren't held accountable, they – we – can get lazy and careless. But when they are, they – we – tend to take things more seriously. James is saying don't speak like there is no standard and you aren't going to be held accountable because there is coming a day when God Himself is going to evaluate the way you used your words.

Then we saw that **we need to pay attention to how we speak because our tongues have such incredible power to CONTROL us.** In other words, what you say affects your entire life. And he illustrated that with a horse and a bit & bridle and a ship and its rudder. And again – if you missed last week, I encourage you to go back and get the sermon online so you can hear what God taught us.

But today James goes on in verses 5-12. In the first half, he pointed out the power of the tongue but didn't really say if that power was good or bad – that's just the way it is. The tongue is powerful. Be careful with it. But today we see that **we need to pay attention to how we speak because the tongue has awesome power to DESTROY.**

Let's look at the text – verses 5-12.

Right in the middle of verse 5, the NIV waters down the Greek a bit. It says “consider what a great forest” – actually in Greek James says “BEHOLD” – it's very emphatic – listen – behold – don't get distracted – don't let your mind wander. Picture this – get this image in your brain.

What a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

This isn't easy for us living in Texhoma to picture but try and imagine walking through a beautiful forest one day. Everything is green and lush. The next day you come back, and it's all black and charred and nothing's left but smoke and ash.

James is saying think about that. Picture that. Think about the horrible wildfires that ripped through Colorado and California just a couple of years ago. James is saying those wildfires teach us something about our communication and the power of the tongue.

When you talk about a wildfire, what hits home is the amazing amount of destruction. Hundreds of thousands of acres and hundreds of homes just destroyed. The land ravaged. Thousands of people harmed. The destruction is overwhelming.

See the thing about wildfires is that the damage doesn't stay in one place. It doesn't burn down one tree – it burns hundreds of thousands of acres. And it happens so fast – it is out of control. And the affects are so long lasting. There are parts of Yellowstone National Park you can drive through and see the forest as far as the eye can see just totally burned to a crisp and black and dead and you'd think the fire happened yesterday. But it didn't – it happened over a decade before.

James says learn from that. That's the power of your tongue. What caused all that destruction? All that pain? All that long-lasting damage? One spark.

See there's nothing like fire. I have my water up here each week but none of you are really afraid of that. You aren't scared that if I bump this table over and my water spills – oh no, run, it's going to build into a flood – we're all doomed!

But with a single a match I could destroy this entire building. Your tongue is not a glass of water. James says it is a fire. It is a spark just waiting for one misuse to spread destruction like wildfire. Because the damage of your tongue misused is out of proportion to its size. It doesn't stay in one place. It multiplies. And it is impossible to contain once it is loosed. So pay attention to how you speak because the tongue has awesome power to destroy.

Morgan Blake – a sportswriter for the Atlanta Journal nailed just one problem area of the tongue – listen to this quote: “I am more deadly than the screaming shell from the Howitzer. I win without killing. I tear down homes, break hearts and wreck lives. I travel on the wings of the wind. No innocence is strong enough to intimidate me. No purity pure enough to daunt me. I have no regard for truth, no respect for justice, no mercy for the defenseless. My victims are as numerous as the sands of the sea and often as innocent. I never forget and seldom forgive and my name – may name is gossip.”

James then moves on into this really unique statement here in verse 6 “the tongue is a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”

A world of evil – actually the word could be cosmos – a whole system of anti-God thinking and living rebelling in the midst of what God made us to be.

And just like time after time God’s Word warns us to not let ourselves be stained by the external world system we live in that is twisted and evil and set up against God, James says this world of evil – the tongue – can corrupt the whole person.

The word corrupt means to spot or stain or pollute. So James is saying you pollute yourself – you stain yourself by the way you use your tongue. Imagine a person just standing in a field and throwing mud and cow dung on himself and you get a picture of what a person who does not control his tongue is doing to himself. He’s throwing filth on himself and his life by what he says.

There is a world of evil in the tongue, and if you’re not careful about what you say it can corrupt your entire person. Meaning again – you can’t separate who you are from how you speak. If you don’t control your tongue, it will literally stain all of you. You’ll be the guy walking around smelling like cow dung.

But again – just like the fire – it doesn’t stop there. James says it sets the whole course of his life on fire. Here he expands it even further – the damage of the tongue can set your life on fire – literally make you be like a person who is on fire.

Now imagine that. A person who is ablaze. Running around – out of control. He’s being destroyed right in front of your eyes, but it isn’t just him. It’s going to affect everyone around him. What happens when you get too close to a person who is on fire? You catch on fire as well. We know that because we’ve all been burned by someone else’s tongue.

And then James goes one step further and says the starting point of all this – the source of all this damage – this world of evil that corrupts your whole person – that sets your life on fire – that spreads to everyone you cross paths with – he says the tongue itself is set on fire by hell.

And there’s a whole word picture there because the word hell is literally “Gehenna” in Greek is referring to an ever burning valley of trash and human flesh and refuse outside of Jerusalem but the point I want you to get is that **the tongue is set on fire by that which is the very OPPOSITE of God** – it is set on fire by hell. In **John 10:10** Jesus says where he comes to give life and life abundantly, the enemy – Satan – comes to steal, to kill, and to destroy.

Folks Satan has schemes. You’ve got to be aware of that. And one of his schemes is to use your speech to start fires that destroy things. Just like a fire is spread by wind and fuel, **SATAN wants to take your speech if you don’t control it and use it as a tool of DESTRUCTION in every arena of life you will let him.**

James says we have got to pay attention to what we say because our tongue has such potential to condemn us, has such power to control us, and such power to destroy and to prove that he first says think forest fire, now in verse 7-8 he says think wild animal.

He says we've tamed every kind of wild animal but that no man can tame the tongue, it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

This isn't new news – we know this. All you've got to do is go to Sea World and you'll see guys swimming and doing stunts with Killer Whales. You can go to Las Vegas and see guys doing tricks with lions and tigers. We know we can tame animals but the point is that when they aren't tamed they are dangerous.

You go to a zoo and get into the cage with the lions or bears or whatever – you're going to be scared if you have any clue what is going on. You don't go to the zoo and have the wild lions come sit in your lap. They aren't house cats. You don't go "Hey Mr. Lion – you're a good kitty yes you are" and bury your face in his mane. You'll be lucky to get your face back.

You keep wild animals in cages because they are dangerous when they aren't tamed and James says no matter how dangerous the animal, we can tame it – but no man can tame the tongue. We'll come back to that in a minute but right now his point is **like a wildfire that CONSUMES everything around it – like a wild animal that ATTACKS without mercy – your tongue has awesome power to destroy**. We've got to pay attention to what we say.

And then in verses 9-12 James gives a final reason why **we need to pay attention to what we say – because the tongue has the power to PROVE the condition of your HEART**. Which is what we've been saying since verse 1. Look again at these verses. Read 9-12.

Basically **James gives us here a series of INCOMPATIBILITIES that all prove that one point – that our tongues reveal the condition of our hearts**.

First he says praising God and cursing men made in God's image is incompatible. In fact when he says in verse 10 this ought not be – that is an extremely strong negative – it's only used here in the entire New Testament. Praising in God's Word is not just a statement of fact or truth about God – praise is the delight in the truth and the person of God. Just because you sing the words that are true on Sunday morning, does not mean that you are praising God unless you delight in the truth they profess about God. Praise is an indication that I get it – I get God – I get his love and mercy and grace and perfection and holiness. And to do that and then turn around and curse man made in God's image. Curse means to wish evil on someone. Literally I understand it to come from a position of pride or selfishness that sets you up to damage someone else's worth. Basically by demeaning anything about them you judge them as unworthy of value or worth and condemn the image of God in them.

See that can't go together. You can't praise God because you delight in him which only happens from a position of humility where you see yourself in light of who He is and then turn around and condemn man from a position of pride with no regard for who God is.

I know that's long, but I want you to get this down.

You can't praise God from a position of HUMILITY where you see yourself in light of who He is and then turn around and condemn man from a position of PRIDE with no regard for who God is.

That ought not be. That can't come from the same heart.

His next few examples are a little easier to get our brains around. **Fresh water and salt water can't come from the SAME source. Olives and figs can't come from the same SOURCE.**

All of those things are proving that what comes out reveals where it came from. Our words prove the condition of our hearts. **James is saying that the way you speak is really a TEST of whether or not you are a believer.** If you fail to control your speech on a consistent basis, you may not be a Christian.

If you are – you've been born again – re-made – a new creation – you're not who you used to be. And what James has been saying in this entire letter is that that reality is going to affect how you live your life. Jesus told the woman at the well in John 4 that if we come to him for salvation that salvation will well up from within as a spring of living water flowing out of our lives. The source – our hearts will have been changed and that will affect what flows out of us.

Now James is not talking about perfection here. We know that because back in verse 2 he said we all stumble in many ways talking about our mouths specifically. But the consistent pattern of our lives should and will reflect what is real in our hearts.

Now let me be real practical here. **There is a difference between a pattern of speech that is CONSISTENTLY wrong and a SITUATION that causes your speech to be wrong.** Here's what I mean. If you have to change the way you normally talk because you are around other Christians, because you are at church, or because you are talking to me – then you have reason to doubt whether you are truly saved and made new or not. Along the same lines if you consistently employ the same wrong habits like gossip and slander and criticism even at church and with other believers then you have reason to doubt whether you are truly saved.

That is different than speech that becomes a problem because of situation. You see even a fresh spring can be made to produce bitter water if something is put into it that shouldn't be there. That's why when you go camping, you don't bathe or clean your fish upstream from where someone is drawing out drinking water. Because what you put into the stream can contaminate the water.

The same is true with your heart. **If the consistent pattern of your speech increasingly shows a heart CHANGED by the love of Jesus Christ, but one area or one person or one situation just overflows out of you in SINFUL ways – in bitterness or anger or slander or cursing, that's not proving that your salvation isn't real – it's proving you've let something into your heart you shouldn't have.** I'll say that again.

If the consistent pattern of your speech increasingly shows a heart CHANGED by the love of Jesus Christ, but one area or one person or one situation just overflows out of you in SINFUL ways it's proving you've let something into your heart you shouldn't have.

Hebrews 12:14-15 talks about doing all you can to live at peace with all men by making sure no root of bitterness takes hold in your life to grow up and cause trouble and defile many.

We can let stuff get into our lives in such a way that it contaminates what comes out. And the longer it stays in there, the worse it gets. So even if the pattern of your speech doesn't bring your salvation into question, if there are still areas where you know what comes out

is inconsistent with what God's Word calls us to be, then James principle is still true – how you talk proves the sick condition of your heart.

So what do we do with that? Because we have a problem. Go back to **verse 8**. James makes it clear – even though we've been talking for two weeks about the need for us to control our tongues, he says right here “**No MAN can tame the tongue.**”

We can't do it. We can't control the world of evil that is our tongue. But the tongue can be tamed – it just has to be by God. We've got to have God's help to control this beast. See **there is a rider for the horse – there is a pilot for the ship – there is a firefighter for the forest fire – there is a tamer for the wild animal**. And it's not you – it's not your will power. It's not your determination. **It's your SURRENDER to the GRACE of God**. Peter says in 2 Peter 1:3 that “His – God's – divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness.”

Which is why what we said last week is so true. Whatever means of grace and whatever dynamics of spiritual commitment it takes to take care of your tongue are going to by virtue of controlling that, control the rest of you as well. **The only way for me and for you to have a tongue that consistently SPEAKS rightly is to have a HEART that is consistently right with God.**

So if you look at your life honestly today and you see a pattern of speech that fits more in the category of gossip, slander, criticism, arrogance, foul language, or just plain meanness then hear what James says today – he says your claim to know Christ is worthless. Don't be deceived. Get right with God.

And if you look at your life and you already know there are areas or habits or people or situations that you have let create a root of bitterness defile what God wants to flow out of you – then repent and surrender your rights to that bitterness to the God who can make the difference.

And no matter where you are today or who you are today – whether you've listened the past two weeks or not – hear the heart of what God is saying. **Your WORDS Matter. ALL the time.**

We've got to pay attention to our words – because our tongues can condemn us, they can control us, they can destroy us and those around us, and mainly because they can reveal the condition of our hearts.

Since your words are going to matter this week, I pray you will make them matter for the glory of God.

Let's pray.