



## INTRODUCTION

The most powerful muscle in your body is not your biceps, legs, or even back. It happens to be this little muscle behind your dental work, your tongue. For some it is their strongest muscle because it is exercised so frequently. Although it is petite, it can be potent and powerful. Someone has called the tongue “the world’s smallest but largest troublemaker”. Stats place the average tongue between 2 and 3 inches in length, weighing only a few ounces. In comparison to the rest of the body it seems small and insignificant, yet God puts a priority on it and tells us to tame our tongue.

The tongue has stirred up and caused more trouble than an army of the world’s strongest men can contend with. It has split marriages, divided families, lied to make a sale, hurt feelings, fed the rumor mill, cursed a loving God, caused divisions in the church, and even started wars. Your tongue can be a weapon of mass destruction.

In the first two chapters of his letter, James has referenced our speech several times. In James 1:19 he says, “let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath”. Later he writes, “if any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain” (1:26). In chapter two he deals with false and true faith. One sure sign of true or worthless faith is what comes out of a person’s mouth. He exhorts, “So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty” (2:12). In the big picture of faith and works, James says our speech is the number one indicator of what we believe. Speech is one of the greatest powers God has given us. It can be used for great good or great harm. We can praise God, pray, preach the Word, and point others to Christ with our words. We can also lie, gossip, slander, and curse with our words.

As he begins chapter three, James issues a solemn warning to teachers. He wants them to be aware that with the privilege of speaking authoritatively also comes great responsibility. For those who teach also have great accountability, for James says they will face a stricter judgment (3:1). James is not trying to

discourage teaching, rather he is encouraging faithfulness in the leadership role of teaching God’s Word.

Furthermore, he explains that the man who has learned to tame the tongue has mastered the most difficult of member of his body. Controlling the tongue demonstrates great spiritual maturity (3:2). God desires that each of us would grow up spiritually and by His grace for His glory tame our tongue. He is about to reveal truths that every tongue owner ought to know. No other section in the Bible speaks with greater clarity and impact on the potential destructive power of our words.

### 1. The Power of the Tongue

The ability to speak is one of the greatest powers God has given to man. Communicating with words is one of the distinguishing marks of human life. Clear, verbal communication is an awesome tool when used correctly, but speech also has its darker side. With numerous word pictures and illustrations, James demonstrates the power of the tongue.

#### A. It has the power to direct (3:3-4)

James uses two common items of his day that were small, yet wielded great power, to point out the ability of the tongue to direct. The first comes from the equestrian world. He likens the tongue to a bridle on a horse (3:3). When a small bit is placed into the mouth of a horse it allows even the smallest of jockeys to guide the steed. So our tongue, being small, can guide others for right or wrong.

The second illustration comes from the nautical world (3:4). A great ship is directed through the seas by the hand of the captain who navigates using the helm which controls the rudder. Compared to the size of the ship the rudder is seemingly small, but it is significant. Lose control of the rudder, and the ship is at the mercy of the winds and waves on the high seas.

Illustration: The German battleship *Bismark* was one of the most famous warships in WWII. It was faster than any other ship and its artillery range was greater than others. The Germans thought it would help win the war in their favor. In its first battle it sank the flagship of the Royal British Navy (HMS Hood). The British knew the importance of eliminating the *Bismark*, and it was discovered on its way out to open sea. Torpedoes were fired at the ship, but could not deter it. However, one of the torpedoes lodged in rear of the boat jamming the rudder at a 90 degree angle. The captain of the *Bismark* no longer had control of the ship, and it began to go around in a large circle. Ultimately it was destroyed by the British.

Transition: A bit and rudder both have the power to direct, so do our tongues. Our words directly affect the lives of others. We can guide others down the right path of life with right words. We can help others navigate through the tempestuous waters of life with wise words. We should never underestimate the power of our words. But the tongue also has the power to destroy.

### **B. It has the power to destroy (3:5, 8)**

When the tongue is properly controlled God is glorified and others are edified. However, as the old WWII saying goes, “loose lips sink ships”. When that little member of our body is not harnessed by God and seasoned with grace, it can cause irreparable damage. James understood the destructive power of the tongue. He likens it to a spark that causes a massive forest fire. Every year millions of acres are lost to wild fires that often begin with people’s carelessness. A simmering cigarette butt thrown aside, a camp fire not properly extinguished. As Smokey the bear would say, “Only you can prevent forest fires”. That is true with our words as well. Only you can prevent destruction from your words.

Illustration: October 8, 1871 was the day of the Great Chicago Fire. Some 17,500 buildings were destroyed, 300 people died, and more than 100,000 were left homeless. It cost the city of Chicago over \$400 million to rebuild what was lost. It is believed that the fire began in Mrs. O’Leary’s barn. A cow knocked over a lantern that burned down the barn, then the farm, then much of the city of Chicago. One spark can cause immense damage.

In verse 8, James says the tongue is “full of deadly poison”. Like a coiled venomous snake, our tongue is quick to spew poison when provoked. It’s as though we have a capsule of cyanide behind our teeth, ready to break open and spread death wherever we go. Remember the saying from elementary school, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me”. Many of us have repeated it as way to cover our internal wounds from unkind words. But that statement is not true. Everyone has had someone say something that hurt. Words can be like a deadly poison. No wonder Proverbs 18:21 states, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue”. An unchecked tongue can assassinate a person’s character, destroy a reputation, even ruin a church.

Transition: The tongue has the power to direct like a bit and bridle on a horse or a rudder on a ship. Our words have the potential to cause great damage like a wild fire that destroys the beauty of a forest or a poison that causes irreparable damage. But our words also have the power to delight.

### **C. It has the power to delight (3:9)**

God gave us the ability to speak so that we would glorify Him and edify others with our words. We should endeavor to honor God and help others with our speech. Proverbs 15:23 says, “A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!” Ever had a “bad day”? Things may not have been going well, but someone came along and spoke a kind, encouraging word to you that changed your whole outlook on the day.

Proverbs 25:11 says, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.” No doubt you are familiar with Ephesians 4:29, “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.” Did you realize that your words have the potential of ministering grace to those that hear them? I wonder have your words of late been filled with grace or disgrace? Our words have the potential of fostering unity, encouraging fellowship, and forming relationships. The tongue has the power to delight.

Transition: James illustrates the power of the tongue, but he quickly moves to identifying and addressing the problem of the tongue. He dogmatically states, “the tongue can no man tame” (3:8). Taming the tongue is a universal problem.

## **2. The Problem of the Tongue**

### **A. The tongue defiles man’s body (3:6)**

James calls the tongue “a world of iniquity”. With that he stamps the tongue as a vast system and organism connected with evil unjustness and unrighteousness. Hiebert comments, “The tongue embodies in itself all the sins in the world, it incorporates in itself the whole story of evil in this world. For no other member of our physical body has comparable power and range of influence for evil.” James is saying that the full range of iniquity finds an outlet through the tongue.

Verse 6 continues that “it defileth the whole body”. The tongue is a corrupting agent of the body. The impact of an uncontrolled tongue stains all of a man. Fallen man shows himself to be a part of this evil system by using his tongue to express the evils that are in his mind and heart. His hatreds, impurities, slanders, and violent desires eventually find their way to the surface and are expressed by words. That is what James means when he says that the tongue is set “on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell” (3:6).

**Illustration:** Perhaps you have admired someone from a distance, they dressed sharp, acted confident, and looked like they have life together, then you have a chance to converse with them and their speech conveyed something completely different. Their words stained, corrupted, and polluted their “clean image”. The respect you once held them in was greatly diminished by their words. Maybe that is why the old proverb says, “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt”. Has your testimony been tarnished by your tongue?

**Application/Teaching Note:** There are multiple ways that the tongue can be misused. Scripture addresses many of these areas. The following are a few common battles in taming the tongue. You could use these as discussion points by asking what the class believes are common misuses of the tongue. You could have them look up the references to aid them in their thinking and understanding. You could also present these as direct application in your teaching.

- **Complaining** tongue – people who whine and complain about everything. Do you complain about work, your boss, the traffic, the weather, etc. (Num. 11:1; I Cor. 10:10; Phil. 2:14)
- **Critical** tongue – criticizing others, putting others down to make self look better. Often complain about things and criticize others. (Ps. 52:2; 64:3; Prov. 12:18; Eph. 4:29)
- **Contentious** tongue – person loves to argue and attempts to win every argument. Always takes the opposite view point, plays the Devil’s advocate. One day you may win an argument and lose a friend. (Prov. 15:1; 10:11; Ps. 34:13)
- **Corrupt** tongue – person uses vulgar language that is crude, rude, and often defiles God’s holy name. Ever had your mouth washed out with soap? (Ex. 20:7; Jm. 3:10; Prov. 15:28; Col. 3:8)
- **Conceited** tongue – this person likes to talk about one subject only and always – themselves. They are a braggart, constantly pointing out their accomplishments and greatness. (Prov. 27:2; Jer. 9:23)
- **Concealing** tongue – individuals who lie. It may be partial truth, but it is a whole lie. (Prov. 12:22; 19:9; Eph. 4:25; Col. 3:9)

### **B. The tongue defies man’s control (3:7-8)**

A second problem and danger of the tongue is its inability to be brought under control by men. Although man has been able to subjugate most all the animal kingdom, the tongue proves much more stubborn. A contrast is brought out in

verses 7 and 8, man displays an amazing ability to dominate the animal world, but he cannot tame his own vicious tongue. Not all animals have been domesticated as household pets, but man has been able to capture, cage, leash, or otherwise control about any creature he wishes. With a similarity to Genesis, James divides them into four categories “beasts, birds, serpents, things of the sea” (3:7). One needs only visit the circus, aquarium, or local zoo to find a variety of “tamed” animals.

In contrast to man’s control and dominion over the animals, man has lost dominion over himself. James emphatically says, “But the tongue can no man tame” (3:8). Our tongue is a one-of-a-kind creature that is humanly untamable. This is universally true without exception. The tongue is “an unruly evil” (3:8). This phrase points to its restless and unstable characteristics. It was a word used to picture a caged wild animal that is constantly pacing back and forth looking for an opportunity to escape and wreak havoc. Could it be the reason God has placed our tongue behind 32 pearly bars (teeth), a powerful lock (jaw), and two guards (lips) is to help cage the beast (tongue)?

Human beings, on their own, don’t have the ability to keep their tongues in check. You cannot quench the raging fire. You cannot tame the snarling beast. You cannot provide the antidote to the poison of hellish, hateful speech. Yet what is hopeless for fallen man can become reality by God’s grace and power.

### **C. The tongue displays man’s heart (3:9-12)**

If I want to know what is in your heart, all I have to do is listen to what you say. As unfair as that may sound, it is Jesus who said, “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matt. 12:34). The tongue is the dipstick to your heart. Your words indicate the condition of your heart. The tongue is a tattletale. It doesn’t just tell on siblings and friends, it tells on you. For the fruit of our lips finds its source in the root of our souls.

**Illustration:** Dad usually drove the kids into school each morning. However, one morning mom took them in. As they peacefully rode along one of the children asked, “Mom, where are all the idiots today?”

The real problem we face is not as much our wicked words as it is our heinous hearts. Suppose you visited an old-fashioned well, the kind that you lower the bucket down to draw up the water. The first time you crank the bucket up you discovered it was filled with dirty water. Maybe you would think the bucket must have been dirty. Dumping it out, you tried again but got the same result. It would not take you long to realize the problem is not the bucket, the problem is the well. So it is with our words. The problem is not the bucket of the mouth, but the well of the heart. The reason you complain with your

tongue is because you are discontent in your heart. You criticize and curse with your words because you are bitter and angry in your heart. Bragging with your mouth displays the pride of your heart. Lying with your tongue shows the deception in your heart. Sour words display a sinful heart.

James demonstrates the inconsistency of our speech. One minute we are praising God and the next we are cursing men (3:9). How is it that the same tongue can say such opposite things? A forked-tongue comes from a double-minded man (1:8). Our words display the fickleness of our heart. James warns, “these things ought not so to be”! As Christian we are instructed to “let your yea be yea; and our nay, nay” (Matt. 5:37; James 5:12). There is often more consistency in nature than in man. A water source is usually salt or fresh, good or bad to drink (3:11). And you can identify a tree by its fruit. A fig tree has figs, a berry tree has berries, and an olive tree yields olives (3:12). So our speech should be consistent with our Christian profession. In essence James is asking, “If you believe like you should, why do you speak like you shouldn’t?” How would others describe the color and content of your words?

Transition: James has illustrated the power of the tongue. He has identified the problem of the tongue. Finally, he issues the prescription for the tongue.

### **3. The Prescription for the Tongue**

Once we recognize our inability to master the tongue, we can realize God’s ability to control it. Like a good doctor who not only diagnoses the problem but also dispenses the medicine, God supplies the antidote for our venomous tongue.

#### **A. Ask God to change your heart**

The heart is the key to right speech, but we have been diagnosed with a serious heart condition – it is “desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9). You cannot control your tongue, because you cannot change your heart. The answer to taming the tongue is not reformation, but regeneration. You will not have the ability to live for God until God comes to live within you. Once you yield your heart and life to Christ, the Spirit of God resides within. It is only through the change He brings to the heart that the tongue can be tamed. When God changes your heart it will come out through your mouth.

Many need to get honest with God and admit that their complaining tongue is sourced in a discontented heart. Ask God to give you a heart that is content in Him. Perhaps you have been critical and corrupt in your language. Acknowledge your internal bitterness and anger, and ask God to give you a heart of kindness and forgiveness. Maybe you are prone to boasting and

bragging. Admit your pride to God and ask Him to give you a heart humble before Him. You may be one who spins lies. Agree with God that you have a deceptive heart, and ask Him to give you a heart that is honest and upright. When our heart is changed by God, our tongue will be changed for God. If our hearts are truly filled with grace our lips should overflow with good.

Transition: Not only should we ask God to change our heart, but we must allow God to control our tongue.

#### **B. Allow God to control your tongue**

It is tempting to apply self effort to overcoming our tongue trouble. And while we may be able to “hold our tongue” back temporarily, no lasting change will exist apart from God’s power. The tongue is controlled not through will-power, but through the Spirit’s power. Self control begins not with the tongue but with the heart. Temperance is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). This means we must stop all attempts of self-control and surrender to God’s control. Ask God to make your tongue a source of life rather than a source of destruction. Have you surrendered control of your speech to the Lord Jesus? Have you yielded to the Spirit’s sanctifying work with regard to your speech? Will you say with the Psalmist, “Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer” (Ps. 19:14).

A wonderful prayer every morning before we utter a word would be “set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips” (Ps. 141:3). We must weigh every word before we speak them against these questions: (1) Is it true? (2) Is it necessary? (3) Will it honor God?

Conclusion: The tongue is a powerful tool that has been given to us by God. We are individually responsible for how we use our tongues. Jesus said, “But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment” (Matt. 12:36). One day we will meet God for what we have spoken here on earth. Have you been complaining, criticizing, contentious, corrupt, conceited, or concealing with your tongue. Or have you used your tongue to glorify God and edify others? The question is will you ask God to change your heart and allow God to tame your tongue?