

## **Series James**

### **This Message Faith Without Disciplined Behavior is Dead part 1**

“The man who can control his tongue is able to keep his whole body in check.”

#### **Scripture James 3:1-12**

After Jesus selected the twelve men who would be His Apostles, He immediately began to teach them about behaviors suitable for the Kingdom of God. We refer to this portion of Jesus’ teaching as the Sermon on the Mount. One of the key statements in this teaching was, "Unless your righteousness (that is, your conduct and behavior) surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (*Matthew 5:20*). Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contrasted the unacceptable habits of the religious leaders with the behaviors He expected of His followers.

I mention this because James was trying to get across a similar thought in his letter. James wrote his letter to the Jewish followers of Jesus who were scattered throughout the eastern region of the Mediterranean. His objective was to get them to live out their faith in their new surroundings. He wanted them to become spiritually mature and complete, to live as Kingdom people.

Unfortunately, many of the Jewish believers were not acting in ways which were appropriate for the followers of Jesus. They resented the difficulties in which they were living. They were not depending on God for their guidance. They were becoming worldly in their attitudes, being tempted and deceived by the habits and thinking of the non-believers around them. They were not accepting and practicing the word of God which could have comforted and guided them through their difficulties.

As a result, they were resorting to evil ways of gaining favor, and neglecting their responsibilities to take care of their own community of believers. They were neither following the Old Testament pattern of their revered ancestor Abraham nor the New Testament teaching of Jesus. James bluntly informed them that their faith, because it was not accompanied by appropriate actions, was “dead.”

Today we will think about chapter 3. The subject is “the tongue.” This might seem like an odd topic in a letter concerned about godly behavior and spiritual maturity, but James was convinced that the control of the tongue was the strongest possible evidence of a disciplined life. And since James was emphasizing the relationship between faith and action, he was concerned about the ways believers were speaking to one another.

James mentioned the subject of speech three previous times in the letter. In chapter 1, verse 19, he urged “everyone to be quick to listen and slow to speak,” and, in verse 26, “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.” In chapter 2 verse 12 he wrote, “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law.” James was emphasizing other topics when he wrote those words, and he did not get off topic to develop his thoughts about the tongue. However, in chapter 3 he was ready to take up the subject of the use of the tongue, and he did so with great passion and earnestness.

I have given this message the title, “Faith Without Disciplined Behavior is Dead.” The thought which underlies this title is, “The man who can control his tongue is able to keep his whole body in check.” As I said earlier, the control of the tongue is strong evidence of a disciplined life.

### **Read James 3:1-12**

When we speak, our words can bring comfort and encouragement, or they can be discouraging, hurt the feelings of listeners, and give rise to anger and resentment. Words can both draw people together and drive people apart. Most of us grossly underestimate the power of the tongue in human relationships.

Rather than risk outbursts of words that are harmful, a writer in an old issue of Reader’s Digest gave this advice, “As you go through life you are going to have many opportunities to keep your mouth shut. It’s best to take advantage of all of them.” Given the negative impact that our words can have, that is indeed good advice.

I also read that the tongue is the muscle in the body which receives the most exercise. It is used in tasting, chewing, and swallowing, in addition to making sounds. It is in the making of sounds that the tongue can become a tool of evil. In the passage we just read, James mostly focused on the negative impact of the tongue. He wanted his readers to recognize how they were mis-using their words.

Let's think about this passage in the context of the letter. James has been declaring that the actions of believers are evidence of their inner faith. In the verses we just read, James pointed out that words were a demonstration of inner faith just as other outward "deeds" were proof of inner faith. James wanted his readers to understand that their oral communications needed to improve just like other areas of their behavior.

I have organized my comments about this passage into three sub-headings:

As believers, we will be held accountable for what we say (3:1-2).

As believers, we must keep the power of the tongue under control (3:3-8)

As believers, we must eliminate the inconsistencies in our speaking (3:9-12).

Verses 1 and 2 make up the first section. The focus is on accountability for what is spoken. James began this section by identifying with his readers, referring to them once again as "my brothers." Then he abruptly addressed one of the problem areas of "his brothers." Apparently a number of the believers were aspiring to positions of authority in the church fellowships. They were "presuming to be teachers," but the implication is that they were not qualified to be church leaders. James reminded them of the warning which applied to those who teach: "You know that those who teach will be judged strictly."

The desires of some believers to elevate themselves to positions of authority and influence in the fellowships was not good, especially in view of what James had written about them in previous portions of the letter. He had described the "deadness" of their faith and the worldliness of their behaviors. He had pointed out that they were not putting into practice the instructions of the Word of God. And here in chapter 3 he called them out for wanting to be leaders even though they were not faithful believers.

Because these aspiring teachers had been neglecting the word of God, they were setting themselves up for judgment. The reason is, I think, obvious. Those who teach in the Church are presumed to know the truth and, more importantly, are expected to live by the truth they proclaim. Good teachers must be models of godly behavior, or else they will be hypocrites.

Jesus accused the teachers of the law and the Pharisees of hypocrisy because they did not practice what they preached. Jesus had some choice words for those hypocrites: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. ... You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (*Matthew 23:27, 33*). Strong words!

I think that James wanted to frighten his readers into a change of attitude and behavior. His reminder about the judgment of those who were hypocritical in their leadership was intended get his readers back into religious practices that “God the Father could accept as pure and faultless” (*James 1:27*). He wanted them to “speak and act as those who were going to be judged by the law” (*James 2:12*).

In verse 2 James softened his hard-hitting approach a little bit. He acknowledged that “we all stumble in many ways.” In essence he was saying that none of us is perfect, that we all commit acts of sin. However, he went on to say that those who speak more are more susceptible to sin because the tongue is the most common means of sinning. Notice what he wrote: “if anyone is never at fault in what he says,” if he is able to control perfectly the use of the tongue, then “he would be a perfect man.” And furthermore, anyone who is disciplined enough to control “what he says,” then he is “able to keep his whole body in check.” To restate this thought another way: if you have the ability to control what you say, then you can also learn to control everything you do.

The word, “perfect,” does not mean sinless perfection. Rather, it suggests spiritual maturity. None of us will achieve sinless perfection in this life, but we can grow to a level of spiritual maturity. The most important gauge of that maturity is how we speak.

On one occasion, Jesus said, “But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (*Matthew 12:36-37*). By this statement, Jesus was explaining how our words reveal the genuineness of our faith. Our words either validate that we are true believers or reveal that we do not know God. A tongue under control is therefore an indication of spiritual maturity.

The next section is verses 3 through 8. This section emphasizes the need to control the power of the tongue. In verses 3 and 4 James explained the impact small items have on powerful horses and large ships. Powerful horses are controlled by the “bits” which are in their mouths. “Bits” are just five or six inches long, quite small. Large ships are steered by small rudders even when driven by strong winds and currents. Compared to the overall size of a vessel, the rudder is just a tiny part.

James then compared these items with the tongue. The tongue is a small part of the body but, said James, just consider what it can do. It has influence which is out of proportion to its size. Just like the horse's bit and the ship's rudder have to do with controlling and steering, so also is the tongue involved in the direction of a person's life. In each case, the emphasis is on the extent of influence — over the horse, the ship, life.

In the context of this letter, James did not focus on the positive aspects of the use of the tongue. His concern was remedial; he was hoping to correct the inappropriate behavior patterns of Jewish believers. Hence he focused on the tongue's potential for evil. Notice his descriptive writing in verses 5 and 6. The tongue is like a small spark that sets off a forest fire. James then went on to say that “fire” is a good illustration of the destructive impact that the tongue can have.

But this illustration was still not yet as strong as he wanted. He then declared that the tongue was “a world of evil among the parts of the body.” The tongue was therefore not only to be recognized as powerful, but it was to be seen as perverse in the impact it could have. It was capable of “corrupting the whole person.” It could “set the whole course of a person's life on fire,” meaning that it could destroy a person just like it could destroy the forest. Verse 6 emphasized the thorough and far-reaching destruction wrought by the uncontrolled tongue.

Then James went one more step further and identified the ultimate source of the problem: the tongue “is set on fire by hell,” a reference to the future abode of Satan and the place of eternal torment for unsaved people. Hell is the true origin of the tongue's incredible perverse power to destroy.

The statements in verse 6 were progressive. The first statement pointed to the multitude of evils contained within a person and evidenced by impure speech. The second warned against the corruption of the whole person because of the uncontrolled tongue. The third referred to the tongue's impact on the whole course of the person's life. The fourth statement described the tongue's identity with hell.

As I have stated previously, James wrote in a very blunt and direct style. He was deliberately trying to shock his readers into a change in their attitudes and behaviors, and to get them pointed in the direction of spiritual maturity. He wanted them to recognize that they needed to change their undisciplined behavior in regard to the ways they interacted with one another.

What about us? We react in horror to sins like the molestation and abuse of children, homosexual practices, murder, and other gross evils, yet we tolerate gossip, slander, deceit, half-truths, sarcastic put downs, and other sins of the tongue as if they were no big deal. However, James has made it clear that the sins of the tongue have their origin in the pit of hell, just like the grosser kinds of behaviors. They defile the one committing them. They destroy others, and they are inconsistent with the inner faith professed by believers. As believers, we must deal with the sins of the tongue if we hope to become spiritually mature.

Verses 7 and 8 explain the problem that we have in controlling the tongue. We have seen, in person or on television, all kinds of creatures perform amazing tricks, perhaps at Sea World or the circus or other places, and we have trained our own pets to behave in certain ways. All kinds of land, sea, and air creatures can be tamed, “and have been tamed by man,” but, unfortunately, by comparison, “no man can tame his own tongue” because “it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

Jesus said, “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (*Matthew 12:34*). The reason the tongue can't be tamed is that it is intimately connected to our hearts and desires. One of the best ways to understand a person is to listen to what he/she says. Our words eventually reveal what we're like on the inside.

James did not say that the tongue was untamable. He only stated that people do not have the ability in themselves to subdue and control it. There is an obvious follow-up truth that James could have stated to his readers at this point, but he didn't. Keep in mind that he was writing to believers, that is, individuals who had been born again by God's Spirit, who were indwelt by God's Spirit, who were empowered by the Spirit to live as God wanted them to live, if they were so inclined to be obedient to what God expected of them. The point implied here is that God can enable the believer to control his tongue, just as God can enable the believer to overcome other evil behaviors. The tongue can be controlled only after God brings about spiritual change in a person from the inside out.

Now we come to the last segment of this passage, verses 9 through 12. In this portion we are instructed to eliminate the inconsistencies in the use of our tongues.

One aspect of the tongue's perversity is that it can both "praise our Lord and Father" and "curse men." Notice the urgent plea made by James as he wraps up his teaching: "My brothers," you must not be guilty of inconsistent speech." Although the readers were believers, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, they were not behaving properly. From their mouths came both blessings and cursings. They were perfect examples of what James stated in chapter 1, "If anyone does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (*James 1:26*).

James concluded with a series of questions that are worded in such a way as to demand the response, "no." "Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?" Answer: "No. It's impossible." "Can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Answer: "No. Of course not. It can't be."

James wanted his readers to think about the true nature of their characters. Just as plants and springs naturally produce outcomes according to their source materials, worldly minded believers will naturally express themselves with words which are not always pleasing to God. On the other hand, if the faith of the individual is genuine, and he/she is obedient to the indwelling Holy Spirit, then the words which are spoken will most likely be pleasing to God. Scripture declares that the person of genuine faith and consistent obedience "will be blessed in what he /she does" (*James 1:25*).

The Apostle Paul was in complete agreement with James on this matter of speaking. To the believers in the city of Ephesus, Paul wrote: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (*Ephesians 4:29*). In this life, we will never be able to totally tame our tongues. However, as believers, we must try to always use our voices for good, and avoid the damages of inappropriate speech.

We need to pray with David, who wrote, “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips” (*Psalms 141:3*).