

Taming The Tongue James 3:1-12

Can you figure out this riddle? **“I am often held, but never touched. I am always wet, but never rust. I often bite, but I am seldom bit. To use me well, you must have wit. What am I?”** Can you figure it out? Ready for the answer?

It is...the tongue! The tongue can be held without being touched. It won't rust (at least hopefully not). It can bite although it has no teeth. As we continue our time in James, we find ourselves in chapter three, **and the first half of this chapter is all about the tongue.**

The tongue is an important thing in the book of James. **The book has 108 verses across five chapters, and 46 of those 108 verses in some way, some shape, some form, some how, deal with the tongue, language, or speech.** That is 43% of the book of James. Or, to see it another way, two out of every five verses in James deals with the tongue. And in chapter three, we see his most concentrated teachings on it. And what does he say about it? Let's find out.

James begins by giving a warning to teachers and other leaders in the church. He writes, **“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”** Why is that? It is because false teachings can destroy or damage the faith of those who are taught. But as James moves on, he instructs both the teacher and the taught. His following words encompass all people. **“For we all stumble in many ways.”** James admits that we all sin, and uses this stumbling imagery for it.

When we stumble, we still stay on the path and move forward, even though we might be spreading our arms out and hitting the pavement hard. It is a good comparison to sin. We may stumble, but that does not mean that we completely fallen away from the faith. We are still going forward. But James is not done with this stumbling imagery, just yet. He continues: **“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.”** James begins to dive in here about the tongue, and alludes to his first point on it.

It can be hard not to stumble in what we say. We can say things carelessly, in anger, frustration, or panic. We speak without thinking. Some of us might be known for this. We can lie, use self-justifying words, harmful ones, or use empty ones. The apostle says that these are not without effect. They can effect our lives, and our bodies.

He explains that the tongue can control us, and he uses a farming example to illustrate his point. He says, **“If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.”** It is crazy to think that a little one pound bit can control an animal that can weigh up to 2,000 pounds.

Move the bit to the left, the horse goes left.

Move it to the right, it goes right along.

Move it up to make it go faster, and pull it down to make the hulking horse come to a halt. One little thing controls a huge animal.

But James drives the point home with another image immediately following. **“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.”** Ships were one of the fastest ways of travel in the ancient world. They would carry crews and cargo. They would be moved along by large gusts of wind. But what calls the shots on such a mighty vessel? **The little rudder that controls where it goes.**

What is James' point? What does the tongue, a bit, and a rudder have in common? It is that something so small can affect something much larger. Something so small can control such a large thing. Our little, teeny, tiny tongues can control our entire bodies, and direct our lives.

Our tongue can control and affect our actions, believe it or not. The tongue can also control what we believe, or even think. **If we say that we are “worthless” or “stupid,” or even say that about others, we can begin to believe that about others, or even ourselves. We can even repeat a lie so much that we believe it to be true!** Our tongue can control us, and it can even control others, even though it is tiny compared to our bodies.

James then moves on to the damage that the tongue can do: it can destroy. One of history's most famous fires started from a little spark. Who knew that when Mrs. O'Leary's cow knocked over a little lantern and started the Great Chicago Fire, that it would do so much damage? It destroyed 73 miles of roads, 120 miles of sidewalks, and over 17,000 buildings. The fire killed over 300 people and did over 1.3 billion dollars in

damage! This fire made 100,000 of Chicago's 300,000 people homeless. It only takes a spark to get a fire going. One little spark created one of history's most deadliest fires. James says that this is just like the tongue!

"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.**" With this image, James describes the tongues' ability to destroy. He notes how words can reflect our fallen nature. He says that our tongues don't just destroy us, they can destroy others as well. Perhaps you have heard the incredibly inaccurate rhyme: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Life, and especially James, says that is entirely untrue.

Often times, the hurtful words we may hear from others last much longer than the scars, bruises, or lumps that we may get.

Words like, "I hate you, and want nothing to do with you" can last longer than a bruise.

The words, "I'm leaving, we're through," can hurt more than a blow. The

he phrase, "I don't love you," can hurt more than any scar we can receive.

Overhearing, or even hearing, what people really think about us, those conversations that start, **"Well bless their heart, but..." can sting and linger more than any stone hitting us.** The words our tongue can say can destroy families and friendships. They can devastate relationships. They can tarnish trust. They can hurt and humiliate. They can eliminate self-worth and confidence. They can destroy everything we have, and everything we have worked for. They can even destroy us! They can forever change our lives and some words can never be fully taken back. The little tongue can be destructive. It can destroy.

With that in mind, we try to hold it, keep it back, and bite down. However, it can seem to no avail. We can tame animals like Babe the Pig, Flipper the dolphin, Shamu, Mr. Ed the horse, or Wishbone. You can go to a circus and see lions, elephants, and chimpanzees obey their masters. But you will never see the tongue tamed. James says, "but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly venomous words and phrases." Try as you may, it will break free. It cannot be fully held back. Bite it down, and it will emerge victorious, ready to sting.

Despite this fact, it doesn't stop James from calling for consistency. He says that the tongue's use should reflect our calling. **"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."** James is spot on.

We can sing our praises to God with our tongue in church and then go wound someone with it right after. It leads us back to verse two, doesn't it? **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. Fortunately, there is one perfect man, who controlled the tongue for our sake and salvation.**

When was condemned, He didn't open His mouth to refute or to fight. On the cross, He cries out, **"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me"** as He bears the punishment for our sin. As He is teased and crucified, He does not curse, but, rather, pleads: **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."** At the end of it all, He says, **"It is finished."** But His tongue is not silenced. On Easter morning, Our Lord arose from the dead and speaks forevermore! He is the servant Who knows how sustain Him Who is weary. And what words does our God say?

Through Pastors and His Word, He says, **"You are forgiven."** He says, **"You are loved. You are chosen before the world began. You are redeemed from sin and the devil. You are beautiful in me. You are blessed. You are called. You are protected. You are cared for. You are my child. You are valuable. You are important and mean the world to me. You are mine!"**

And our Lord works in us through His Word, and through our baptism.

He moves us to use our tongue properly. **We sing praises in response to His love and grace given to us. He moves us to use our tongues to use words that build up, cheer, encourage, speak well of, and to bless others.** He speaks through our tongues His saving Word of truth. When we fail and stumble with this, we hear the words of the Perfect One: **"You are forgiven!"** James says that our tongues can control, and they can destroy. They are set on fire by hell, but in Jesus Christ, that fire is put out by baptism, and our tongues redeemed for a good use. In Jesus' name, Amen.