

Sermon outline and notes:

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James 3:2b-12            “The Little Troublemaker”

Intro. All of us have been hurt at one time or another by what someone had said. Sometimes we are hurt by people unintentionally. Having grown up just outside New York City, a young preacher barely knew a cow from an ear of corn. Until, that is, he married a small-town Ohio girl. While in seminary, he had a temporary assignment at a church in a rural community. The day of his first sermon, he tried very hard to fit in. Maybe too hard. With his wife sitting in the first pew, he began his discourse saying, “I never saw a cow until I met my wife.”

At other times, people intentionally hurt with their tongues. You know how it is. Someone may say to you, “My, that’s a great-looking dress. Too bad they didn’t have your size.” Or how about the time that a man had gotten up nerve to tell his mother that his wife had left him and she snapped, “What took her so long?” The world is full of people who build themselves up by tearing others down. Few children & young people have been spared the cutting remarks of classmates or friends.

James understood that this matter of the tongue was a real problem. If you look at 1:19 & 26, you will see that it must have been a problem with too many of James’ readers. Then, as he says in v.2 of our text, we all stumble into sin. “Stumble” is a habitual present tense. He is not referring so much to the act of stumbling but the habit of stumbling. And sinning with the tongue is one of the most common ways we sin.

So this message this morning is very relevant to each of us, for none of us is completely free from the problem of the tongue. I hope that as a result of this message, all of us will be more careful in what we say. So let’s see first of all:

## I. THE GREAT CHALLENGE THE TONGUE PROVIDES

Do you like to have a good challenge? While we were at Myrtle Beach with our Senior group, Roland, Jim Hatfield, and I took a side trip one afternoon to play some golf. Roland picked out the course, and as we were turning in to the course, there was a big sign saying that the course we were to play had the 3 toughest finishing holes of any course around. One of the 3 was a 576 yard par 5, & your third shot had a clear a good size lake. What a challenge! I think I scored at least a 7 on that hole.

Well, I want to give you an even greater challenge. Try to keep your tongue from saying something bad or hurtful, even for a full day. If you pass that challenge, try to tame your tongue for a whole week. Verse 8 says, “But no man can tame the tongue....”

Let me tell you why taming the tongue is such a great challenge. First of all:

A. It is the Most Revealing Member of the Body – Your tongue can reveal a lot about you. For example, it says a lot about your physical health. When you are sick & you go to the doctor, he will often ask you to stick out your tongue. I’m told that if it’s coated, you probably have a fever. If it’s yellowish, you probably have poor digestion. If it’s a bright strawberry red, you’ve been drinking too much kool-aid!

Likewise, the tongue is an indicator of one's spiritual health. You can try to fool people into believing that you are a good Christian, but the great challenge is to keep your tongue from revealing your true spiritual condition. After all, James says in 1:26, "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." Then he says in v.2 of our text, "if anyone does not stumble in word he is a perfect man." The word "perfect" there is the word for mature. James says you can measure the maturity of a Christian by how he controls his tongue. The best mark of maturity in the Lord is not how you control your talent, nor how you control your time, nor even how you control your treasure, but how you control your tongue. We have people today who are saying that the real sign of spirituality is whether or not you can speak in tongues. I believe the real sign of spirituality is not whether you can speak in *new* tongues, but whether or not you control the one tongue that you already have. You see, the tongue is a barometer that measures the spirituality and the maturity of a man's heart. Jesus said in Matt. 12:34, "for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." There seems to be a direct connection between your heart & your mouth.

Another reason why the tongue is such a great challenge is because:

B. It is the Most Uncontrollable Member of our Body – James says in the last of v.2, "If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body." What James is saying is that since the tongue is the most difficult member of our bodies to control, one's ability to control his tongue implies control over the whole body. A person can probably keep the hand from stealing better than keep the tongue from sinning.

James illustrates how difficult it is to control the tongue by way of contrast. In v.7 James says, "For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind." The word "tamed" (*domadzo*) was used of bringing oxen under the yoke, or of breaking in wild horses. The last occurrence of the word "tamed" is in the perfect tense, which speak of abiding result. It remains tamed. Why, you can go to the circus & see that even lions can be tamed. But in stark contrast, James says in v.8, "But no man can tame the tongue<sup>1</sup>...." The idea is that the tongue can never be completely domesticated by man. However, we should emphasize the word "man" (*anthropos*) in that statement, which was not necessary to add. He could have simply said, "But no one can tame the tongue." Instead, he literally said, "But no one [among] men can tame the tongue." That is to say, no man by himself can tame the tongue. I'll talk more about that later.

Is your tongue completely under control? Most people realize that taming the tongue is a great challenge indeed.

Here's another challenge regarding the tongue:

C. Though It Is Small, It Is Very Powerful – They say, "Big things come in small packages." Well, in v.5 James says, "Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!" James points out that even though it is small, the tongue is powerful in its influence, & the destruction it can cause. The tongue is indeed powerful, for good or evil. Have you ever considered how just a few words can determine the course of an entire nation?

The rousing delivery of Patrick Henry's immortal words inspired the struggling colonies to fight on and secure their national liberty. You've heard those words, "Is life so dear or peace

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<sup>1</sup> "tongue" is in the emphatic position at the start of v.8.

so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death.”

Furthermore, just a few words can determine the course of an entire life?<sup>2</sup> In fact, just 2 words can change the course of a man or woman’s life, can it not? Over 30 years ago the minister asked Cheryl if she would take me to be her wedded husband, and she said, “I will.” Just two words influenced the course of her life! I don’t think she realized how much her life would be affected!

James gives two illustrations to prove his point that something small can have powerful influence, just like the tongue. First, he uses:

1. The Illustration of the Bit & Horse – In v.3 James said, “Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body.” The horse is naturally wild and ungovernable, but it may have its fiery temper subdued and its movements regulated to the wishes of its rider. This is spite of the fact that the horse is much larger than a man. That point is implied in the emphatic position of the words, “whole body.” All this is accomplished by means of the relatively small bit put into the horse’s mouth. James is amazed that a wild animal so big can be controlled by something so little as a bit. Here is a great horse weighing over a thousand pounds, and yet a little one hundred pound jockey can get on that horse and direct that horse anyway he wants to go just by turning a little bit and bridle.

2. The Illustration of the Rudder & Ship – Then in v.4 James says, “Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires.” Here’s a great ship that weighs hundreds of tons, going through the deep waves and the even strong winds, and yet by the turn of a little rudder, even a ninety pound pilot can steer that ship anywhere he wants it to go. So even though the tongue is small, it is powerful.

So don’t underestimate the power of the tongue, just because it is so small. Taming the tongue is one of the greatest challenges you will ever face in life. How are you doing? Do you typically hold back your tongue from lying, cursing, gossiping, or hurting others in some other way?

Next, James wants us to know why controlling the tongue is so important. For he not only talks about the great challenge the tongue provides, but also:

## II. THE GREAT DAMAGE THE TONGUE PRODUCES

I call your attention to 4 damaging effects of the tongue. First of all:

A. It Destroys – We see this from the illustration James uses. In v.6 James says, “And the tongue is a fire, ... and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.” Think of how destructive fire can be. In the last of v.5 James says, “See how great a forest a little fire kindles!” Indeed, one match can destroy a forest that has taken a hundred years to grow. That’s because fire spreads quickly and is soon out of control.

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, the last of v.6 James says the tongue “sets on fire the course of nature.” The tongue wields its evil power through the whole course of human life. The Greek word which is translated “course” literally means “wheel”. The wheel was in ancient times a familiar symbol for the cycle of life. The “wheel of birth” (lit.) may then be understood to denote the wheel of existence, that is, the cycle of life from birth onward. So the tongue keeps doing its damage throughout the person’s life.

One famous example of the destructiveness of fire is the great Chicago fire. On October 8, 1871, a cow that belonged to Mrs. O'Leary, accidentally kicked over a lantern in a barn. That lantern fell into some hay. The hay caught fire and that fire spread. And when that fire was over, over 100,000 people were left homeless, 17,500 buildings were destroyed, and 300 people died. It cost the city over \$400,000,000, just because of what started as one little fire.

Think of how destructive the tongue can be. Contentious tongues have hindered the work of God a thousand times over. Critical tongues have closed church doors. Careless tongues have broken the hearts of many people. Because of angry words, best friends have become bitter enemies, and homes have been divided. I wonder how many fellowships have been destroyed by the spark of the careless arsonist called the Gossip. One can gossip and then ask God to forgive him. God will forgive, but He alone knows where that gossip will stop. It goes on and on, burning and destroying.

There was a peasant with a troubled conscience who went to a monk for advice. He said he had circulated a vile story about a friend, only to find out the story was not true. "If you want to make peace with your conscience," said the monk, "you must fill a bag with chicken feathers, go to every door in the village, and drop at each one of them one fluffy feather." The peasant did as he was told. Then he came back to the monk and announced he had done penance for his folly. "Not yet," replied the monk. "Take your bag again and gather up every feather that you have dropped." "But the wind must have blown them all away," said the peasant, "Yes, my son," said the monk, "and so it is with gossip. Words are easily dropped, but no matter how hard you try, you can never get them back again." [Zodhiates, p.88]

Not only is the tongue destructive, but it damages in another way:

B. It Is Deadly - In the last of v.8 James says the tongue "is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." James says that the tongue is as deadly as the fangs of a rattlesnake. What poisonous power there is in the tongue! Rom. 3:13b says "The poison of asps is under their lips." The tongue is a killer. Concealed as a sniper, the tongue is like a deadly moccasin that lives in a pool of saliva, and is quick and deadly as it strikes.

Thinking of the tongue being full of poison reminded me of a story I read about Sir Winston Churchill, and a woman by the name of Lady Astor. They had a genuine dislike for one another. He was the Prime Minister of England. She was a very well-to-do socialite. And so they were often thrown together at various banquets and parties and dignitary functions. Well, at one particular party, as luck would have it, they were seated right across the table from each other. Well everyone in the room soon got quiet to watch them fight like cats and dogs. Finally, Lady Astor said, "Sir, if you were my husband, I would put poison in your coffee." Winston Churchill said, "Lady, if you were my wife, I would gladly drink it."

So you had better be careful with your tongue. It can not only damage friendships, but it can even be deadly. As a result of the tongue, fights have broken out, and people have been killed. Even if the tongue does not literally kill, it can assassinate a man's character in the twinkling of an eye. It can kill a man's reputation with a single sentence.

The tongue is not only destructive & deadly to others, but we also see from our text that:

C. It Defiles Our Soul – James says in the middle of v.6, "The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body...." Likewise, Jesus said in Matthew 15:11, "It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." The tongue can corrupt and defile the entire body from the inside out. It not only defiles the whole

body, but the whole world! Notice that he also says in that verse that the tongue is “a world of iniquity.” The whole world sins with their tongue. It is a universal problem.

You need to know that the tongue will defile you spiritually. It will help send you to hell if you are not saved, or it will cause a break in your fellowship with God if you are saved. You are hurting yourself when you sin with the tongue.

I heard about two farmers one time who were talking about gossip, and one wise farmer said, “Well, I’ve learned you can’t throw dirt without losing ground.” And the other farmer said, “No, and you can’t throw mud without getting your own hands dirty either.” If you cast hurtful words at others, you may succeed in hurting them, but you are going to hurt yourself as much or more, especially in the spiritual realm.

Finally, the tongue damages us spiritually because:

D. It Deceives – I’m not only talking about lying, but also about the sin of hypocrisy. Beginning in v.9 James says, “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...” Oh, the hypocrisy of the tongue! At one moment we may be in church, using our tongues to praise God, and give the appearance that we are really spiritual. But then we turn around and use the same tongue to curse or hurt men.

A little girl sat with her arms wrapped around her father’s neck. But her mother observed that over her father’s shoulder she was sticking out her tongue at her little brother. The mother responded by saying, “Take your arms from around your father’s neck. You cannot love your father and at the same time stick out your tongue at his son.” To profess love for God while reviling men made in His image is a brazen offense against God.

So because the tongue can do so much harm, we need to be careful with our tongues. We need to bridle our tongues.

So far we have seen what a great challenge it is to control the tongue. We have seen why we must control the tongue. It can be so damaging to others, and our own relationship with God. Is there any hope for being able to control the tongue? Indeed there is! So let’s see last of all:

### III. THE GREAT DELIVERANCE GOD PURPOSES FOR THE TONGUE

Now I do not want you to get the impression that the tongue is an awful thing in and of itself. It is not. God created the tongue, and He has a divine purpose for it. It can be used for great good. But we must learn to control it, and God has provided a way. First:

A. Be Born Again – If we are going to have victory over the tongue, we need a new nature. This is implied in v.12, “Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?” Then some of our ancient Greek texts read, “Neither can a salty spring produce fresh water.” The source determines the result. The kind of plant determines the fruit. A fig tree produces figs. On the other hand, a marijuana plant produces marijuana, which can cause all kinds of problems. Even so, a sinful nature produces sinful speech. In Mt. 12:34 Jesus said, “You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” So if you want to stop cussing, lying, gossiping, and the like, you need to let God change your heart and nature. Though *man* can’t control the tongue (v.8a), God can. You don’t need a tongue transplant; you need a heart transplant! You need to be born again by the Spirit of God. No man can tame the tongue, but Jesus Christ certainly can.

There once was a madman in the land of Gadara. The Bible tells us that “no man could tame him.” But that was before he met Jesus! Jesus cast out the demons (Mk. 5:7-8) and the man was gloriously saved. Then, instead of using his tongue to curse God & speak profanity, he went out and published throughout the whole city how great things Jesus had done unto him” (Lk. 8:39).

Have you been born again? Can we tell it from your speech? If not, in just moment I’m going to invite you to receive a new heart from the Lord.

Now being born again is just the starting point. Once you are converted, then you must still:

B. Learn to Control that Tongue - Now James seems to say something contradictory. He says in v.8, “no man can tame the tongue.” But he wrote back in 1:26 that true religion will enable us to bridle our tongues. Now how can we reconcile that apparent contradiction? Well, James is right. No man can tame the tongue. You can no more control your tongue than you could save your soul. But I want to tell you that the same God that can save your soul can control your tongue. You say, “How?” Once you are born again, we need to be filled or controlled by the Spirit of God. Let Him cleanse your life, and control your tongue. There is a heavenly, cleansing fire that can change the tongue from bad to good.

Isa. 6 describes the time when Isaiah had a vision of the holy God on the throne. Immediately, he was keenly aware of his sin, including the fact that he was “a man of unclean lips.” Then, when Isaiah’s tongue was touched with a hot coal from the heavenly altar, he became a great prophet, speaking out the Word of God. And like fire when it is properly controlled, the tongue held in check is a power for great good.

So with the help of the Lord, we need to control our tongues. Remember James’ illustration of how the ship is controlled by a small rudder? Well, to avoid shipwreck, control your tongue. 1 Peter 3:10 says, “He who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile.” This requires both faith in God, and diligent effort on our part.

So to overcome the problem of the tongue, be born again, control that tongue, and then:

C. Use Your Tongue for Good - James gives some examples here in vv. 9-10 of blessing God and blessing men. Again, to use your tongue for good, you must control it, and tame it. For example, when you tame an animal, you get a worker instead of a destroyer. When you control fire, you can generate power. And when you tame the tongue, you can harness the tongue for much good. The tongue should be used for God’s glory, not for man’s gossip. It should be used to bless. It should never be used to blast. It should be used to help. It should never be used to hurt. Look over to Eph. 4:29. There it says, “let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.” If you don’t have something good to say, don’t say it. Also Col. 4:6 says, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.” I believe if we would memorize those two verses, that would go a long way in helping us to control our tongues, and speak what is good & helpful. Someone has said,

Be careful of the words you say,  
To keep them soft and sweet;  
You never know from day to day

Which ones you'll have to eat.

Conclusion: If you have come to realize that there is too much bad speech coming from your mouth, yet you know you are a Christian, then you need to repent of the times you failed, and trust the Lord to help you control your tongue, and use it for good. As a Christian you *can* have power over your tongue through the power of the Holy Spirit.

However, if your old sinful nature is still in control of your tongue, then you probably need to be saved. Remember, Jesus said, "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Mt. 12:34). You can get a new heart & a new tongue when you are born again by repentance, & faith in Christ. Only by coming to Christ & yielding your whole life to Him can you have victory over the tongue.

Sources: James Merritt (notes from his sermon on this text); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); George Sweeting, *How to Solve Conflicts: A Practical Study of the Book of James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973); Curtis Vaughan, *James: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Mature: James* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1978). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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