

Taming the Terrible Tongue

Devotional

On a windswept hill in an English country churchyard stands a drab, gray slate tombstone. The faint etchings read:

Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, lies Arabella Young,
Who, on the twenty-fourth of May, began to hold her tongue.

Let's hope that we learn what that woman never did, to tame the tongue! As a wise sage observed, "As you go through life you are going to have many opportunities to keep your mouth shut. Take advantage of all of them" (quoted by James Dent, Reader's Digest [12/82]).

As we move into chapter 3, James has gone from preaching to meddling! He has just made it clear that genuine faith works. If God has changed your heart through the new birth, the saving faith that He granted to you will inevitably show itself in a life of good deeds. But now he moves from the generality of good deeds to the specifics of the words that you speak. Genuine faith yields to Christ's lordship over your tongue. With David (Psalm 141:3), all true believers will pray, "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips." While the monster may never be totally tamed, if you know Christ as Savior, you are engaged in the ongoing battle to tame the terrible tongue.

In building his case that all have sinned, the apostle Paul zeroes in on the sins of the tongue (Romans 3:13-14):

*"Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips";
"Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness...."*

It would be nice if conversion resulted in a total makeover of the mouth, but it is not so! Although we become new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), we also carry around with us the old nature or the flesh, which wars against the Spirit (Galatians 5:17). The tongue is one of the major battlegrounds in the war. To become godly people, we must wage war daily on this front.

James is a savvy pastor who knows that we won't gear up for the battle and face our own sins of the tongue unless we recognize the magnitude of the problem. We all tend to justify ourselves by pointing to others who are notoriously bad. In comparison with how they talk, I'm doing okay. But James comes in with vivid illustrations to open our eyes to just how serious our problem is. It's interesting that he never gives any advice on how to control the tongue. He just leaves you reeling from his portrait of how huge this problem is. He's saying,

To tame the terrible tongue, we must recognize the tremendous magnitude of the battle that we face.¹

¹ Sermon by Steven Cole Found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-12-taming-terrible-tongue-james-31-12>

Open it

1. What are your favorite and least favorite foods to eat? Why?

Read it

JAMES 3:1-12

Explore it

2. What warning does James give to people who want to be teachers within the church?
3. Who does James say has tamed the tongue in verse 8?
4. How does James describe the tongue in verse 8?
5. According to James, in verse 9, what do we do with our tongue that makes it such a big problem?

Apply it

Once again, context is important. James has been developing the theme of living a complete and mature Christian life—one that puts faith into practice. He's already focused on several areas where there's a sizable gap between what we believe and how we act. Speech is next on the list.

6. We have just completed two chapters of James' letter to the church. What lessons have you learned so far, and how has this new understanding helped to make you more complete in Christ?

NOT SO FAST

Apparently the churches to which James was writing had too many men who were self-appointed teachers. In the Jewish synagogues, rabbis were highly respected and the office was often one that parents coveted for their sons. It was proper to respect the rabbis because of the sacred Scriptures that they expounded, but it was wrong to give men the honor that God alone deserves. Jesus confronted the Jewish leaders on this account (Matthew 23:6-11):

They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant.

There's a certain inherent prestige in becoming a teacher. Presumably, you know more than those that you teach, which means that in some way they should look up to you. Because of this, there is the built-in danger that some will take upon themselves the office of Bible teacher for the wrong reasons, or that those who took the position for the right reason later will fall into pride. If a man goes into teaching the Bible because of a secret desire for status or recognition, he is doing it for self and not for the Lord.²

7. What are some of the benefits that come with being a teacher that might tempt people to desire such a task? What is it about teaching that might cause you to regret becoming a teacher?

The office of teacher offered a respect, a prominence, and an authority which made some men hanker after it. Don't, says James. Think not so much of its outward privileges as of its immense responsibilities under God. Be more concerned about your fitness for teaching than with the external trappings of the office.³

² ibid

³ Vaughan, Curtis. James -- Bible Study Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1969

James here sees anyone who is involved in a public teaching ministry but who is misusing the tongue as in particular peril. Though we may be unusually gifted in spiritual insight and verbal eloquence, if we cannot control the tongue we had better hang it up. As we have seen, James' motivation for his command "not many of you should become teachers" is not that he wants to evacuate the church of gifted teachers, but rather that he wants people to assume such duties in the right spirit, under God's tutelage. He wants those who teach to have control over their tongues because a chaste tongue means a pure heart and a life submitted to God. How do we preachers measure up? What about those of us who are elders, leaders, Sunday school workers, club leaders?⁵

12. How might we as students affirm and encourage the teachers among us? How does this ministry of support and encouragement to our teachers benefit us as students?

WE ALL STUMBLE IN MANY WAYS

So we all sin, and we all sin in many ways. **The word here is the word "stumble," which is a substitute for the word "sin." It means a moral lapse, a failure to do what is right; an offense against God is the idea.** We all do it. It is present tense. We all do it commonly, and we all do it in many ways. In all kinds of ways, all of us continually fail to do what is right, and the tongue is one very, very dominant way in which we fail. And so it has great potential to condemn us. Now, while, in a sense, this is a confession on the part of James, it is more an observation of truth than a personal confession.⁶

13. In what ways, does verse 2 serve as an encouragement to believers? How can it be abused?

14. How have you seen God grow you in the last couple years where you no longer "stumble" over the things that once tripped you up as a Christ-follower?

⁵ Hughes, R. Kent. James (ESV Edition): Faith That Works (Preaching the Word) (pp. 120-121). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Sermon by John MacArthur entitled "Taming the Tongue Part 1" found @ <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/59-17>

18. James 3:8 pictures the tongue as a recoiled snake waiting to lash out. Was there a recent time you lashed out with your tongue? In what ways would a bridled tongue have changed what was said?

James moves back to an idea that he started in chapter one about being double-minded. We learned in chapter one that this double-mindedness is the opposite of wisdom. Wisdom integrates hearing the word and doing what it says. Double-mindedness separates these two vital aspects of biblical faith. In chapter 1, James spoke of the “double-minded man” and in chapter 2, he looked at those who would separate faith and works. In this passage, he’s pointing at the “double-talk” or “forked tongue” of Christians, who out of the same mouth both praise and curse. Again the answer lies in wisdom— integrating faith and practice and not separating the two. We are Christ-followers and so we should speak like Christ-followers.

19. In verses 9–12, perhaps thinking of the snake’s forked tongue, James says we can be double-minded when it comes to our tongues. Why is James so concerned with this sort of dichotomy in the Christian’s speech and life?

20. James finishes this passage on the tongue by speaking of the great contrast of using our tongues both to bless and to curse people. In what ways can we use our tongues to curse others? How can we use the examples and wisdom James gives to begin blessing people this week?

21. Read Isaiah 6:1–7. What does this passage say about our sin when it comes to our speech and the grace God gives despite it?