

XV. James in Biblical Perspective
The Gospel Life According to James
“True Religion and the Tongue, Part 2”
James 3:1-12
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March 16, 2014 – Morning Sermon

We are in James 3 and our fifteenth study of the book of James. This is our second visit to this text in James 3:1-12. Remember that true religion is marked by a bridled tongue, by public ministries to the least, last and marginalized and thirdly a personal commitment to holiness that is found back in James 1:26-28, the Gospel wisdom life. Now we look at this matter of the bridled tongue. James 3:1-2 says *[1] Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. [2] For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.* The grass withers, the flower fades, God’s Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

At the outset with this whole matter of the tongue I have been greatly indebted to two professors I had in seminary, Tim Keller and Henry Krabbendam and then also C.S. Lewis. I’d like to give them credit that is appropriate upfront. I will be taking some of their thoughts and putting them together with this text but mostly some things that the Lord has laid upon my heart.

First I would like for you to remember two extraordinary events in the life of Jesus because I think you’ll see why as we get to the end of this study. The first event is where Jesus is on the road to Caesarea Philippi. It was a place of extraordinary pagan ungodliness. In fact He is on a road where you are under the shadow of a cave that was actually a place of child sacrifice at one time. It houses a pagan temple. There the Greek and Roman paganism that has been preceded by the pagan ungodliness of child sacrifice and intermingle from time to time, under the shadow of Mount Hermon and the shadow of that pagan temple, Jesus turns to His disciples and says “Who do people say that I am?” His disciples quickly answer “They say You’re John the Baptist, You’re Elijah, You’re Jeremiah, You’re one of the prophets.” That is kind of like saying today that you’re a great preacher for everybody is downloading your sermons.

Then Jesus turns to a more probing second question saying “Who do you say that I am?” Peter quickly as was his wont says “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus responds, “Blessed are you Simon Barjona (how did you utter that from your tongue) because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you but My Father who is in heaven.” Then Jesus began to share with them that He must go to Jerusalem and there He will be put to death by the scribes and Pharisees. After the third day He will rise again. Peter with the same mouth and the same tongue then pronounces an anathema of what Jesus has just said “God forbid that this should ever happen to You.” Then Jesus says “Get behind Me Satan for you have set your mind and heart not upon God’s interests but upon man’s interests.” Within a few moments there is a tongue from heaven and a tongue from hell from the same man.

Fast forward with me to some months later to the second event I want you to remember. We’ll be celebrating this in a couple of weeks. We call it Palm Sunday, the

triumphal entry. Jesus comes in and the crowds are shouting the psalms of the Messiah, declaring God has come, the Messiah has come, “Hosanna, in the highest!” Yet in days some of these same voices will be part of a crowd that cries out “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” Keep those two events in the back of your mind as we go to James 3.

I want you to anticipate something. We are in some verses that do three things for you. Number one, these verses identify for you the greatest challenge in the Christian life of growing in grace. Secondly, these verses identify the one area of focus that if God’s grace gives you victory then the rest of the Christian life will fall into place and be drastically affected in a gloriously and marvelously majestic way for God’s glory in grace. So on the one hand these verses give you the greatest challenge and on the other hand the greatest asset of focus in the Christian life. Thirdly, these verses identify the only way to overcome the challenge and the only way to employ and take advantage of the asset. So with those three things in mind and the two events from the life of Jesus let’s look at the test for this study.

We took some time in the last study on James 3:1-2 and found out that these gateway verses give a challenge that not many should become teachers. Now that is looking at formal teaching, the office of teaching, the gift of teaching but it is also looking at other teaching as well. Why does it do this? It is because teaching matters. Teaching matters because words matter. The text is informing you that everyone will appear before the same Judgment Seat with the same Judge but while all will appear before the same Judgment Seat and the same Judge they all won’t be in the same group. There will be two groups. There will be sheep and goats. There will be those who are judged who are in rebellion against God’s revelation, creation and in His Word and they will be judged from that which is called the books. The only verdict that will be heard time and time again is the wages of sin is death and condemnation for depart from Me you workers of lawlessness.

There is another group of people who will be before the same Judge but it is not the same group of people and it’s not the same judgment. There will be one Judgment Seat and one Judge, two people and two different judgments. This group is called the sheep. This group is not written in the books but they are written in the book of Life. They will not hear ‘depart from Me’ because the One who is now their Judge had come and saved them from their sins so there is no condemnation because He took it. There is only justification because His righteousness surrounds them. So why are they there?

They are there for five reasons. I gave these in the last study and here I will just remind you of them. Number one, that day will be the first day that you will know the height, the depth and the breadth of God’s grace and love for you, like no other day. I know you know your life better than I know your life and I know my life better than you know my life but I don’t know my life. I don’t know the depth of my sin. I don’t know the heights of my rebellion. Therefore I have not yet seen the heights, depths and the magnificence of all that God has done for me. Eye has not seen and ear has not heard but that day, I’ll know it. Secondly, on that day God will be glorified by saving a wretch like me. Thirdly, on that day those who have vilified God and His people because of what is displayed of His grace in the lives of His people, we’ll have to glorify God in the Day of Judgment according to Peter. Fourthly, that is the day that I give account of my stewardship and those who are teachers have a stricter account of their stewardship but we’ll all give account of our stewardship. This is not for our salvation. This is for the

accountability of all that God has entrusted to us in life. Fifthly, comes the giving of the rewards for God's people which is the amassing of the resources that you will use to worship God and serve Him forever. With all of those rewards you will praise Him and with all of those rewards you will serve Him forever and ever in eternal life and ministry.

The reason the teachers have a stricter judgment is because God uses teaching and teaching works. Good teaching produces good results and bad teaching produces bad results. One of the reasons teaching works is because words are powerful. So James gets to this mark of true religion. Remember religion is not how we get right with God for true religion is the result of being right with God through Jesus Christ. One of these marks is the matter of the bridled tongue. We are going to hear some astounding things in this text about the bridled tongue, about our relationship with our tongue and what has to happen for the tongue to get bridled.

In James 3:2 he first says that we all stumble in many ways. One of the ways we stumble is with our tongue. Then he makes this startling statement in James 3:2 that if you don't stumble in your tongue then you can be a perfect man. Now none of us are going to be perfect until we get to be with Jesus but we are want to be perfect because we heard Jesus tell us through Peter to be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. We are not going to be sinless but we want to sin less and we want to love Him more. Therefore we are wanting to be complete, be perfected. If you can get a hold of the tongue then you can have a perfect life. That is astounding. If the tongue is bridled then the whole man can be bridled which affects everything else in your Christian life.

After saying that he decides to illustrate it so let's look at how he illustrates this. He gives two vivid metaphors about this matter of the tongue. He has already said that the bridled tongue is the evidence of true religion and he'll talk about the tongue much more as we go along. He is also drawing from the book of Proverbs and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount heavily in this text. I'll try to point this out as we walk through this text.

James 3:2b-3 says *[2b] if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. [3] If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.* The bit represents the tongue in the metaphor and it will direct the horse which references life, wherever the rider wants it to go. That is how powerful that small bit is in the mouth of this big horse. He doesn't stop there. He gives another illustration.

James 3:4 says *[4] Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.* Here is this large ship, these tumultuous waves and storms, yet the ship gets to the port where the captain wants to dock it. It gets there because there is a rudder that the captain uses to guide it. There is a little rudder, a big ship with big elements but he gets it where he wants it because of the rudder. Then he sums it up.

James 3:5a says *[5a] So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.* We are going to boast with our tongues but the question is who and what will be boast about and we have the capacity to boast great things with this little bity tongue in our mouth. It is not 'if' we boast for we will but what will it be and who will it be that we boast about. Then he gives us a third metaphor.

James 3:5b-6 says *[5b] How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! [6] And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire*

by hell. So he takes a look at the natural tongue and basically compares it to a campfire that gets out from the camp. Therefore the campfire becomes a forest fire and it utterly destroys everything in its path. He says that the tongue is like that little flame. That tongue that is set on flame by the flames of hell itself and that flame begins to go through all of life. The tongue is like that for it is a small member set among the body and when it is set on fire it destroys and stains everything, the whole body and the whole course of life.

James has just done two things with the tongue. He has given it to you positively where if the tongue is bridled and tamed then you can tame everything else and now he has given the negative part where it is unbridled and cut loose like a fire going into a forest fire then it will destroy the whole life. Now he goes to some life illustrations. You can really see him calling on the book of Proverbs here.

James 3:7-10 says [7] *For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, [8] but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. [9] With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. [10] From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.* This same tongue can bless God in a worship service and walk right out and curse the first person that cuts them off in traffic. Great is our Redeemer and greatly to be praised. He says this tongue is full of poison and its boasting is that of what poisons, destroys and brings death. Here we use it to bless and here we use it to curse. Then he says, who am I talking to for from the same mouth come blessing and cursing, my brothers.

Then he concludes by giving more illustrations. Why is this happening? Why is the tongue saying such things that destroy and direct lives? It is because it is speaking from what has filled the heart. James 3:11-12 says [11] *Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? [12] Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.*

In this next part you can see him quoting from what Jesus has said in Matthew 12, like you shall know them by their fruits. You have to make the tree good because the root tells you what the fruit is. If you want to know what kind of tree it is then check the fruit. That is why he has already told us that you are justified by your works but that does not mean that your works save you. It means that those who have saving faith in Christ that is rooted in Christ there will be fruit as evidence. One of the works in life is how we talk. The way we speak is also an action. He is saying that our profession of faith is justified by the evidence of our possession of faith with what we do and say therefore at the Judgment Seat we give an account for every careless word. It's under the blood, forgiven, and it's not remembered against me for guilt but I give an account for my speech. Teachers will in particular. I will.

I'm also doing a series on Biblical Parenting and do you know why I'm doing this? Who has a stricter seat in the judgment on accountability in the realm of those who are believers? It is teachers, right? Do you have children? Those who have children are teachers yet we'll give a lot more time to the pit of hell, the television or a book than for the Word of God and therefore our children become the reflection of what we teach or don't teach or who we decide will teach them alongside of us. This is not incidental stuff.

You are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone but when God saves you by grace you become is workmanship. He has created you. There will be

a trajectory of life where the evidence is different in works and words and words do matter. In Proverbs it says words are like thrusts of a sword or they are like a balm of healing. Words matter and the forgiven do not become careless about their speech because they are forgiven. They are even more careful but how can I deal with my speech when I just heard that no man can tame the tongue? I just heard that the evidence of a true relationship with Christ by faith is a bridled tongue and it said that no man is perfect and no man can tame the tongue.

Where is James taking us by the Holy Spirit? He says in James 3:11-12, *[11] Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? [12] Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.* He says the same stream will give fresh water or it will give salty water. The fruit will tell you what the root is but then he circles back around to this stream of salt water or fresh water and he says what comes out of the stream is determined by where it started in the pond. If it is a salt pond then it will be a salty stream. If it is a fresh pond then it will be a fresh stream. The reservoir determines the stream.

I want to give you three takeaways from this text. Here is the first one that we have learned from what James has said to us. Words both direct lives and reveal hearts. Words count. I was reminded from one pastor as I was studying for this of that nursery rhyme that says ‘sticks and stone may break my bones but words will never hurt me.’ How many of you believe that? Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never break my bones. Ok I’ll go with that. Words will poison, pollute and destroy a soul. In fact some of us reading this today our lives are being directed by the words we heard as a child – maybe from a parent, a teacher, a coach or a peer. Perhaps they are making fun in whatever was done and we’re still dealing with it. It is directing our lives. Words direct lives. The words you hear direct your lives and the words you speak direct your lives.

One of my great blessings as a pastor is to do a marriage ceremony and every time I see that man face that woman and say before God ‘I vow...’ and I see that woman face that man and say ‘I vow...’ I know those words are going to affect the course of their life. Teenagers, on your way to college or when you go to a new business or move into a new neighborhood, find a way verbally to get on record that you love and have trusted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Say it out loud. What you say begins to direct the course of your life. You have seen the negative. Say a lie and oh the web we weave when we first decide to deceive.

Words not only direct your life when you say them but the words you listen to direct your life and the words that you’re hearing direct your life. That is why you choose preachers and teachers carefully. Some will say then I won’t choose teachers and preachers, I’ll just teach myself. Let me paraphrase C.S. Lewis here – any student who decides that he will secure himself as his teacher, then that teacher just got a fool for a student. You can’t learn about what it means to be human nor what it means to be a Christian without hearing. You have to hear that which is good, beautiful and true and that’s why you want to choose who you hear and what you hear carefully but you must hear in order to grow and what you are hearing is affecting your life and the direction of your life.

So our words are either a thrust of a sword or they are balms of Gilead. Remember that you are made in the image of God. God is light therefore God speaks, God gives His Word. I know God because God has spoken in creation and in His Word. You are made in His image. We will know who you are by what you say and you will start becoming what you read and listen to. You will become what you read and what you listen to.

I have a fireplace in my home that is unbelievable. It is the greatest fireplace in the world. It just throws the heat out. I'll get next to it to get it arranged to where it needs to be and I can hardly stand next to it without thinking of hell. What must it be like to be in the torment of the fire of hell? When the Bible describes hell it not only describes the torment that is symbolized by fire but it also says one is cast into outer darkness. Let me explain. It doesn't mean when you get to hell you get to see all your friends of sin. No hell is the exact opposite of what you were made for. You were made for relationships and communication. Hell is absolute isolation forever. Do you want to know why people go crazy when you put them in isolation in prison? It's because we were made for relationships and communication and hell is irrevocable, utter isolation.

We were made to talk. We were made to hear and words matter that come into our life. We are not like the animals. I have seen the National Geographic channel. How many different ways can a wildebeest get eaten? I don't think those wildebeest go around trying to invent symbols to communicate with each other. As soon as we experience something what do you want to go do? You want to go tell the people you love. You also want to hear what has happened in someone's life. We were made to do that. In our 8am service we have a deaf section and they have gone to great lengths to hear and speak. Just because they can't speak with their tongue they don't just go through life without speaking, they find a way to communicate. We were made to communicate so we'll find a way to communicate. That's how we learn what it means to be a human, how to be a Christian and how we learn to grow as a Christian and when we are speaking we are speaking that which is building up someone or tearing someone down. Parents are doing that with their children.

James gives us this last illustration that show not only do words direct but words reveal. If you want to know what kind of tree this is then go check the fruit. If you want to know where this person's heart is then just listen to their words. That's why these people spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to become counseling therapists and basically when you go see them they sit and listen to you talk. You probably think anyone can do that but no they can't because most of us start talking too soon and we don't give people enough time and room to talk. When they talk you really find out where they are.

Have you ever heard someone say "I wish they would think before they speak"? That is not true! No one has ever spoken without thinking. In fact, what they are saying are the verbal clothes that they have put on the thoughts of their heart. Man speaks from what fills his heart. The thoughts and intentions of our heart are eventually revealed through the verbal clothing that we call speech and so it eventually shows itself. That's why he says if you listen long enough you'll know what kind of tree it is by the fruit of the speech that is there and it will eventually become clear.

The second takeaway is our tongues, like us, are imperfect yet unstoppable and transforming works of God's grace. God is going to change us, grow us and get a

trajectory of our speech until we start saying careful words instead of careless words. He wants us to have speech that boasts in the Lord and not in ourselves. We want speech that praises instead of poisons. God has this on track in our life and the more our speech gets on track the more the other areas in my life will get on track because it is directing my Christian life. The more it will enhance the rest of my Christian life but it is imperfect and that's why he says we all stumble. We stumble in every way in our life especially our speech. From our mouths come springs of life and from our mouths come sewers of death.

Brothers, we all do this. Until we get to heaven and heaven comes from us we will be capable of both blessing and cursing from the same mouth. Until we get to be with the Lord we will be capable of praise and poison but here is the good news. You can't do both at the same time. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter, the rock of the church, says "Thou art the Christ the Son of the living God" and Jesus says "Blessed are you Simon Barjona for heaven has filled your tongue." In the next few moments Peter says "May this never happen to you!" and Jesus says "Get behind me Satan, your tongue is on the flame and fires of hell!" That is what Satan wants, for me not to get to that atoning cross. Within the space of a few minutes, the same man, same mouth, same tongue does blessing and cursing. One minute he is boasting in the Lord and the next minute he is boasting in his control of the Lord.

On Palm Sunday the same people saying "Hosanna!" will cry out "Crucify Him!" I am deeply indebted to a preacher for this insight for while they are saying "Hosanna" the scribes and the Pharisees said to Jesus "Do you hear what they are saying? They are calling you God, the Messiah and all those things. Tell them to be quiet!" Jesus said to them, "I can't tell them to be quiet for if they are silent then the rocks will cry out." Jesus is saying this because He is there for if the people were silent His presence would make stones eloquent. My presence is what cuts loose the stream of life and stops the sewer of death, Jesus says. That's where the tongue is tamed, in Christ. That's the way we accelerate the trajectory of closing the sewer and opening up the spring of life, of stopping the poison and unleashing the praise with our lips.

No man can "tame the tongue." I love the Lord of the Rings. I love the moment when the king is about to die is being defended by daughter and the evil serpent has arrived to consume the king. She stands between the serpent and the king and the serpent looks at her and says "No man can stop me! No man can kill me!" She rips off her helmet with that long blonde hair flowing and says "I'm no man!" and thrusts her spear to his death. Men can tame every single animal no matter how big it is but no man can tame the tongue.

How in the world can the bridled tongue be the evidence of true religion? You can't. That is why James doesn't give you the thirteen words you need to memorize and start repeating. Let no unwholesome word proceed from out of your mouth except that which is good for edification according to the need of the moment that it may give grace to those who hear (Ephesians 4:29), but how do I get liberated from my tongue saying what I want to say to my tongue saying what the hearer needs me to say? How do I get rid of poison words and give life giving words?

Here is how you do it. The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart and the only One who can give you a new heart or fill your heart is Jesus Christ. That is why he doesn't give you speech therapy here or vocabulary memorization. I love vocabulary

and trying to think of ways to say something the best possible way you can say it but what he gets to is this. Do you want to get rid of boasting that leads to cursing that leads to poison that leads to death that stains your life and everyone else's life? Then you want boasting in the Lord because you're still going to boast and that will bring life, healing and blessing instead of cursing, so the only One that can tame my tongue is Jesus Christ. Let me tell you what Jesus does. He doesn't just give you a new vocabulary but He changes the heart. He gives you a new reservoir for the spring to start flowing from.

Perhaps you are reading this today and you don't have that new heart. May I invite you to Jesus Christ? He will give you a new record and you'll be right with God and you won't be with that other group at the Judgment Seat. You will be in the book of Life. Know that He will give you a new heart and that new heart will start changing the poison that has filled the tongue for years upon years. You will never be perfect but He will put you on a trajectory of growing in grace. That is why you and I need to know the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart and Jesus is the One that gives you a new heart.

Maybe your problem is not that your speech is revealing an unregenerate heart for perhaps by God's grace you are regenerate but you're not satisfied with your trajectory for you want to go more forward. You want to bless the Lord. You want to boast in the Lord and you want to know how to get there. I have a new heart but my speech reveals pockets of poison that are still in my heart.

Here are the two things you have to remember. Number one, please remember that Jesus Christ has saved you, taken your condemnation, has made you right with God and that's the first step in being able to boast in the Lord. As long as you think that you are the one who is performing to get to heaven you're going to boast in yourself and you'll have to curse other people. You'll have to run down and criticize others. You'll have to be superior and that's what makes you think you'll get to heaven but when you know that you're getting to heaven because Jesus came down from heaven for you and you put your trust in Him, now you don't need to authenticate yourself with your speech. Now you don't need to boast of yourself, curse others, and poison others but now you are free to boast in the Lord who has taken you to glory.

You may be saying "Pastor, I'm there. I'm with you but I still have these pockets of poison." Let's start washing out the heart. Start filling up the heart with fresh water. One preacher said "I want every Christian to live as if they are spilling their guts. Every day I want you to spill your guts as long as your guts are filled up with Jesus." Perhaps that's not good pulpit stuff there but I want your guts to get so filled with Jesus that it just pours out of your mouth. Praise His Name! I have been immersed in His Word, in Biblical preaching, in good teaching and I'm being disciplined. I am in good literature. My mind is dwelling on that which is good, pure and perfect and the Lord is bringing that excellence. Now when I speak the thoughts of my heart are clothed with verbal statements and I can spill out praise and boasting in the Lord who is my God.

You may be thinking "I really have this broken vessel and it's not doing all that I want it to do." Remember the tongue is a bit. Who is riding the horse? Is it you or Jesus? The tongue is a rudder. Who is steering the ship, who is the pilot? Don't give me this bumper sticker saying of God is my co-pilot. If so then make God the pilot and fire the previous pilot. God is your pilot, God is the rider. Pastor, my tongue is a flame. Go to Christ and get in His Word. Immerse yourself and saturate yourself in His Word. Do

you know how you fill up a broken vessel? The only way to fill it is to immerse it. Immerse yourself in His Word, in that which is good, true, perfect, pure and excellent and then say to Jesus “Make my tongue like a flame from heaven, not a flame from hell so that I will pour forth the praise of my Savior and I will boast in the Lord.” Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word and this unbelievably, rich, gloriously challenging text. You have warned us that we cannot tame the tongue but You have granted us a Savior who gives us a new record so we don’t have to boast, who has given us a new heart so that we are free to be immersed in that which is glorious and true so that our boast is in the Lord. Father, thank You that while no man can tame the tongue Jesus does. So Jesus guide us, be our Rider, our Pilot, send the flame of heaven so that our tongues will be a flame of praise. Jesus do a great work. If you are reading this and don’t know Him, I invite you to Christ and that’s all I have to do. Now all you have to do is accept Him and say “Jesus I know you died for my sins. My tongue has revealed my heart is not right. Create in me a clean heart, O God, for I come to Jesus for the new record and for the new heart that I will not need to boast in myself, for Christ is my boast and He is filling my heart to overflowing with praise.” If you would like to pray with someone about this decision you have made please contact us at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200 for it would be our delight. Dear Jesus, would You fill up Your people that they would spill forth the stream of life and with Your Word and by Your Spirit would You dry up the sewers of death and vacuum out the pockets of poison as we by Your grace out of love to Christ immerse ourselves in Him who loves us, who loosens us and who grows us in grace even this tongue, knowing the blessing of being bridled by grace through Christ who holds the reins, for I pray this in Jesus’ Name, Amen.