# James 3:1-8 The Tongue, Part 2 May 4, 2008

# Introduction

We are in the midst of studying how wise speech and conduct are to be an integral part of the Christian’s life of faith. We learned last time several key truths:

1. It should not be the case that many people are clamoring for the office of teacher in the church, because the future judgment on teachers is going to be stricter.

2. As it is, **we all sin in many ways**, so adding teaching will mean more opportunity for stumbling. Teaching is an added responsibility that brings with it further accountability at judgment (Luke 12:48). This judgment will be, for teachers, more in *quantity* (more words spoken) and different in *quality* (because of the potential impact of teaching, and the need for proper motivation and truth in the content of teaching).

3. We noted that this indicated three problems in the churches to which James wrote: lack of proper *motivation*, probable lack of *qualification* (1:19, 26, 3:1-12, and 4:11), and lack of *application* of knowledge regarding the future judgment.

4. **Human speech is a good indicator of spiritual maturity**. The general rule is that having a controlled tongue will mean one also has their whole person under control. We noted the verses about the heart in Matthew 12 and 15 And to the extent that the person does not stumble in word, to that extent they are perfect or mature. The implication of the statement is that those who are mature are qualified to teach. If this were an absolute standard, no one could teach!

5. Note the contrast between the good and bad uses of the tongue:

* Proverbs 10:31 The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, But the perverse tongue will be cut out.
* Proverbs 12:18-19 There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, But the tongue of the wise *promotes* health. The truthful lip shall be established forever, But a lying tongue *is* but for a moment.
* Proverbs 15:2 The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, But the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness.
* Proverbs 15:4 A wholesome tongue *is* a tree of life, But perverseness in it breaks the spirit.
* Proverbs 18:21 Death and life *are* in the power of the tongue, And those who love it will eat its fruit.

The remainder of verses 3-12 support James’ teaching that if someone can control his tongue, he can control his whole body. How is it that such a small part of our body can cause so much trouble? James will give us some insight into this as follows.

# 1. Our Tongue is Small But Can Have a Large Influence, v. 3-5a

James supports the notion at end of verse 2 that if you can control the tongue, you can control the whole body. He does so with two illustrations and then a concluding statement.

# A. Illustration #1: A Bit and a Horse, v. 3

Picture in your mind a strong war-horse, or a fast race-horse, or a large and stubborn draft horse. We place a bit in the mouth of such a large animal and can, with proper training, control the movements of the animal. The point is that **if you control the bit in the mouth of the horse, then you can control the whole horse.** This supports James’ contention that a small thing can control a much larger thing, and is a great illustration of control of the mouth.

One note on this interpretation—some covenant theologians suggest that the horse is the church and the bit is the pastor/teacher. This is too far-fetched!

# B. Illustration #2: A Rudder and a Large Ship, v. 4

Again, picture a huge ship, several hundred feet long, carrying hundreds of people and lots of cargo, or a large oil tanker, or an aircraft carrier. The rudder directs the ship in spite of huge forces against it—the sheer size of the ship, the strong winds, the waves, etc. In NT times, ships could be 300 feet long or thereabouts (maybe do a study on this sometime!); Paul’s ship in Acts 27:37 carried 276 men and is said to have a tonnage of 2600 tons. The point is that **if you control the rudder of the ship, then you can control the whole ship**, again demonstrating that something small can control something large.

Note that this point is enhanced by the last phrase of verse 4—there is another element at work here. The tongue is not the ultimate controlling agent, just like the rudder is not, and the bit is not. They have an intelligence and mechanism of control back of them. The text says about the rudder it guides the ship “wherever the will of the pilot desires.” Similarly, there is something behind the tongue—a will or a heart. Thus, the tongue, though so influential, is not the ultimate problem. It is a manifestation of the problem.

# C. Conclusion from Illustrations: The Tongue, v. 5a

**The point is that if you control the tongue, then you can control the whole body.** Though so small, the tongue has a great effect. The analogy is not exact, for the control of the horse and ship are executed through the bit and rudder, respectively. Control of ourselves is not through an intermediate agent as such. But the force which it takes to bring the tongue in line will find it simple then to control the rest of the body by comparison, as the tongue is our most unruly member.

The problem with the tongue is that it is more than a rudder—if we have control of it, we have control of our whole self, to be sure—but it also has a far-reaching impact outside of ourselves. To extend the illustrations just a bit, an out-of-control tongue not only shows an out-of-control person, but if it were a ship it would be crashing into many other ships, causing damage; or if it were a horse, it would be running wild and trampling others. So the tongue can do huge things, even though it is just a tiny thing.

In the context of teachers, mentioned in 3:1, the words of a teacher can have a far-ranging and either salutary or destructive effect. Speaking false doctrine can lead people to condemnation; speaking true doctrine can lead people to eternal life.

# 2. Our Tongue Has a Devastating Influence, v. 5b-6

The previous verses showed that the tongue, though small, has a large influence. These two verses add the nuance of “destructiveness” to that idea. Another illustration drives the point home—Smokey the Bear would agree with James and tell you that it only takes a match or a small campfire to set ablaze thousands of acres of woodland.

So verse 6 says that the tongue *is* a fire, dangerous and threatening. We should understand this to correspond to the “little fire” in v. 5b. The “forest” then corresponds to the destructive effects of the tongue. Notice how the tongue is described:

**A. It is the world of evil.** The *world* in James has the negative connotation of the system of evil that all humans are born into, that Satan controls, and that is in rebellion against God. In one little package is wrapped up a whole system of evil. The tongue and the world are close cousins.

**B. It defiles the whole body.** It has such a place in our bodies that it can morally stain us with sin very easily. See 1:27 for the related word “unstained.” Words that we use can do great damage to ourselves. The words of a public speaker, for instance, can totally damage his reputation in a very short span of time.

**C. It sets on fire the course of life.** Our speech can do damage to others as well. The whole world is full of sin because of our speech—from the Garden of Eden to the conflict in the middle east to many wars throughout history. The forest of world history has been set ablaze by the little fire called the tongue.

**D. It is set on fire by Hell.** James gives us some idea of the origin of the deadly effect of the tongue. Satan and the demons have influenced the use of the tongue (back to the Garden of Eden) and can use it today in those who are under their sway. It is interesting to contrast this source with the source of true wisdom (3:17, contrast 3:15).

# 3. Our Tongue Is Also Untamable, vv. 7-8

In reality, the content of verse 8 (*unruly evil*) connects these verses with the previous section. But another nuance is added in these verses, and that is on top of the out-of-proportion and destructive influence of the tongue, the tongue cannot be tamed or brought under control by mankind.

This sad reality is highlighted by the fact that mankind can tame and has tamed all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures. The examples are many—from the domesticated ones to the others that we can herd or use for work or whatever. Dogs, circus elephants and lions, killer whales, dolphins, eagles, parrots, snakes, and many others. James indirectly refers here to the dominion mandate, in which God gave mankind dominion over the creation from the beginning (Gen. 1:28).

Take the lion, for instance. Any level of control over that fearsome beast is simply amazing. But as wild as the king of beasts is, it is no match for the tongue. James says that no man can tame the tongue. It is restless or uncontrolled, ready to break out at any second. It is also full of fatal venom (like Rom 3:13).

Note that the NASB along with some commentators say that “no one can tame the tongue,” meaning that it is impossible to tame it at all. And if utter and absolute perfection in this life is what is in view, I would agree, since we never get rid of sin completely. But the Greek text, along with most translations, recognize that it really says “no one **among men** can tame the tongue.” There is a big difference. We have hope that God can indeed help us to subdue/domesticate/control our tongues. Man cannot. God can. See Matt. 19:26. After all is said and done, God *will* perfect our tongues, as well as every other part of our soul and body, when we are glorified and with Him forever.

This inability is part of the larger inability of mankind to please God because of his innate sinfulness (Rom. 8:7-8). This is something that we must come to admit about ourselves—we are UNABLE. We do not have the power to save ourselves. We are thus DEPENDENT upon God. Christ died for you to save you from your sins. He can also save you from your tongue, which is just one avenue (ahem, major highway) for sin.

# Conclusion

I trust that you have noticed your tongue fits this description—it is small but can have a big impact in your family, work, and church. This influence is often devastating because the tongue is so wild it cannot be tamed. What does this mean then? First, what it means is that I nor any other preacher can give you an easy 3-step solution to overcome the problem of the tongue, to tame it, as it were. If we believe the text of Scripture, no man can do that!

On the other hand, James 1:26 tells us that if we do not bridle our tongue, our religions is useless. What to do?! Any solution has to relate to the One Who can tame the tongue, and that is only God. We can appeal to God for help via practical wisdom (James 1:5) that comes down from above (3:17). We can repent of sins of the tongue (4:8-10) and appeal to God for cleansing from sin (1 John 1:9). We can continue to fill our minds with Scripture and be obedient to it (Psalm 119:9, 11). Obedience to God in every way you know how will bring marvelous results as He continues to sanctify you through His Word.

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# Illustration about Something Small Controlling Something Large

The steering wheel of a car, a small relay controlling a large electric motor, and other things.

# Illustration About Tongue as a Fire

“From September 11 to 13, 1902, the Yacolt Burn, the largest forest fire in recorded Washington state history, destroys 238,920 acres -- more than 370 square miles -- and kills 38 people in Clark, Cowlitz, and Skamania counties. The fire is fanned by unusual dry winds from the east and travels 36 miles in 36 hours.”

[http://www.historylink.org/essays/output.cfm?file\_id=5196]

Even larger…“The Great Fire (also known as the Big Blowup and the Big Burn) of 1910 was a forest fire which burned about three million acres (12,000 km²) in northeast Washington, northern Idaho, and western Montana over two days (August 20 and 21) and killed 86 people. It is believed to be the largest fire in recorded U.S. history. [That is equivalent to about 4500 sq miles, larger by 1000 sq miles than Delaware and Rhode Island combined]”

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\_Fire\_of\_1910]

# Illustration About the Devastating Influence of the Tongue

From [www.news.com](http://www.news.com), a story that happened in 2006: “Megan Meier, a 13-year-old girl who has struggled with issues of self-esteem and depression, is greeted on MySpace by an older boy. He strikes up a flirtation with her over a series of weeks. Then, inexplicably, he starts sending accusatory messages, then nasty ones. Megan, crushed by the turn of events, takes her own life. Further twisting the tragedy is the fact that the boy wasn’t a boy at all. Rather, he was the creation of adults, including the mother of one of Megan’s friends, a girl with whom she had a falling out. As it turns out, ‘Josh’ didn’t exist; the persona was created by a number of adults, including a woman named Lori Drew, the mother of one of Meier's former friends, specifically to harass the girl.”

Now to be sure, the point of the illustration is not to absolve the girl of responsibility in taking her own life, but a large amount of blame sits at the feet of those adults who were harassing her. They were using the “tongue”—human speech—to harass Megan and make for an effective, albeit sad, illustration of what speech can do to others.

# 4. Our Tongue is Inconsistent, v. 9-12

We may speak too much, too fast, too slow, too little (minimum standard before you are considered somewhat rude), too loudly, too softly, with too much complaining, with gossip, with slander.