



**DON'T LET YOUR TONGUE BITE YOU**  
**James 3:1-12**

A pious woman with a rather sharp tongue, who professed to be a Christian but gossiped like an old hen – approached the rector of her church in London. She complained that the white bands which he wore with his pulpit gown – were altogether too long and that this annoyed her greatly. She wanted permission to shorten them and had come armed with a pair of scissors. The pastor agreed, handed over the bands and the woman snipped away with her scissors and then handed the garments back to the rector.

He said, “Now, my good woman, there is something about you which is altogether **too long** and which has annoyed me and many others for quite some time, and since one good turn deserves another, I would like your permission to shorten it.”

Startled, the woman said, “Certainly sir, you have my permission to do so and here are the shears.”

Whereupon, the pastor smiled and said, **“Very well madam, stick out your tongue.”**<sup>1</sup>

The tongue in comparison to the size of our physical bodies is a midget – but in spiritual significance it is a giant. Words from the mouth can be a spiritual boomerang which can come back to us to hurt us and haunt us. However, the late Mother Theresa once wrote: “Kind words can be short and easy to speak – but their echoes are truly endless.”

James writes in **Chapter 3:10**, “Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.”

As a preacher of God’s Word, I am greatly challenged every time I read these first 12 verses of the third chapter. While written to all Christians – it has a special exhortation to teachers and preachers and the words we use. Yes, those of us who teach and preach will be judged with a greater responsibility. It is enough to get you looking for another line of work. I remember that Dr. Brack, my professor of speech and communications at Drew Seminary, teaching us with a smile that “words are what set human beings above the lower animals.”

William Shakespeare knew of the powerful impact words could have when he wrote, “He who takes from me my good name, takes that which enriches him – but

makes me poor indeed.” Yes, when anger spreads through thy breast – guard they tongue from barking wildly.

St. Augustine wrote years ago that a preacher is a “vendor of words” – and because of this teaching in James’ epistle – it frightened him a great deal.

Then to make matters that much more challenging, James writes in **verse 8**, “No man can tame the tongue.” It is as if James is saying your conversion to Jesus Christ is not fully completed until your tongue has been baptized as well. Even Charles Haddon Spurgeon was forced to conclude, “Tongue sins – are GREAT sins.” Even John Calvin wrote, “The only thing more damaging than a loose cannon – is a slippery and loose tongue.”

We have opened God’s word today and read those revealing words from **James 3:1-12** in which we see that the problems of the tongue and communicating properly is not a new problem – but an ancient problem that demands daily attention and action. It needs control.

I remember when our children were very young and they were going through bouts with tonsillitis and strep throat. The first thing Dr. Moffitt in West Reading would say was, “Please stick out your tongue.” Dr. Moffitt would always share with them how important it was to examine the tongue.

James, the Apostle, declared the same principle is at work in our spiritual life and maturity. The writer, James – as I shared – teaches us that the tongue is small – but it has great influence and power over the rest of the body. It may only weigh two ounces but it can cause tons of damage.

This is demonstrated when the tongue in **verse 3** is compared to a bit in the mouth of a horse. Nothing is quite as scary as a horse out of control – or a bull in a china shop.

In **verse 4** – it is compared to a rudder on a large ship.

In **verse 5** – it is demonstrated how just a spark can set the whole forest burning.

Perhaps the greatest insight that James shares is that without the constraining and controlling power of the Holy Spirit – it is impossible to tame the tongue from its natural tendency to hurt and harm. Only when the “tongue is under the power of the Holy Spirit – can it be used to heal – not hurt.” In our own strength, we are incapable of overcoming the power of evil and the devil, which really is at the center of the problem of the tongue.

So, let us present our tongues to Dr. James of the Jerusalem medical team for an examination today. I see that Dr. James has 3 comments on his prescription pad for us to take home today.

**FIRST, JAMES IS TEACHING US TO BE VERY CAREFUL ABOUT THE WORDS WE SHARE IN OUR CONVERSATION ABOUT EACH OTHER IN THE CHURCH HOUSE AND BEYOND.**

**Proverbs 12:18** shares, “Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword – but wisely spoken words can heal.”

Dr. William H. Willimon, who is perhaps our best-known Bishop – wrote a column shortly after Dr. Jerry Falwell’s passing about his encounter with Dr. Falwell. When Dr. Willimon was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University – our great Methodist institution in the south – it was his responsibility to invite to campus a diversity of religious leaders and speakers across the theological spectrum. One of the students dared him to invite Dr. Falwell to campus. So he did. Well, Duke University was up in arms about this. Protests erupted. The Duke Community is an upper middle class school – usually with a leftist position on most political and the theological issues. One professor wrote, “How dare you invite Dr. Jerry Falwell? What can we learn from a bigoted, narrow-minded man like this?” (In my experience as a Christian – it is the liberal left who are the most closed-minded, bigoted people I have met.)

Well, Dr. Falwell accepted the invitation and came to speak. When Dr. Willimon introduced Dr. Falwell – there were boos and hisses from the crowd. Dr. Falwell spoke – and remarkably not one controversial thing was said. However, there was a question and answer period afterwards.

Dr. Willimon remembered, “Things got real ugly – fast. A young woman got up and said, ‘Dr. Falwell, you preach hate.’ The crowd responded with cheers. She continued, ‘How many African-Americans do you have at Liberty University?’

The crowd responded again with applause. Dr. Willimon never forgot how Dr. Falwell responded. Dr. Falwell said, ‘Young woman, you could not have asked a question that hurts me more deeply.’ (The hissing and jeering continued.) ‘It is my most regrettable failure. I have worked – prayed – recruited all over this country – and I regret to say that only 12 percent of our student body is African/American.’

Falwell continued, ‘Now here at Duke – your endowment is 50 times greater than ours – you have had many more years to work on this issue. Do you know how many African-Americans are enrolled at Duke? I’ll tell you. Six percent! I pray that you will let the Lord help you do better.’” Dead silence in the jam-packed auditorium.”<sup>2</sup>

Be careful you don’t let your tongue bite you. Before you speak, examine your life with the same microscope you have used to examine the person you are able to criticize.

In **Acts 15** – a major controversy erupted in the early church called ‘The Jerusalem Conference.’ It was James who was a moderating influence between the two dividing factions. James knew the value of words – a word rightly spoken.

## **SECONDLY, JAMES IS TEACHING US TO GIVE UP NEEDLESS CONVERSATION FOR ACCOMPLISHMENT IN THE BODY OF CHRIST.**

We learned from Dr. James last week we must be hearers and doers of the word of God. In **Matthew 7:21** – Jesus, our Lord, teaches us “not everyone who cries ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of God.” How clear do we need to hear it?

My colleague, Jim Moore, tells the story of a man who went to heaven and discovered in his tour a place where he found only the tongues and ears of so many people that he knew who called themselves Christians. He asked St. Peter why this was.

St. Peter said that only their tongues and ears made it into heaven because they heard the word, they told everybody including God how much they believed, but they never got to first base because that was all they did. They talked about feeding the hungry, but they never shared a cup of cold water or contributed a dime to the many worthwhile projects right there in their own communities.

You don’t know how many times I heard someone say to me, “Pastor, the church is just full of hypocrites. They talk a good game – but that’s all it is.” A Christian who is a Christian in name only – or what we would call a ‘nominal’ Christian – is one of the greatest detriments to the Christian faith. It is far more detrimental than atheism. James would encourage us to give up needless conversation and put our hands to the plow and let people see our faith in action.

I would encourage you to volunteer to help with:

- the Water Street Rescue Mission
- Our LUMINA ministry in Lancaster as well. Give up TV one afternoon or evening a week. Instead visit some of our home-bound and nursing home members. They would love to have a visit from you.
- Make a meal for our Wednesday night youth program
- volunteer at Wednesday Night Alive
- attend the Wednesday Bible Study with Lucy
- help with the casserole ministry
- make a commitment to join our Senior Choir or Praise Band

- accept a turn in the nursery
- Help with Vacation Bible School.

Do one positive thing for God – rather than talking about 10 things that never get done. **Galatians 6:6** says, “Let him who is taught the word, share all good things.” Please give up **conversation** and replace it with **accomplishment**.

**THIRDLY, DR. JAMES WOULD PRESCRIBE, ‘SOAK YOUR TONGUE DAILY IN THE PURPOSES OF GOD.’**

I believe James indicates this in **verse 12** when he writes, “Can a fig tree bear olives – or a grape vine bear figs?” Perhaps what we say on the outside is always determined by what is on the **INSIDE**.

I recently read about four Jewish physicians who were quarreling about which part of the body was most important for life. They could not reach a consensus among themselves so they consulted the Rabbi.

“Of course the heart and blood vessels are most important,” said the first physician, “for on them the whole of life depends.”

“Not at all,” said the second physician. “It is the brain and nerves which are most vital, for without them, even the heart would not beat.”

The third physician said, “You are both wrong. It is the stomach and the digestive passages which are important, for without the proper digestion of food, the body will die.”

“The lungs are most important,” declared the fourth, “for a person without air will surely die.”

“You are all wrong,” said the Rabbi. “There are two vessels of the body only – that are important, but you have no knowledge of them.”

“What are they?” asked the physicians.

The Rabbi replied, “**One is the channel that runs from the ear to the soul and the other runs from the soul to the tongue.**”

This is the exact anatomy lesson that Dr. James of Jerusalem is sharing in our scripture lesson today.

Yes, when the tongue is connected to the soul, your words come from a fountain that blesses life – not corrupts it. Our words are to be governed by God.

Every Sunday in pulpits all across the world the preacher will pause to pray, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

The tongue is a tremendously powerful tool. You can make a person feel like a zero – or lift them to the zenith of life.

I am convinced if the Holy Spirit had all the tongues of this church – it would be like Pentecost all over again! May God take your tongue and lips and speak through them – with his love and light! I think Charles Wesley expressed it best when he wrote,

**“O for a thousand tongues to sing  
My great Redeemer’s praise  
The glories of my God and King  
The triumph of His Grace.”**

May God give us grace so to do!

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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#### **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Attributed to the late Dr. Clarence McCartney of Pittsburgh, PA.

<sup>2</sup> **“The Christian Century,”** June 12, 2007, **CHARMS OF AN IDEOLOGUE.**