Taming the Tongue - James 3:3-12

Does anyone here suffer from “hoof in mouth” disease other than me? You know what I mean, don’t you? I mean the tendency I have to put my foot in my mouth!

I have never seriously considered a tattoo, but if I did I would consider having the following instructions put permanently to the bottom of my foot: “Open mouth, insert, close mouth, chew!”

Though most of our verbal faux pas are innocent and inconsequential, there are far too many times that we choose to use our words as attack weapons. Did you know that your words could be deadly? Proverbs 18:21 states, “The tongue has the power of life and death…”

Our words have power -- they can bring joy or cause despair.

This morning, I want us to consider some practical steps that will help us tame our tongue. The stakes are high. Our words can either bring life, or they can bring death to our spouse, our kids, our parents, our siblings, our relatives, our friends, our co-workers, and our neighbors. Our tongues can build others up, or they can tear them down.

Our study this morning will center on the Book of James. This short book has only five chapters and is known for its practical wisdom and common sense sound bites for life. Throughout the letter James is helping his readers learn to view their trials from God’s perspective and to resist temptation as they bridle their anger. The church James was writing to was tolerating evil, showing favoritism and participated in fighting, slander and lying about one another. They were using their tongues to destroy each other.

Someone has said that great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, and small minds discuss people. The church that James is writing to was full of small-minded people who gossiped about each other and tore one another apart with their tongues. I wonder if we’re a bit like that church today?

We’re quick to avoid murder, stealing, and drunkenness, but we often assassinate fellow believers and leave destruction in our wake by the way we use our tongues. Husbands have stabbed their wives with words that are as sharp as daggers and wives have lashed out with tongues that cut and pierce.

Parents have devastated their kids by repeated blasts of venom. Children have exploded at their parents with volleys that have leveled the family like a bomb. And churches have been wiped out by wagging tongues that have sliced, diced, and chopped people to shreds.

Listen to what is written in James 1:19, 26: So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath … If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless.”

Did you get that? That means that the words I choose can negate my testimony! My faith becomes useless if I let my tongue get loose!

If you and I launch grenades of verbal destruction, they will have devastating consequences on others. And, our words have a direct correlation with our own spirituality -- if we don’t exhibit control over our tongues, we can render our religion of no value.

James continues his treatment of the words that come out of our mouths by devoting almost all of chapter 3 to the topic. In verse 1, James warns people to be careful about their eagerness to be teachers because teachers are held to a stricter judgment. Perhaps they were impressed with the authority and prestige of the office and forgot about the tremendous responsibility a teacher has to guard his or her words.

Teachers are not the only ones who are prone to sin in their use of words. In verse 2 we see that each of us need to admit that, “For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.” The word “perfect” is a banking term that pictures a note that has come due. If we are able to discipline our tongue, we can prove that we are a mature person.

I want you to notice how James connects sins of the tongue with sins of the body. He does this because our words usually lead to deeds. The hardest sins to control are the sins of the tongue. A mature person is able to hold the most uncontrollable part of his human anatomy in check. Proverbs 21:23 states, “He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity.”
The tongue remains hidden for the most part, but when it does make its presence known it has devastating power. The tongue can express or repress; release or restrain; enlighten or obscure; adore or abhor; offend or befriend; affirm or alienate; build or belittle; comfort or criticize; delight or destroy; be sincere or sinister.

In verses 3-12, James uses 6 different word pictures of the tongue to help us see how small, yet powerful it is:

- A bit
- A rudder
- A fire
- A dangerous animal
- A spring
- Fruit

Let’s take just a moment to consider each of these.

1 - A Bit.

The first metaphor is the bit that is put into a horse’s mouth by a trainer. This relatively small piece of metal can control a very powerful animal, directing the horse to the right or left and telling him to stop. When the rider pulls the bit back, it presses against the horse’s tongue causing him to stop. It is interesting that, in this analogy, the instrument has some control over the tongue of the animal.

2 - A Rudder.

James also compares the tongue to a rudder on a boat. Just as a small rudder can control the direction of a large liner or even an aircraft carrier, so too, the tongue can control our lives. Both the bit and the rudder must overcome contrary forces. The bit controls the wild nature of a horse; the rudder must fight the winds and currents that would drive the ship off course. Both the bit and the rudder must be under the control of a strong hand.

Friends, our tongues are the same way. They’re small but they have the power to delight or destroy. From our mouths come either words of life or words of death.

3 - A Fire.

After talking about the power of a bit in the mouth of a horse, and the power of a small rudder to steer a large boat, James uses the image of fire in 3:5-6: “Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.”

Just like a small spark can ignite an entire forest, so too words that flow out of tongues can corrupt lives and shipwreck families. Words that are unleashed without thought can significantly affect and alter lives. James is pretty strong here as he tells us that our tongues are set on fire by hell itself.

When I was about 8 years old a couple of my cousins and I were out in the woods playing with fire - literally. We were lighting matches and throwing them into the dry grass and then stomping the flames out before it could get out of control. We were lighting the matches off our teeth, our buttons, our zippers, and even our jeans! I threw a match and a clump of dry grass went up in flames. I remember calling to my friends to come and see what I had done. I was proud of it. It looked cool. But, I must have enjoyed my masterpiece too long because the flames soon engulfed a small pine tree and threatened to spread throughout the entire woods! Fortunately my uncle was nearby and avoided disaster!

A little spark had caused damage to several trees, and to my backside after my parents were finished with me! Like a careless match thrown into dry grass, so our words can demolish people.

Parents, if you want heaven’s help for your home, you need to realize the potential your words have for destruction. Your words can bring a form of death to your kids. We might not even realize what our words do to our children. When sparks fly in our homes, firestorms can erupt creating a blazing inferno.
that leaves deep scars and lasting pain.

After Karen Carpenter died of heart failure at the age of 32 brought on by years of fighting an eating disorder, it came out that her fatal obsession with her weight was triggered by a single reviewer’s comment. When referring to Karen, this man called her “Richard’s chubby sister.” While I’m sure there were other factors attributing to Karen Carpenter’s struggles, this one comment unleashed a flurry of self-doubt, which led to her eventual disease and death.

We really need to watch our words, don’t we? Let me give you a suggestion. When your child does something wrong, instead of saying something like, “You’re bad,” or “You’re such a brat,” why not say something like, “What you did was wrong and I don’t want you to do that again.” It’s real easy to say things to our kids that are not really true -- the tragedy is that they can very easily grow up thinking they are naughty, or bratty, or chubby, or ugly. Try to separate who they are from what they do.

Other times, we might be deliberately caustic as we look for ways to skewer someone with our words. Like launching a grenade at some unsuspecting people, it can bring us strange pleasure to tear someone down. Maybe we think it helps us look better when we cut on others. Maybe if we cut others down it will help build us up! I don’t think so!

Do you remember the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me?” I don’t know who came up with this but it’s just not true because words can break our hearts. Broken bones can heal with time, but a broken spirit caused by words of death, is not quickly repaired.

Words can spread like fire in our families … and in our church. Let me ask you a couple questions. How many people have you maimed or killed with your words? Are your kids dying a slow death because of your lethal lexicon? Is your tongue quick to criticize? Are you ragging on your spouse or are you replenishing their love tanks every day? Do your words build up or do they tear down?

Col. 4:6 – “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.”

So James likens the tongue to a bit in a horses mouth, a rudder on a ship, and a fire. But his analogies are not over.

4 - A dangerous animal.

As important as it is to not speak death words and to instead speak words of life, we have a problem. Take a look at verses 7-8: “For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.”

It’s amazing when you think about it. Every dangerous animal can eventually be tamed. Ferocious lions can jump through burning hoops, grizzly bears can ride on horses, and huge elephants can do handstands. We have a remarkable ability to tame ferocious beasts but can’t get hold of our tongues.

But I can’t tame your tongue. You can’t tame your tongue. It is untamable without expert help!

Like snake venom, or corrosive rust, our tongues are just looking to strike unsuspecting people. They’re active and they never rest. There is no sting of a serpent that does as much damage as one wagging tongue.

Verses 9-10 lay out the dichotomy and hypocritical nature of our tongues: “With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.” We bless God while we blast away at others! There’s something wrong with this picture. Do you see it?

A bit, a rudder, a fire, and a dangerous animal. Then James speaks of …

5 - A spring.

James now draws his fifth word picture to help us see that it should be impossible for us to both bless and blast out of the same mouth. He asks a penetrating question in verse 11: “Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?” The image here is of a fresh, flowing stream that has both bitter water and sweet water flowing through it. Natural springs still remain in the Middle East today.
Some produce fresh water, and some produce salt water. However, none produce both. It is not possible.

James is saying here that just as it is impossible for a spring to have both sweet and sour water, so too it is inconceivable for the tongue to send forth both righteousness and rumors; blessing and blasting, compliments and cursing.

It is impossible … or is it? Do we not do that very thing when we bless the Lord and curse His people? You and I can do the impossible, can’t we! But do we sense the contradiction? That is the real question Holy Spirit is asking us today.

Do we need a revival to take place in our mouths? Do we need revival to take place in our hearts so that our words build up rather than tear down?

6 - Fruit.

The final image is that of fruit in verse 12: “*Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.*”

We expect a fig tree to have figs on it and a grapevine to have grapes. Nature reproduces after its kind. James is calling us to be consistent. What comes out of our mouths is a reflection of what is in our hearts.

Action Steps

I want to give you a number of action steps this morning. It’s not enough to just hear about how powerful our tongues are, or even just to walk away understanding a bit more about this passage. If we want to have tamed tongues, then we must put into practice what we’ve heard.

1. Read Proverbs and James.

   The Book of Proverbs has 31 chapters, one for each day of the month. Why not make a decision to read a chapter each day, along with a chapter from the Book of James? After a month, you will have read through the entire book of Proverbs once and James 6 times! Almost every chapter in Proverbs has something about the tongue:

   Today you might read 11:12: “*A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue.*” Tomorrow you could read 12:18: “*Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*”

2. Think First.

   I know of a young mother who asks her kids a question on a regular basis: “Are your words flames or flowers?” This helps her children realize that they have a choice to make - they can plant beautiful flowers with their words or they can unleash a raging fire.

   In the military, while qualifying as a marksman, on the firing range you would hear these words: “Ready! Aim! Fire!” Far too often, when it comes to our words, we leave out the middle command. We are “Ready – Fire” and totally forget to aim.

   Using the acronym THINK, try to ask these 5 questions before you speak.

   - Is it True? Remember this rule about gossip: “The more interesting it is, the more likely it is to be false.”
   - Is it Helpful? Will your words help bring about a solution to a problem?
   - Is it Inspiring? Will your words build up someone?
   - Is it Necessary? Do we have to say anything at all?
   - Is it Kind? Are your words based on a desire to help?

3. Talk Less.

   Your chances of blowing it with your words are directly proportional to the amount of time you spend with your mouth open. Abe Lincoln said, “It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to
open your mouth and remove all doubt.”

Calvin Coolidge said, “I have never been hurt by anything I did not say.” Proverbs 10:19 puts it this way: “When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.”

I read this week about a woman who had a very serious throat condition. The doctor told her that her vocal cords needed total rest - she was forbidden to talk for 6 months! With a husband and 6 kids, this seemed impossible, but she did what she was told. When she needed the kids she blew a whistle. Whenever she needed to communicate she wrote things on pads of paper.

After six months, her voice came back. When asked what it was like to communicate only in writing, she said this: “You’d be surprised how many notes I crumpled up and threw into the trash before I gave them to anyone. Seeing my words before anyone heard them had an effect that I don’t think I can ever forget.”

King David, after seeing how his words got him in trouble wrote this in Psalm 39:1, “I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth.” While we might not be able to stop talking for six months, we can learn to talk less by putting a muzzle on the muscle in our mouths.

4. Build up others.

The Bible continuously reminds us to encourage one another with our words. Someone has said that we shouldn’t complain about our spouse’s faults because if it weren’t for those faults they could have married someone so much better! Are we speaking words of death or words of life? Words of life energize people. Proverbs 12:25 says, “An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up.”

Chuck Swindoll tells the story about a guy he went to seminary with. This man had a bright red birthmark that covered half his face. After Chuck got to know him a little bit, he finally got up the courage to ask him what had happened. His friend answered by telling him what his dad had told him: “Son, that birthmark is where an angel kissed your face. You have it so that I can always pick you out of the crowd.” Swindoll’s friend then turned to him and said, “You know, I almost feel sorry for those who don’t have a birthmark.” Friends, that dad spoke words of life to his son - and the son was still living off those words years later.

Let me challenge you to give one encouraging word to everyone you talk to every day. You’ll probably have to be deliberate. Tell your son or daughter something that will build them up. Teenagers, give a life-word to your parents. Siblings, say something kind to each other. Couples, affirm and encourage each other - at least once a day.

5. Have Heart Surgery.

Why is it so hard to say kind things with our tongues? It’s because the Bible says that in our strength we will never tame our tongues. Where does all the garbage come from that comes out of our mouths? Jesus gives us some insight in Matthew 12:34 and 15:19: “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks...for out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, lies and slander.”

God doesn’t want you to leave this service and try to tame your tongue totally in your own strength. It will take more than just willpower and determination. In its natural state, the tongue is a “restless evil”. It’s like a ferocious beast that will not be subdued and like a serpent that’s full of deadly poison.

Before I became a Christian, I had a very foul mouth. It took time for the Lord to clean up my language. I couldn’t just automatically stop by forcing myself. I needed to have a new heart.

If you want to stop using death words, and begin speaking words of life, you need a different heart. The good news is that Jesus specializes in heart transplants. Friend, if you’ve never allowed Jesus to change you from the inside out, then it’s time for some heart surgery. If you keep your old heart, you’ll continue to launch verbal grenades and live like you’ve always lived. But, if you ask Jesus for a new one by turning your life over to Him, you can have a fresh start, a new beginning.

Only God can give us the power we need to build others up instead of tearing them down. If you
want to be a dispenser of life words instead of death words, you need to be rightly related to God. And, we become rightly related to God through our words. Romans 10:9-10: “If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”

I want to close by reading something I received by email this week.

I shook my head in disbelief. This couldn’t be the right place. After all, I couldn’t possibly be welcome here. I had been given an invitation several times, by several different people, and had finally decided to see what this place was all about. Yes, I was at the right place. I peeked through the window again and saw a room of people whose faces seemed to glow with joy. All were neatly dressed, adorned in fine garments and appeared strangely clean as they dined at this exquisite restaurant.

Ashamed, I looked down at my own tattered and torn clothing, covered in stains. I was dirty, in fact, filthy. A foul smell seemed to consume me and I couldn’t shake the grime that clung to my body. As I turned around to leave, the words from the invitation seemed to leap out at me, “Come as you are. No jacket required.” I decided to give it a shot. Muster up every bit of courage I could find, I opened the door to the restaurant and walked up to a man standing behind a podium. “Your name, sir?” he asked me with a smile. “Jimmy D. Brown,” I mumbled without looking up.

I thrust my hands deep into my pockets, hoping to conceal their stains. He didn’t seem to notice the filth that I was covered in and he continued, “Very good, sir. A table is reserved in your name. Would you like to be seated?” I couldn’t believe what I heard! A grin broke out on my face and I said, “Yes, of course!” He led me to a table and, sure enough, there was a placard with my name written on it in a deep, dark red.

The man returned and said, “I recommend the ‘Special of the Day.’ With it, you are entitled to heaping portions of everything on this menu.” You’ve got to be kidding! I thought to myself. You mean, I can have ALL of this! “What is the ‘Special of the Day,’ I asked with excitement ringing in my voice. “Salvation,” was his reply. “I’ll take it,” I practically cried out.

Then, as quickly as I made that statement, the joy left my body. A sick, painful ache jerked through my stomach and tears filled my eyes. Between my sobs I said, “Mister, look at me. I’m dirty and nasty. I have a foul mouth. I’m unclean and unworthy of such things. I’d love to have all of this, but, but, I just can’t afford it.” Undaunted, the man smiled again. “Sir, your check has already been taken care of by that Gentleman over there,” he said pointing to the front of the room. “His Name is Jesus.” Turning, I saw a man whose very presence seemed to light the room. He was almost too much to look at.

I found myself walking towards Him and in a shaking voice I whispered, “Sir, I’ll wash the dishes or sweep the floors or take out the trash. I’ll clean myself up and stop swearing. I’ll do anything I can do to repay you for all of this.” He opened His arms and said with a smile, “Son, all of this is yours if you just come unto Me. Ask Me to clean you up and I will. Ask me to take away the stains and it is done. Ask me to clean up your mouth and I will. All you have to do is accept the gift.”

Astonished, I fell at His feet and said, “Please, Jesus. Please clean up my life.” Immediately, I heard the words, “It is finished.” I looked down and white robes adorned my squeaky clean body. Something strange and wonderful had happened. I felt new, like a weight had been lifted, and I found myself seated at His table. “The ‘Special of the Day’ has been served,” the Lord said to me. Salvation is yours.”