

**SERIES: Walk the Talk**

**SERMON: Tongue in Check**

**SCRIPTURE: James 3:1-12**

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**DATE: July 6, 2008**

We've had a rough week at my house. My two youngest daughters began showing signs of illness last Sunday. They were running a fever and complaining of a sore throat, so Maggie took them to the doctor on Monday afternoon to have it checked out. Isn't it interesting that when you go to the doctor as a kid the first thing they check is the inside of your mouth? How do doctors can tell what is wrong inside of you by having you stick out your tongue and say 'ahh'? My girls' tongues were full of sores and it was confirmed that they were sick. But the doctor didn't prescribe medicine to put on their tongue.

Instead of treating the outside symptoms doctors will generally prescribe medicine that will go to work on healing the inside, so that the outside symptoms will go away. In our passage this morning James is asking us to stick out our tongue as well. It seems that in the Christian life when you check your tongue you can tell a lot about what's going on inside. If you're sick spiritually it is likely that people will be able to tell by what you say. Also, in the same way that our girls' illness has altered our entire week the tongue has a powerful impact on all of life. And in the same way that most physical symptoms need to be treated internally the problem with our tongues can only be made well by addressing our hearts.

Turn with me in your Bibles to James chapter 3 as we look at what James has to say about checking our tongue. As you turn let me give you a little bit of background concerning this section. If you will remember from last week James has been addressing the issue of faith and deeds. We concluded from that text that our deeds don't save us; we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, but that our deeds indicate whether or not we possess true faith. What James addressed in general terms in the previous passage he is simply addressing in specific terms in this passage. Faith without deeds is dead. The specific deed that James is addressing in this passage is how we use our tongue.

Follow along with me as I read from James, chapter 3, verses 1-12.

*Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.*

*When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*

*All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

*With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*

I would like to organize our time in this passage this morning by looking at two problems and two powers: the problem with our words and the problem with our hearts, as well as the power of our words and the power of our God. I think we will find that our words are powerful, but they can only be controlled by an all powerful God. Let's look first at the problem with our words.

## The problem with our words (1-2)

History tells us that there was a lot of social tension among Jewish Christians when James wrote this letter. Times were bad for the Jews under Roman occupation and were working toward the ultimate crescendo in A.D. 70 when Jerusalem would fall to the Romans. The injustice, at the hands of the Romans, was resulting in physical and verbal retaliation by the Jewish Christians. However, this retaliation was not simply directed at the Romans, but also towards other Jews. Resources were so scarce that the poor were starting to develop bitterness towards the rich and the rich were not being generous or fair with the poor due to the fear of the failing economy. All of this tension led to a party spirit and an “us against them” mentality among the Jews. And as in any time of social upheaval there were many people who wanted to stand up and speak out against the injustice that was becoming threatening.

The book of James if seen as a whole validates this historical context. It also gives us clues that help us understand the specific problem James is addressing in chapter 3. See listed on the screen some facts from the book of James about the audience James was writing to:

- They considered themselves “righteous” but had anger in their hearts towards fellow believers (Jas. 1:20).
- They considered themselves “religious” but had uncontrolled mouths that were slandering other believers (Jas. 1:26).
- They knew their Bibles and believed them; they were very religious (Jas. 2:8, 19).
- They desired high positions because they thought very highly of themselves (Jas. 3:1)
- They didn’t necessarily think highly of other believers though; they were cursing them (Jas. 3:9).
- They thought they were wise, but were harboring selfish ambition and bitter jealousy towards others in the church (Jas. 3:14-16).
- They were full of pride and were judgmental towards their brothers in Christ (Jas. 4:11).

It is my belief that the reason James tells these Jewish Christians, in v. 1, that not many should presume to be teachers was because they had a tendency to self-righteously judge fellow believers. So the first problem with words in this text is that **our words can be self-righteous.**

Verse 1 is clearly directed at teachers:

*“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”*

You may be tempted to think that this passage only applies to church leaders and that maybe I should just preach it to myself and not you. I think you will see as I move through this text I have had to preach this passage to myself, but I also think you will see that this passage has general application for all Christians.

In the first century being a teacher was a status symbol, especially among Jewish Christians. These teachers likely wanted a platform to speak out against issues that were going on; they wanted “position” over others. No doubt they felt that they were being wronged personally by their circumstances or maybe orthodoxy was being compromised or the church wasn’t functioning properly during this tense time.

Unlike Paul, who issues warnings because of problems with doctrine, there is no mention of this in James. James seems more interested in ethical issues, like pride and a judgmental spirit. These are issues that we all face. This applies not only to teachers but to all of us. All of us have a tendency to be self-righteous and judgmental. The reason for this is that within each of us is a desire to be right. The desire to be right

is a desire to be righteous. But the challenge is that only God is righteous. He is warning them that they better watch out in their self-righteous judgment because God is the only righteous judge. And **self-righteous words will be judged by a righteous God.**

This interpretation is especially supported as we look at verse 2. For as verse 2 says,

*“We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.”*

Nobody is perfect; we all sin and will all be judged. This sin and imperfection is seen most clearly in what we say; especially in what we say against others. Who are we to judge the sin of others when our sin is so clearly seen when we’re speaking out against them! When we show with our words that we believe we are righteous and above others, we are in effect standing in a place that only God can stand; self-righteous judgment will ironically come under the righteous judgment of God, as will all of our words.

The biggest challenge our family has faced since I have left for seminary is not separation, though that has been hard. The biggest challenge has been what we call re-entry. One reason for this is that when I come home sometimes things aren’t the way I expect them to be and I become critical of my family. One example of this was my first trip home when I discovered upon arrival a new dresser and a new desk in my bedroom. The house looked great, it was very clean. The new furniture looked great and Maggie had thoughtfully supplied a place for me to work while I was home. But the only thing I could think of was “where is the old dresser that my mom bought for us as a wedding present?” To my astonishment the dresser was out on the back porch (during rain season). I said some very critical and hurtful things to my wife that first afternoon home. I felt that my rationale for my criticism was righteous: “after all, this is a stewardship issue” was what I was thinking. And therefore I thought this was worth speaking up about! However, as we started to work through the conflict what I learned was that my words communicated to Maggie that I thought she was doing a horrible job around the house in my absence and that what I had going on was more important than the load she was carrying. I became self-righteous and judgmental of my wife. She deserved praise but all I had to offer was criticism. Good communication has made these “re-entry” transitions go much better, but this first incident reminded that I am not that much different from the Christians that James was addressing.

And I think that if you were honest you would have to confess that you are not that much different. Because whether we’re teachers or serve the church in a different capacity we all sin in many ways and this is seen most clearly in what we say. There will be times for each of us when things aren’t right and we’ll want to make that known with our words. You may feel like you’re not being treated fairly in your own home by your spouse. Your brother or sister may be annoying you to the point of breaking. You may have a situation at work that you need to stand up to. All of these things will happen and James reminds us that when we face trials that we are to consider it pure joy because this is the testing of our faith and it will produce steadfastness.

However, the temptation in each of these situations will be to respond with self-righteous or sinful words that seek to prove that you are right. But remember that ultimately self-righteous judgment will come under the righteous judgment of God! So we have seen that the problem with our words is that they can be self-righteous. Let’s now look at the power of our words.

### **The power of our words (3-5)**

**Our tongues are small, but our words have a powerful impact.** Our text provides illustrations that make this point very plain in verses 3-5.

*When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.*

Our tongues are small but our words have a powerful impact. This is clear from these illustrations; however, there is one point of confusion in verse v. 5. “*Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.*” If James was trying to use horses and bits, and ships and rudders as parallel examples for our words shouldn’t he have said, “*Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it moves the whole body, or impacts all of life.*”? Why does he say, “*makes great boasts*”? When James says, “boasts” he is not talking about *man* boasting, using his tongue. He is talking about the actual *tongue* boasting. It is not man saying, “Look what I have accomplished” it is rather the tongue itself saying look at what a huge and powerful impact I have had on life! So in essence he *is* saying, “Our tongues are small but our words have a powerful impact.”

This is such an important point for us to grasp as it relates to my previous point. If we are being tested by a situation where we are tempted to prove that we are right with our words we need to beware because the words we use may end up being bigger than that for which we are standing up for. Our words though only spoken by a small tongue are powerful and can have a huge impact on our life and on the lives of others. If we are fighting for a righteous cause that we deem is a big deal, but use self-righteous or sinful words to defend ourselves or our cause we may actually be guilty of creating a bigger problem than was present in the first place.

As in the story I shared with your earlier – the dresser was a big deal to me, but the second I opened my big mouth the words spoken to my wife became bigger than the dresser. The dresser would have long been forgotten had I not spoken hurtful words to my wife. But it is my guess that the dresser will never be forgotten now. Your words impact life disproportionately to the size of your tongue, so beware!

All of these examples show that negative words have a huge, negative, impact. However, the text doesn’t address positive examples. But if the principle is true, that our words have a powerful impact as seen through negative examples, then couldn’t the principle also be true if applied to positive examples. Surely encouraging words, words of praise, words of love, and words of appreciation could have a powerful and lasting impact on someone’s life and on your life in the same way that sinful words could have a negative impact. Why is it then that we tend to use sinful words as opposed to uplifting words?

We know that our mouths get us into trouble so why do we continue to say the things that we say? James gives us only two pieces of the puzzle when he provides the illustrations of the horse and the bit, the spark and the fire, and the tongue and our lives. But in the example of the ship there is also a pilot and the will of the pilot. This third piece needs to be applied to the other examples for a more full explanation. There is a rider who works the bit to move the horse where he wants it to go, a pilot who turns the rudder that moves the ship where he wants it to go, an arson who lights the match that sets the forest on fire, and in each of us there is a heart that causes the tongue to speak, which in turn impacts all of our lives. And it is our heart to which we now turn. We have considered the problem with our words and the power of our words; let us now look at the problem with our hearts, beginning in verse 6.

### **The problem with our hearts (6, 9-12)**

*The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*

The first two metaphors of the bit and the rudder showed us that our words are powerful, but the picture of the fire shows us that **unrighteous words are destructive**.

A horse or a ship being moved is a morally neutral event, but a burning forest implies destruction in a negative sense. Setting the entire course of one's life on fire is not neutral; it's bad. It is no wonder that this is the hardest verse to understand in this section. What is James really talking about here when he says that the tongue actually corrupt the whole person? It is plain that words can make a powerful impact on life, but it is not plain that they can corrupt us completely. "*The entire course of one's life*" is big. James doesn't say partially or mostly; he says "entirely". He also says that our tongue is set on fire by hell. This is harsh language that is hard to understand.

But Mike's sermon last week really helped me understand this passage because what James describes in the passage above in general terms, "faith without deeds is dead," he applies specifically in this passage, "unrighteous words corrupt the whole person." We established last week that our deeds don't save us; we are saved by grace alone, by faith alone. However, our deeds do indicate whether or not we have received grace by faith. Our deeds are, as Mike said, a window into our soul. What you see on the outside is what is on the inside. Without the evidence of deeds there is a question as to whether or not true faith exists. I think it is fair to say that this verse follows the same logic. What we say with our tongue, on the outside of our body, indicates what is inside of our heart. Just as Jesus said, "*out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.*"

So when James says, our words "*corrupt the whole person, set the whole course of our lives on fire, and are set on fire by hell*" what he is saying is that **unrighteous words flow from unrighteous hearts**.

The phrase "*set on fire by hell*" literally means that the "source" from which your words come is evil not that if you have a filthy mouth you're going to hell. Hearts that are unrighteous will produce unrighteous words.

Again, James uses great illustrations to shed light on the point he is trying to make. Please look at verses 11-12 as I read.

*Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*

That which is with in us is that which will come out of us, period! Righteous words cannot flow from unrighteous hearts any more than fresh water can flow from a salt water spring. Words that seek to promote self cannot promote God, or the things of God. And that is why **unrighteous hearts cannot praise a righteous God**.

Hopefully it is becoming clear that the situation with our tongue is a problem. After all we were created to praise God. But if we have unrighteous hearts we cannot produce righteous words of praise. James speaks most passionately at this point. Look with me at verses 9-10.

*With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.*

"*My brothers, this should not be!*" You cannot praise God and claim love for him when you are harboring evil thoughts against your brother or sister in Christ. And you for sure can't authentically worship God when you are speaking out publically against your brother or sister in Christ. When things aren't right with other members of the body they can't be right with Christ – the head of the body.

If you find yourself talking about other people a lot of the time when you are in conversation that may be a sign that your heart is unfit to praise God. If you are frequently complaining about issues in the church or issues with your family, your heart may be unfit to praise God. If you have a habit of talking down to your kids or your spouse you may be harboring pride or anger that needs released; otherwise your heart will prevent you from worshipping God authentically. Do you have a reputation for being sarcastic? Do you make fun of other people? Are you prone to bragging? All of these may be indicators that you have an insecure heart. Do you yell at your employees or lose your temper with your co-workers on a regular basis? Your heart may need to be softened. You only have one heart. You don't get one heart for worship and another heart for anger and criticism. When James says, "*Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing*" he is trying to illustrate the absurdity of such a concept. And that is why he pleads with us and says, "*My brothers, this should not be.*" You cannot praise God and then curse men, who are made in the image of God.

As a parent this makes perfect sense to me. If you still live with your brothers or sisters, or if you have any recollection of your childhood, or if your kids are anything like mine, you know that sibling rivalry is a given. But as a father it hurts me so much to see my girls being catty with one another or screaming at each other. When they hurt each other with their words they hurt me because they are hurting someone that I love dearly. In the same way when we hurt our brothers and sisters in Christ with our words, we hurt the heart of the Father who loves them, and we damage not only our relationship with them, but our relationship with God.

Notice that James uses the phrase or the plea "*my brothers*" many times in this letter; he uses it 3 times in this passage. I think it is important for us to remember that James was addressing believers. He *is* saying that unrighteous words flow from unrighteous hearts and that unrighteous hearts are unfit to praise a righteous God, but he is *not* saying that our unrighteous hearts mean that we are not saved. He is simply saying that sin still dwells within us and that if not tamed will powerfully impact all of life including our relationships with family, other believers, and even God himself. And he is pleading with us to not let this duplicity exist in the church. After all we are representatives of Christ; "*we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light* (1 Peter 2:9)." We need to represent him well.

And so something must be done about this problem of the tongue if we are to be all that God created us to be. If we are to fulfill our role of glorifying and praising God then we need hearts and words that are righteous. How does this happen? We've seen that we all share the problem of speaking sinful words and that our words powerfully impact all of life. We've also seen that the problem with our hearts is the reason we struggle with our words. Look with me now at verses 7-8 to find the solution to this powerful problem found only in the power of our God.

### **The power of our God**

*All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

All of this talk about animals seemed like a weak illustration to me at first, but as I've looked deeper at this passage I believe this illustration may summarize the thrust of this whole passage. James lists these animals in four categories: mammals, birds, reptiles, and creatures of the sea. He is likely giving us an intentional flashback to the creation account in Genesis. After these four categories of animals were created God created man and gave him dominion over the animals. And man has dominated the animals and is dominating animals. Man has accomplished many things throughout the course of history. Not only have we tamed every kind of animal but human ingenuity seems to have no end in subduing nature. I

wonder what illustration James would have used if he were writing today. It is no surprise to me that we have continued to dominate much of God's creation, for to some degree it was what we were created to do. But it is also no surprise to me that this verse tells us that we cannot dominate or tame the tongue because God reserved the role of dominion over man for himself. It is ironic that our small tongue can have such a big impact on all of life, but that our big achievements have no power over our small tongues. Man can accomplish great things, but **man is powerless to change his own heart.**

Even though man thinks he is righteous, only God is righteous. Even though man is judgmental, there is only one Judge. Even though man takes pride in his accomplishments and exhibitions of power only God is powerful. Man is powerless to change his own heart because **only God can change hearts.**

And the reason that man is powerless to change his own heart is because *"it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison."* And only God has power over evil and death through what Christ accomplished through his death and resurrection.

It is truly amazing that the only person who was ever righteous didn't feel the need to speak up when he was wronged and unjustly accused. *"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth (Isa. 53:7)."* If there was ever a reason to curse men Jesus had the right, but instead he silently endured the cross set before him, for the sake of us and the glory of God. And so he serves as our model. We don't always need to defend ourselves, even if we're right. But more importantly he serves as the means to changing our hearts.

Without his death on the cross and his victory over death, accomplished through his resurrection, we would be hopeless against restless evil and deadly poison in our hearts. But through his blood shed on the cross and by his resurrection from the dead, we have access to his power. It is only through him that we can experience hearts that are changed. And only as our hearts are changed by Christ will our lives start to look more Christ-like. Man is powerless to change his heart. And man's powerful words can only be controlled by an all-powerful God!

There is no amount of behavior modification that can take place in your life that will cure your foul mouth, or your frequent use of angry words, or your tendency to gossip. You can try and try, but until your hearts have been changed by the only one who was ever victorious in this area, you will be frustrated and continue to fail.

This warning I think calls us to reflect on what is going on in our heart and to reflect on what Christ has done for us. I think it calls us to check our tongue and check our pride and to realize that only God is righteous and powerful. I think this text calls us to humble ourselves and to draw near to God and allow him to draw near to us so that we can be changed from the inside out.

What better time to do that than as Andy comes to prepare our hearts for communion? Let's use this time to examine ourselves and to reflect on what Christ accomplished for us and what work he still wants to do in us.