

Guard Your Tongue (James 3:1-12)

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I've always enjoyed reading military history. A few years ago, the BBC published an article entitled, "The Monster Atomic Bomb That Was Too Big to Use." It was developed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War and tested on October 30, 1961 at a range north of the Arctic Circle. It was called "Tsar Bomba." It was 26' long, 7' in diameter, and weighed over 27 tons.

And I quote, "Tsar Bomba unleashed almost unbelievable energy – now widely agreed to be in the order of 57 megatons, or 57 million tons of TNT. That is more than 1,500 times that of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs combined, and 10 times more powerful than all the munitions expended during World War Two. Sensors registered the bomb's blast wave orbiting the Earth not once, not twice, but three times."

That's a big bomb with some serious power. But something doesn't have to be that big in order to be that powerful. From God's perspective, in fact, one of the smallest things in the world exerts an even greater and eternally significant power. It's called the tongue. And as a force of potential destruction, it puts Tsar Bomba to shame.

Since chapter 1 verse 18, James has addressed various areas of life, showing us what it means to live as a Christian, to put our faith into practice as spiritual new creations in Christ Jesus. And at the beginning of chapter 3, James introduces a new subject he will come back to repeatedly in the second half of the book – the words that come out of our mouth.

One of the main goals of this entire letter is to expose spiritual deception, the lie that thinks we're a Christian when we're actually not, or thinks we're a mature follower of Jesus when we're actually not. James knows that one of the defining marks of true religion, genuine Christianity, is self-control in our speech. Verse 2 summarizes the main point of the whole passage. "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."

The first part of that verse – "we all stumble in many ways" reminds us that the perfection of which James speaks in the second half of the verse will only be attained in heaven. On this side of glory, we will never completely stop sinning, our speech included. However, that does not mean we let go and let God.

Titus 2:12-13. The grace of God, the unmerited favor and power of God, is even now "training" you, Christian, through the Holy Spirit who dwells within you, "to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."

Perfect self-control in our speech, though presently unattainable in full, is nonetheless the biblical goal for which we strive. God is glorified by our growth in self-control. God is faithful to help us grow in self-control. And God will hold us accountable for whether we exercise self-control, especially in our speech.

James introduces his subject in verse 1 with a warning to would-be teachers in the church predicated on a warning Jesus gives to all of us. Matthew 12:36–37, “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

The fact that we will all be judged according to the words we speak should make teachers especially circumspect. Why? Because teachers, by definition, specialize in the use of words and influence more people with their words, for better or worse. As Jesus said in Luke 12:48, “Everyone to whom much was given (including teachers in the church who have a significant verbal influence) of him much will be required.”

Self-control with your speech matters because no matter who you’re speaking to or writing, God is listening, God is reading, and God will hold you accountable. If God has called you to teach, especially as an elder, you do not ultimately answer to our congregation or to the regional ordination committee. You are accountable to God. Remembering God will judge our every word is critical if we’re going to think biblically about the importance of the tongue.

But it’s not the main point James is making here. His main concern is that we would recognize diligence in controlling our tongue is an essential mark of Christian maturity. The character of our speech, in other words, is a case study, a key indicator, of the spiritual health of our whole person. For as verse 2 says, if you’re able to guard your tongue, you’ll be able to “bridle” your whole body. If you can exercise self-control in your speech, you are bound to practice self-control in other areas of life. Godliness in this area is reliable evidence of godliness across the board.

So what makes our speech so important? What is it about the tongue that makes self-control in this area of life so critical? James gives us at least three answers.

1) THE TONGUE HAS DISPROPORTIONATE POWER (verses 1-5a)

At only 60-70 grams, the tongue isn’t the size of Tsar Bomba, but its power is completely disproportionate to its size. James says our tongue is like a bit in the mouth of a horse. It’s really small, but it determines which way the entire animal goes. It’s like a rudder on a large ship. It appears so insignificant compared to the size of the sails and the power of the wind that fills them, yet whichever way the pilot turns the rudder, that’s the way the entire ship goes.



Bottom line, verse 5, “the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of (or accomplishes) great things.” The power it wields is disproportionate to its relatively small size. Think about that. Our own experience confirms James is exactly right.

Think about the effect the words your parents spoke to you when you were growing up. Whether for good or ill, they are tremendously powerful. For those of you who play sports, think about the effect of your coach’s words after a rough first half. His words will either tear you down even more or build you up to get out there and try again. A word of encouragement from a teacher at the right time can determine the vocational trajectory of your life.

A spiritual word of correction from a brother or sister in Christ who cares for you can set you back on the path of following Jesus. Gracious words of patience and forbearance keep your marriage on track to keep growing. Harsh words that use your knowledge of your spouse to hit them where it hurts can send a marriage spiraling toward divorce. The words of a good friend can raise your spirits. The words of an enemy can crush you.

The words we speak are not benign. They’re not of little account. They are endowed with power to do great good or great harm. But sometimes we pretend otherwise, don’t we? We excuse thoughtless or insensitive words by telling ourselves, “Yeah, I probably said some things I shouldn’t have said, but they did the same thing. It was an emotional moment for all of us, you know? Why do they have to get so bent out of shape about what I said? It’s just words.”

You know what you’ll never hear the captain of an aircraft carrier say? “Oh, it’s just the rudder.” It’s not “just” a rudder. It is perhaps the most influential part of the whole ship. Your words are the same, friend. They will determine the course of your life. King David knew as much. It’s why he wrote Psalm 34:12-13.

“What man is there you desires life and loves many days, that he may see good?” (If you want to enjoy a long life filled with blessing, what should you do?) Answer? “Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.” As your tongue goes, so your life goes. Do not underestimate the power of your words, my friends.

Paul’s admonition in Ephesians 4:29 is a verse I have used countless times to pray for the influence of the words I speak with my mouth and write with my hands. I commend the practice to you. “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

Make that your aim, friends, in interactions great and small. God did not give you a tongue and Christ Jesus did not redeem your tongues by his blood so you could have something to vent with. He gave it to you that it might serve as a mighty channel of his grace to all who come in contact with you. Proverbs 18:21, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue,

and those who love it will eat its fruits.” Self-control in our speech is critical, first, because the tongue has a disproportionate power.

2) THE TONGUE WORKS TREMENDOUS EVIL (verses 5b-8)

The effect of our words cuts one of two ways – it builds up or it tears down. And James doubles down in verses 5-8 on exposing the latter danger. He begins with another example of a small thing that has a massive impact – the spark that ignites a forest fire.

On July 30, 2003 Michael Barre tossed a cigarette butt near his home in British Columbia that quickly caught some dry grass on fire. He immediately tried to extinguish the fire, but to no avail. It burned for 75 days, destroyed 65,285 acres of forest, 72 homes, 9 businesses, cost \$31.1 million to extinguish and required the evacuation of 3,800 people. Verse 5, “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!”

Absent God’s work in our lives, that’s exactly what our tongue is like. It’s a fire (verse 6). It has the power to speak a single word that sets a friendship, a marriage, a church, or even a nation on fire. In 1 Kings 12 we read the story of how the nation of Israel was split into two kingdoms, the northern tribes and the tribe of Judah. It was a sad chapter in the history of God’s people. And it happened as a result of the reply King Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, gave to the northern tribes when they asked for a reprieve from forced labor.

1 Kings 12:13–16, “And the king answered the people harshly, and forsaking the counsel that the old men had given him, he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, ‘My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.’ And when all Israel saw that the king did not listen to them, the people answered the king, ‘What portion do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! Look now to your own house, David.’”

So began centuries of conflict, division, death, and destruction. Fourteen Hebrew words. That’s all it took. No wonder James adds in verse 6 the tongue is a “world of unrighteousness!”

Did you know every one of the sins addressed in the 10 commands finds expression in some way in the tongue? Our tongue is an accomplice in murder when you use it to express the hatred in our heart. Our tongue is an accomplice to adultery when you use it to convince someone to engage in sexual immorality. Our tongue is an accomplice in belittling God when we use it to take his name in vain. The list goes on.

Think about the sins that most tend to trouble you – anger, pride, impatience, anxiety, you name it – every one of them has some sort of verbal expression. And words of anger, pride, impatience, or anxiety don’t just hang out there. Left unaddressed, they will produce spiritual and relational damage of a life-altering sort. Your tongue can set on fire the “entire



course” of your life. You can regret our words. You can apologize for our words. But the relational and spiritual consequences of your words remain. They’re like a stain that won’t go away. They leave their mark.

And all of that destructive activity, James reminds us, isn’t surprising. It’s not random. It’s the direct result of the works and effects of God’s archenemy, Satan himself. The tongue, he says, is “set on fire by hell.” That doesn’t mean we get to excuse our sin by saying, “Oops, the devil must have got my tongue.” No. It means the sin we commit with our mouths – every time we tear someone down instead of building them up – is an act of destruction aided and abetted by the Evil One.

Satan is a cunning enemy. He knows that if he can simply get you to not control your tongue, the sinful nature in your heart will take care of the rest and do serious damage for the kingdom of darkness. Verse 6 reminds us that even our smallest moments of speech are part and parcel of a much larger spiritual battle where only two choices are available. Use your tongue to advance the redemptive cause of King Jesus or use your tongue to advance the cause of Satan. There is no neutral territory. All of our words work in one direction or the other. It’s why our speech is so significant!

We can tame all kinds of animals as human beings, but you know what we have yet to figure out how to fully tame? Our own tongues. As James says in verse 8, “It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” Think of it this way. Wherever you go, in whatever situation you find yourself, you carry with you, friend, the equivalent of a Tsar Bomba.

If you knew you had a nuclear bomb in your backpack or a vial of cyanide in your pocket, I bet you would be really, really careful. You wouldn’t go charging into online conversations and start typing as fast as you can. You wouldn’t go charging into the kitchen and start giving your spouse a piece of your mind. You wouldn’t say what you felt like saying to your friends in the name of being “real” or “authentic.”

Remember that. Always. In every situation. Unless we consciously choose to remember the dangerous power of our tongues and control them accordingly, they will work irreparable evil. Self-control in our speech is critical because the tongue has disproportionate power, it works tremendous evil, and finally...

3) THE TONGUE REVEALS OUR TRUE SPIRITUAL CONDITION (verses 9-12)

The “restless evil” of our tongues, absent the Lord’s work in our lives, is readily perceived in the duplicity and hypocrisy of what we often do with it. Look at verse 9. “With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.”

Have you done that, friend? Have you sung the praises of God here on Sunday and then used the same mouth, the gift of speech your Creator entrusted to you, to bite and devour that very afternoon? I’ve done that. I have exulted in the goodness and infinite compassion



of Christ in a sermon and then used harsh words to try and get my boys in line within the same 12 hours. It's humbling. It's sobering. And brothers and sisters, it should not be. Why not?

Because the duplicitous, divided nature of our tongues – honoring God one moment and denigrating his image-bearers the next – reveals the duplicitous and spiritually divided nature of our hearts, calling into question (left unaddressed and unrepented) the integrity of our relationship with God. As Jesus said in Matthew 12:34, "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks."

Friend, if your words are characterized by anger, gossip, boasting, self-pity, or another sin of the tongue, you need to recognize you don't have a speech problem. You have a heart problem! You need Jesus to transform you from the inside out. He won't take control of your mouth and automatically change what you say, but if you cast yourself upon his mercy and cry out to him for help, he will patiently and persistently conform the desires of your heart to his own so that the verbal overflow of your heart is pleasing to him.

Don't deceive yourself into thinking you're right with God or that it's "well with your soul" if you're consistently using your tongue to tear down and hurt the people around you. A fig tree doesn't produce olives. A grapevine doesn't produce figs. A salt pond doesn't yield fresh water. A tree is known by its fruit, right? The relationship between our hearts and our tongues is exactly the same. An evil heart produces evil speech. A pure heart produces pure speech.

Think of your tongue like a mirror. If something is wrong with your speech, something is wrong with your heart. Something is wrong in your spiritual relationship with God, which means the solution isn't learning to "bite" your tongue. The solution is asking Jesus to change your heart, for when your heart is right with God, choice words of life and grace will invariably follow.

And that's yet another reason the gospel is such good news, because the gospel reminds us Jesus came to do exactly that. He came to change our hearts, to give us new power, his power, imparted by his Spirit, to guard our tongue that we might use it to bring life, not death, to those around us. Proverbs 12:18, "There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."

CONCLUSION

Diligence in controlling our tongue is an essential test of Christian maturity. It's not optional. It's critical, because our tongue has disproportionate power over the course of our life. Left unchecked, it will wreak tremendous havoc and evil in our relationships. And most importantly of all, the words we speak reveal our true spiritual condition. We need to stop excusing the sins of our tongue as "idle words." They are not. They are death or life, both for the one who speaks them and those to whom they are directed.



If, as I'm speaking, the Lord is convicting you, bringing to mind a conversation with your spouse, a Facebook post, or an interaction with a friend where you didn't give grace, you set things on fire, don't stop with feeling bad. Confess your sin to the Lord. Ask that person to forgive you without excuse or justification. And then share your struggle with a Christian friend or pastor.

In many cases, we know what words are "right" and what words are "wrong." We're all too aware of their impact because we live with the consequences. Where we get stuck is knowing how to engage the sinful desires in our heart that give rise to our speech with the truth of the gospel. That's where we have the privilege of helping one another, brothers and sisters. Let's make this an area of our life where we persevere in saying "help" to God by saying "help" to one another, rejoicing that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. God is eager to help us. Let's go to him right now in prayer.