

I Believe... So Now What?
(Week 6)
James 3:1-12
"The Most Powerful Force On Earth"

Introduction

"If anyone thinks he is religious without controlling his tongue, his religion is useless and he deceives himself."
James 1:26

James was a great preacher. The only recorded "sermon" that we still have from him is The Book of *James*. In it, he rails against useless religion. In the first chapter, he briefly addresses some of the telltale indicators of "phony religion". One of those indicators is an out-of-control tongue. By the time we reach the end of the **third chapter**, James has made it very clear that those who truly belong to Christ are held to higher standards, in not only what we do, but what we say. We are given no excuse for out-of-control speech. Those who have been reborn from above, by The Spirit, should be changed from the inside out, and therefore, our manner of speaking must be made new as well. After all, Jesus has made it very clear that the words that we speak come directly from the heart that is inside us (**Luke 6:25**).

I will never forget when George W. Bush was running for president, someone asked him who was the most influential person in his life. His answer was great, especially for a politician. He simply said, "Jesus, because He changed my heart". Now the media mocked him viciously for the statement, but I remember thinking, "This guy actually gets it". To be born again truly means to have a change of heart. If Christ lives within us, we just think differently. Its just a fact. And, when we think differently, we act differently, and we will certainly **speak** differently.

Now most of you who know me well, know that I certainly do not believe that once a person has been saved, they can lose their salvation. Its just not possible. But, there are so many out there who have convinced themselves that they have been born again, when in fact they have not. And, a pretty good indicator of someone who has *not* truly been filled with The Spirit of God is if they have no self control. You see, part of the "Fruit of The Spirit" is **self-control**.

"But the fruit of The Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."
Galatians 5:22

Just what is "the fruit of The Spirit"? It is the personality of Christ Himself. When He is in control of you, then His personalty will come out of you. We have been born again, so that the lost of this world will see Christ **in us** (**Colossians 1:27**). SO... it stands to reason, that if our speech is like that of this sinful world, if we are unable to control our responses in difficult and stressful situations, if we react to everything just as everyone else does, then no one will ever see Him in us. This is why Jesus warns us that we will stand before Him to give an account for what we say.

"I tell you that on the day of judgment, people will have to account for every careless word they speak."
Matthew 12:36

Now, I know what you are thinking. "A Christian will not have to stand before the Great White Throne of Judgment" (spoken of in **Revelation 20:11-15**). And you would be correct. But those of us who have been saved *will* stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account of, not only what we have done, but what we have said:

"Therefore, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to to please Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."
2 Corinthians 2:9-10

Did you catch that part about giving account for what we have done, whether “good or evil”? Well according to James, my friends, there is nothing more evil than an out of control tongue. Some of the worst gossips I have ever known are church members! Can I get a witness? Today, we are going to take a serious look at the tongue. In this section of James’ letter to the Church, he addresses three things: The Control of The Tongue; The Carnage of The Tongue; and The Controller of The Tongue. Please allow me to explain further.

A Tongue Controlled

“Not many should become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we will receive stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways. If any one does not stumble in what he says, he is mature, able also to control the whole body. Now, if we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we direct their whole bodies. And consider ships: Though very large and driven by fierce winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So too, though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts great things.”

James 3:1-5(a)

This is an incredible little piece of Scripture! James is basically saying that the key to complete self-control begins with controlling our tongues. If a person can learn to master his own tongue, then the rest of his body will be easily mastered. Think about that for a moment. When I was young and in school, I bore witness to many “schoolyard fights” between boys. (Truth be told, I was in a few of them myself.) Do you know what started every single one of those fights that I saw? Someone said something, which was followed by someone else saying something, until tempers flared and fists flew. You see, as goes the tongue, so goes the whole body! Just imagine what the world would be like if, before anyone ever spoke, they prayed about it beforehand. There would be no more strife, bloodshed, or turmoil. Wars always begin with words!

James gives a specific warning to those who would teach God’s Word. If a person steps into a position of authority and presumes to tell other people how to live, then that person must be mature and living an exemplary life as well. *The Bible* doesn’t subscribe to the “Do as I say and not as I do” philosophy, when it comes to those who stand and teach. We are to live what we believe, and this includes being able to hold our tongues in submission. Can you imagine what a disaster would befall our congregation if your pastor could not keep what he hears in confidence? Or how much trouble it would cause the church if its leaders were easily provoked into words of anger? This is why *The Bible* tells us not to be too “quick to appoint anyone as an elder”. Spiritual leadership **requires** spiritual maturity, and James has already warned us, that if someone cannot control their own tongue their “religion is useless”. Having useless faith is not exactly a ringing endorsement for a pastor, my friends, and I am almost certain that no preacher has ever listed that on his resume! (Although many probably should have). Those in leadership will be subject to stricter judgment, for they can so easily lead others astray by what they say and do. A pastor not only has to give an account for his own life, but for how his life influenced others:

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, since they keep watch for your souls, as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”

Hebrews 13:17

If God has called you to teach, my friend, then do it passionately with all that you have, but always remember, there is a price to be paid for being in leadership, so take it very seriously.

James uses the illustration of a horses bit and a ships rudder to show how a very small thing can cause a very large thing to be placed under complete control. A person who has mastered his own tongue will have little difficulty in keeping the rest of himself in check. Having problems with self-control? Begin by putting a “bridle” on your tongue. If you can control that, then everything else will fall into place. The words that you say, reveal what is in your heart. Or, as I heard another preacher once say, “When

you get squeezed, what's inside will always come out!" Its easy for us to be nice and kind, when everything is going our way isn't it? But when the tests, trials, and temptations of life come our way, then it is our tongues that reveal to the world just what we are like on the inside. Lets make sure that we are nothing like the Pharisee's that Jesus spoke of in **Matthew 23:27**:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and every kind of impurity."

You see, its not about how you look on the outside. Its the heart that counts, and if you have a bad one, my friend, sooner or later, your tongue will let it slip out into the light! Spiritual maturity will manifest itself by a tongue under control.

A Tongue's Carnage

"Consider how a small fire sets ablaze a large forest. And the tongue is a fire. The tongue, a world of unrighteousness, is placed among our members. It stains the whole body, sets the course of life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."

James 3:5(b)-6

James wanted to remind us of the damage that is caused by an out of control tongue. There is nothing good that can possibly come from "loose talk". That is why Jesus promised to hold us accountable for it. Words are like the bullets from a gun. Once the trigger has been pulled, there is no way to get them back in the barrel! I once read that scientists have discovered that sound waves actually never die, they just move out of our earshot and eventually out into space. This means that if we had the technology, we could actually recapture every word that has ever been spoken on this earth and replay it for everyone to hear! That is astounding to me. Now, just think of all the horrible and evil words that have been said from the beginning of time until now. All of those words are just floating out there in space even as we speak. Humanity has turned the entire universe into one giant "trash can". Kind of makes you wish that you had been more careful in what you said doesn't it? Just knowing that all of my words are still floating out there in space somewhere is a bit disconcerting. By the way, God *does* have the "technology" to replay them for us. It's a good thing to keep in mind.

James likens the carnage that can be done by the tongue to a forest fire that is started by a single spark. All of us can remember well the massive fire that consumed the Smoky Mountains a couple of years ago. That massive fire that consumed thousands of acres and was responsible for the deaths of fourteen people, as I recall, was started by two teenage boys throwing lit matches. Those sparks did considerable damage before the fires were eventually quenched.

Our words can have a similar effect. The wrong word spoken at the right time can cause irreparable damage in the lives of others. With our tongues we speak devastating words of gossip, slander, anger, and profanity, and they destroy lives. The old adage "Sticks and Stones may break my bones, but words can never harm me" is a lie. Words can destroy, and every believer ought to subscribe to the philosophy that when it comes to our speech, "less is more".

"My dear brothers and sisters, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for human anger does not accomplish God's righteousness."

James 1:19-20

Think about what this verse is telling us. It is saying that we should listen more and talk less. And, not only that, but speaking out of anger will **never** accomplish anything positive in God's kingdom. We often react with anger, when we see or hear something that upsets us, but according to The Word of God, that cannot ever work out for the good. Those of us who have children should have learned this lesson well by now. When we discipline our kids while we are angry, we generally come down way too

hard on them. Sometimes, if we are honest with ourselves about it, we have to go back later and apologize for our outburst. Can I get a witness? Just this week, I let someone “get under my skin”, and I replied with an outburst of anger. Even though I was absolutely correct in what I was saying, my own manner of speech negated my argument. I should have prayed about my response, rather than just reacting. There is nothing wrong with righteous indignation, but there is definitely something wrong with speaking as a result of a lost temper. According to James, you can be “right as rain” in what you say, but when it is spoken in anger, it never accomplishes anything good. You do realize that God is perfectly capable of defending His own reputation, and He doesn’t need us to get in fist fights for His honor? So, stand for truth, but don’t be a jerk about it. Listen to the words of Solomon:

“A gentle answer turns away anger, but a harsh word stirs up wrath.” Proverbs 15:1

So don’t talk while you’re still angry. There’s no sense in starting another fire. The world already has enough of those raging as it is. Be a firefighter, not an arsonist! Don’t speak in anger.

Another way that people can cause destruction with their tongues is with gossip/slander. These are sometimes more deadly than words spoken in anger, for they cause damage to people that can last a lifetime. Most arguments are settled, forgiven, and forgotten over time, but gossip can leave a person scarred for life. Here’s a good rule of thumb to follow: If you are saying **anything** about someone else that you would not want them to hear, (unless you are planning a surprise birthday party for them...) it’s gossip! So many “church people” like to dish out dirt on their fellow church-goers in the form of a “prayer request”. A prayer request should go something like, “Please remember Bill in your prayers”. While “gossip disguised as a prayer request” says, “Pray for Bill, he’s an alcoholic and his wife is thinking about leaving him. He can’t keep a job, because he’s a momma’s boy and a loser”. The difference should be quite obvious to us all, don’t you think? But how many times have we crossed over **that** particular line with what we say about others, when they are not around to hear? Talking negatively about the people, that we have been called to “love as we love ourselves”, is never ok. In fact, it stirs up dissension within the body. Again from proverbs:

“The LORD hates six things; in fact seven are detestable to Him: arrogant eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that plots wicked schemes, feet eager to run to evil, a lying witness who gives false testimony, and one who stirs up trouble among brothers.” Proverbs 6:16-19

Those who would spread the wildfire of gossip within the Body of Christ are absolutely stirring up “trouble” among brothers. James teaches:

“The tongue, a world of unrighteousness, is placed among our members. It stains the whole body, sets the course of life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.” James 3:6

There is nothing Godly about a person who cannot control his tongue. And, an uncontrollable tongue brings nothing but carnage into this world. God forgive us, when we cannot learn to keep our evil tongues in check.

A Tongue’s Only Controller

“Every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish is tamed and has been tamed by humankind, but no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue, we bless our LORD and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in God’s likeness. Blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, these things should not be this way. Does a spring pour out sweet and bitter water from the same opening? Can a fig tree produce

olives, my brothers and sisters, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a saltwater spring yield fresh water.” James 3:7-12

Now, we come to a bit of hard-to-understand text. At first, James tells us that we need to control the tongue (**vs. 1-5a**). Then, he warns us about the damage caused by an out-of-control tongue (**vs. 5b-6**). Now, he tells us that **no one** can tame the tongue (**vs. 8**)! People have been able to tame all sorts of wild animals, but not a single human being has ever been able to tame his tongue. Which brings us to the all important question: “So how can we ever possibly hope to control what we say?” Well, James goes on to explain in the next portion of this chapter. It is by praying to receive wisdom from above (**James 3:13-18**). In other words, what James is telling us is that no one will ever be able to control their tongues in their own strength, but only by The Holy Spirit. Now **He** is perfectly qualified to take control of the tongue. A person, who is filled with The Spirit of God, has been given the power to master what they say. It is simply a matter of praying before we speak. Now, I’ve said a lot of stupid things in my lifetime, but I cannot recall one time, when I said something dumb or inappropriate, *after* I had prayed about it first and sought the wisdom and counsel of Almighty God. Can I get a witness?

The most powerful verse in this passage should pierce deeply into the heart of each of us:

“With the tongue we bless our LORD and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in God’s likeness. Blessings and cursing come out of the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, these things should not be this way.” James 3:9-10

I personally have encountered this phenomenon as recently as this past week. I listened as someone talked of God, and how they loved Him, and then almost in the next breath began to rail against a certain ethnic group of people! I find this to be incredibly shocking. How can we call ourselves “Christian” and not love those that Christ loved? Brothers and sisters, **these things should not be!** Every person on this earth has been created in The Image of God. He made them, and He loves them. When we do not love others, for whatever reason, we may try and call ourselves “Christian”, but we are nothing like Christ. In fact, He spent the bulk of His time loving those who were the most despised by man.

I am reminded of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (**Luke 16:19-31**). It is a story of a poor man, whom no one cared to notice, begging outside the gate of a rich man, who had it all. I have never believed that this was a fictional story. I believe that Lazarus the beggar was someone that Jesus knew personally. None of Jesus’ other parables ever call anyone by name. If it was just a fictional story, then Christ must have named the poor man, while leaving out the rich man’s name for a reason. Perhaps to illustrate for us that we might just be surprised at who God knows by name... and who he does not.

When both of these men died, their fortunes were dramatically reversed. Lazarus was comforted, and the rich man was tormented. Which brings me to my point. Be careful to love those that others view as outcast. Don’t “bless God” with one breath and curse those He cares about with the next. To do so is pure evil. Jesus knew Lazarus, **by name**. Maybe no one else on earth ever truly cared about this man, but God did. I can’t imagine how horrific it would be to live my life “deceiving myself” that I know Christ and that He knows me, only to hear Him say before the Great White Throne of Judgment, “Depart from me. I never knew you”. I want Jesus to know me by name, just like He knew Lazarus. One way to prove that He lives within me is to love those that He loves! So, when everyone else sees the outcasts of humanity, do you see a Lazarus? God forgive us when we do not!

We need to control our tongues folks, for our tongues can start fires that will burn for eternity. And, we can never hope to do this on our own. It can only be done by having wisdom from above, and the wisdom from above is found through The Spirit of God dwelling within us. He is the ultimate “Controller” of the tongue. Is He guiding your words and deeds today? Surrender to Him completely. Have a change of heart that causes a complete transformation of your way of speaking. He has done it for others, and He can do it for you. Give Him complete control over what comes out when you speak, and you will be a blessing to others, not a curse.

And ALL of God’s people said.....**TRUTH!!!**