

Who Can Tame the Tongue? James 3:1-12; 4:13-17"

James, chapter three. We're talking about the tongue, and we're going to see, first of all, that the tongue is dangerous. We're going to see that the tongue needs to be controlled by someone, and that someone is not us in the final analysis. So let's listen to God's Word as I read it to you from James 3:1-10. This is God's word.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness, 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. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well and look at the ships also. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they're guided by a very small rudder. Wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire. In the tongue is a fire a world of unrighteousness or evil. The tongue is set among our members, standing in the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird of reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes blessing and curse you, my brothers, these things ought not to be.

Let's pray for a moment.

Lord, I pray that we would not flinch from your standards, not flinch from seeing how far short we fall, and yet not despair, because your grace is greater than our sin. And so give us ears to hear what you're saying to us. We ask in Jesus name, Amen..

Some years ago, I was in a tedious meeting. It was going far too long by my lights, and I have to admit that my attention wandered, and the leader who was perhaps not moving things along, said something that seemed so startling as I came back to attention that I thought it had to be a joke, and failing to control my tongue, I said in front of about 12 people. You've got to be kidding me. He was not kidding. He meant it. He was ready to make a point and to defend that point because he thought it was important. And now I had. I told everyone in the room that it was a bad joke. Have you ever wanted one of those little time reversal devices? Just want to go back and suck those words back in your mouth that are now lying like shattered glass on the carpet or on a table, or like some glue that spilled on someone's new dress. But you know you can't do it. Once the words are out, they're out. And I could only lament the mud and ashes I'd poured on the ground in that meeting. Who can control the tongue? I certainly didn't mean to humiliate the leader of our meeting, but I had. Can anyone control the tongue? It's an important question. It's a question that's important, in part because James chapter one tells us and we're through a visitor.

We're studying the book of James. James 1 says there are three tests of true religion unstained by the world control tongue care for widows and orphans in their distress. Control your tongue. Care for widows and orphans in their distress. You know, it's very easy to say to someone who's in need a widow, an orphan, somebody else in great need with your tongue be warmed and filled and do nothing.

And think to yourself that because you said the right words, you've done something. No care for the needy and keep a tight rein in your tongue, because the tongue has a tendency to run amuck. It's easy for our anger to spill out in words. It's easy to say vague niceties and not mean them. James starts with a startling statement.

It's actually a comfort to me that James does not say you. He says we. In verse one he says, not many of you. You just say you. Now many of you should become teachers. My brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. At a moment later he says, for we all stumble. He's not talking about you.

He's talking about himself. Because everybody betrays who they would like to be with their tongue. Strangely enough, paradoxically enough, in the very act of explaining this text, I will use many words, and most likely one of them will be false or offer misleading to somebody. If you speak a lot, you're bound to say something wrong. Something not helpful, maybe even something false or damaging.

So we watch our tongues because we invite judgment. And there have always been people use their tongues wrong by accident. I hope that most of us had people who did it deliberately. False teachers, heretics troubled the early church, and in Paul's day, there were people known as sophists who would gather around themselves disciples because they would teach them the tricks of persuading anyone and every one of whatever it was they had to say.

Use the tongue to control people. Everyone must tame the tongue. Teachers, especially if you're a teacher. You talk a lot, and when you talk in public, you're that person who isn't afraid of talking in public. And when you talk in public, you notice that people listen and you're inclined to think too much of yourself, to think you know more than you do, to pass yourself off as an expert, to be overconfident, opinionated, and more.

Perhaps the finest lecture I ever heard was a man named Luke Timothy Johnson. He finished his career just recently in Atlanta. He was, I sat under his teaching one semester. I was his teaching assistant. I listen to his lectures. It's like a grade papers. And his lectures are so good that at random, in the middle of this semester, students are just break into applause at the end of some of his lectures.

And this is what he said about people like himself. He said of people who speak in public, especially in classrooms, that they provide, I'm quoting, provide temptation to virtually every form of evil speech, arrogance and domination over students, anger and pettiness, contradiction, slander and meanness toward opponents, flattery of students for the sake of

vainglory. And he's a theologian. When he confesses these sins, he's supposed to model godly use of the tongue.

We all stumble in many ways. No one controls his or her own tongue. No one can control the tongue. When Isaiah laments the sins of Israel at the very beginning of his career in Isaiah chapter six, he says, woe is me, I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips. A prophet starts his career by saying, I'm a man of unclean lips, and I'm of a people of unclean lips.

Psalms 34 asks the question, do you love life? Do you want to see good days? Then keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile or deceit. You want a good life. Control your tongue. Proverbs in the same vein says, A fool's lips bring him strife. His mouth invites a beating so foolish. And when Paul wants to complete his indictment of humanity before he preaches the gospel in Romans chapter three, he says their tongues are full of bitterness and deceit and guile.

Everyone is silenced, guilty and accountable before God. He says in chapter three and his proof he says, take a look at our tongues. Now, of course, the tongue is also a gift, and if you have the gift of speech and utterance, you should thank God for that. But be careful, because if you have the gift of persuasion, you can talk people into doing things they really shouldn't do because you just want them to.

And if you have the gift of humor, be careful. Because when you get 20 people to laugh, it's often an expense of number 21. Humor is a dangerous gift. Now, James gives us some analogies to help us think about the tongue. There are three. The tongue is a rudder and a flame and a fire. Here they are. The tongue is like a bit in a horse's mouth. I looked it up a bit. Typically weighs around six ounces. Horses weigh over 1,000 pounds. So a tiny bit turned this way or that way moves the horse. As for a rudder of a ship. It's so small compared to the ship itself. And if the rudder goes amiss, the ship can't do anything.

The greatest warship, perhaps of all time, at least till that moment, was the Bismarck in World War Two. And as it was destroying the Allied ships, someone launched a small torpedo and it hit the rudder. And the Bismarck could do nothing but go around in circles until smaller boats and planes just obliterated because the rudder was gone.

It's like a fire that sets the course of life on fire. James says. Unfortunately, I experienced this one time when I was a Boy Scout. Not a very good one, I suppose, but my older brother and I, who had learned how to make fires in the woods, were deciding to make a make a campfire meal for our mother on Mother's Day.

And we did everything you're supposed to do. We cleared out the sticks and the brush and the leaves, and he put a ring around the fire. And, you know, we put the potatoes and some meat and some vegetables under the fire was all perfect until a gust of wind came by and took a fairly large spark up into a nearby tree.

It was a it was a dry season, and pretty soon 25 trees had burned down and I was kicked out of the Boy Scouts. No, I really wasn't. But I did quit because it didn't seem to be going that well.

Now, one writer said, okay, what this means then, you know, you got to you got to control the rudder, you got to control the horse.

You got to control the tongue. Said what this means then, is the most important thing we can do is control our tongues and just concentrate all your spiritual energy on controlling your tongue. Because that's the master's key to the Christian life. Just control your tongue. And good author, godly man. But. But I read it. Words. I had to come to the conclusion that maybe he wasn't leading us in the right direction.

Because you see, in these analogies, it doesn't simply say control your tongue. It looks like these analogies are about two elements ship rudder, a horse bit fire forest. But actually they're three each time, right. There's a pilot controlling the rudder of the ship, and there's a rider controlling the bit and the horse, and there's somebody who made the fire in the first place.

And what that means then, is we have to look for the third thing for the agent behind it all. And Jesus tells us who that is or what that is. It's our heart. So Jesus says this A tree is recognized by its fruit. For out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him.

And the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. What that means, then, is controlling the tongue is not simply an act of willpower. I'm just going to do the right thing. There's a sense in which. What's in your heart dominates everything that comes out of your mouth. And that's good news. And it's bad news is good news because God has made our heart new.

And it's bad news because when something dark comes out of your heart, you have to examine your heart. But the heart is the center of life. It is the agent that controls our tongue and moves our tongue. And unfortunately, tongue is often a fire, James says. Small fire rages and a small fire started by a tongue can rage through a Christian community.

The Bible mentions a couple sins and particular sins of the tongue. I'm going to just talk about them a little bit there. Gossip and slander and flattery. Now slander is the easiest one to talk about. Slander is very simple. Slander is saying something false about somebody to damage them. It's intentional. And I hope and pray that none of you would ever do that.

And I'm sure that most of you would never deliberately slander anyone. Gossip is a little bit trickier, because gossip is not always something that's false. There's no indication in the Bible or in experience that when people are gossiping, they're saying something that's certainly wrong. There may be something that's saying something that's mostly true, or they think it's true, but they're not quite sure.

Or it could be something that is absolutely true. The problem of gossip is not that it's necessarily false. The problem is it's not your story to tell.

Or it's something that person doesn't need to know or something that's true but doesn't edify anyone. So someone walks up to you and, you know, gossips do two things. They speak quietly, they whisper, and they lean in because they don't want other people to know what they're doing. Or maybe they only want 1 or 2 people to know the secret.

If someone starts telling you something that you think is not your business to know, you can say a couple of things. You can say, are you sure? Are you sure? I need to know this. Are you sure you have the right to tell this story? Flattery is kind of the opposite. Flattery is saying very nice things to people, but you don't necessarily mean them.

So gossip is saying behind somebody's back what you would never say to their face. Right. And flattery is saying someone's face. What you would never say behind their back, because you want them to think that you think that they're awesome and favor you, or like you, or pay attention to you. Be your friend, be on your side. And after you give this excessive compliment, you go back to your old views and your old words.

That doesn't mean you can never pay a compliment. I'm not saying that, but only pay compliments. You mean that come from your heart? Tongue is a fire, James says, set on fire by hell itself and sets the whole cycle of life ablaze. The first service that talked about posting things on social media. And right afterwards, somebody told me about somebody who posted something on social media.

It was pretty damaging. I saw one time that somebody posted on a social media site, very popular. One. What do you think the rules are? The question was, I invite you to tell me your rules for social media. And there were three answers that came more than any other. First of all, never post anything when you're tired or angry or upset or were too hungry.

Even. Number one. Number two, read your post out loud and imagine a whole bunch of people in the room with you hearing it, especially including maybe people you're talking about from some evil football team somewhere. Number three never reply in anger. Never say anything in anger. I noticed that anger was first and last in this little list. When James says that the whole world is set on fire by the tongue, and it sets the cycle of life on fire, it means that the tongue is not some isolated phenomenon, some little tiny part of your life.

It means that the tongue is somehow involved in all of your life. So, for example, if you are going to plan to rob somebody, you plan it with words in your mind. And you, if you have colleagues, you plan it with other robbers. You use words. If you're going to kill somebody, you plan it with words. If you're going to bring somebody down, you plan it with words in your mind.

And then and then as you as you say things against someone, you believe them all the more. Now, the flip side, of course, is when you're thankful for somebody and you bring it to articulation. When you want to praise somebody and learn from their example as you bring it to articulation, you see, even more what you appreciate in that person.

So the tongue has a sort of a catalytic effect on all of life.

It's influential. If you ever noticed that when children are whining, they kind of keep it going for a while. It's like having started to whine. I will continue to whine longer. And if you ever notice it, when people start complaining, when you know they exceed the age of 21, when people start complaining, that's also infectious. Now that I'm complaining, let me let me think of some other things I could complain about.

And if somebody says, well, good point, let me complain about something to. And so it sets the world on fire. It's not just saying things you shouldn't say. You might also excuse yourself when you shouldn't be excuse. You might blame people at our house. When we start blaming, we say, you know, if you can't fix the problem, at least fix the blame.

You don't mean it. Let me say that it's a way of correcting each other that James corrects us. I'm going to put a few more verses from James up there. James 4:13 to 15 James says, our tongue doesn't just gossip or slander or liar, deceived or other things. That tongue can also boast. The tongue can boast. Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and try to make a profit.

I'm the master of my own destiny. And James replies, but you don't know what tomorrow is going to bring. Your life is a mist. It's been misty a little bit the last couple of days, but if you been on a lake in the summertime, you know, and it's cool at night and the water is actually warmer than the air when you go out, you see mist on the lake, especially at dawn or shortly after dawn.

But if you go back in and have some coffee or have breakfast come out an hour later, the mist is gone. James says. Your life is insubstantial and ephemeral as a mist. I don't dare to think that you're. I'm just going to declare that I'm a prophet. What is your life? Instead? You ought to say, you ought to reframe your mouth, and your mouth can lead you in the right direction.

You can say, if the Lord will live, wills, we will live and do this or that. And as you say that, you know, some people, Christian, say, Lord willing, Lord willing, as you keep saying, Lord willing, it works its way into your life. It's a cycle of death. The tongue can also be a cycle of life, calm or boasting.

What does your tongue say about you, about your character, about your allegiance? I hope it says that you love your neighbor as yourself, and you love your neighbor with your tongue. Back to criticism, which is one of the problems of the tongue. George Orwell, who was a very famous Englishman who flourished in the 30s and 40s and was definitely a man of words, a man of novels, an analysis of communism, was also a critic.

He would review other people's books, and he paused at one point and realized that it's so much easier to say unkind things about someone's book, and because you don't like their ideas or their article to criticize them, he said. And then you meet the person. And suddenly you realize that you're criticizing a living human being, he said. It's so much harder to be savage with

your words when you remember that that person is a man or a woman like you, it's easier, I quote him, it's easier to be savage at a distance when you meet someone in the flesh, he said.

You realize immediately he's a human being and not a character caricature, simply embodying certain ideas. A James digs in a little bit more in verses seven and eight and says, you know, the interesting thing about people is they seem to be able to tame all kinds of animals and tame almost anything except their own tongue. Have you ever been to the circus?

Have you been to the circus? Have you? Have you watched the lion tamers? Have you seen elephants holding each other's tails, going around in a circle? Because the trainer got them to do it? If you've been to, you know, a zoo or an aquarium, you might have seen porpoises jumping 20ft in the air and going through rings and seals jumping up and clapping their flippers.

They seem to enjoy it, especially when they get the fish. It's amazing. We can tame almost anything except our own tongue. Now, James says that in a way that's meant to arrest our attention. He says not no being contain the tongue. He says no one can be translated. No one among mankind or no one among humankind can tame the tongue.

No human can contain the tongue, which leaves open the idea that someone can. But someone, of course, is the Lord. Bend our efforts. If you've been remade in the image of Christ, and the book of Ephesians meditates on that over in chapters four and five, we're going to throw some scriptures up here in a moment. In Ephesians chapter four, it says that we used to walk in darkness and in sin, and then we've learned Christ, and we've been renewed in the image of Christ.

And he says, therefore, verse 24, put on the new self created after the likeness of God, and true righteousness and holiness. And over the next 8 or 9 verses he talks about the newness of life, and he mentions a tongue repeatedly. He mentions and comes back to it, drops it, comes back to it. The first thing he says is having put away falsehood, we stop lying and deceiving and slandering.

We tell the truth, but we don't simply tell the truth. He says, let each of you put away falsehood. We speak the truth with his neighbor because we are members of one another. We understand that speaking the truth and putting away falsehood is a matter of care for the people around us. And then a little bit later, he starts again saying, what?

You should stop doing, what you should do. So you shouldn't steal anymore. But you should labor and be generous. And in verse 29 says, let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, no talk that's rotten, no talk that leads others astray, no mocking, no tempting, no gossip and slander. Go back to verse 29, please. Thank you. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouth, but only say what is good for building up for edification as fits the occasion.

How do you do that? Well, back to James. James says everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. So how do you know how to build people up at the occasion? The

answer is you listen and you listen to people are just like you. You I know what you mean. And you also listen to people who are very different from you.

And you have to work very hard to understand why they're saying what they're saying, because it doesn't make sense to you right away. Which means, of course, to really listen, you have to stop playing the I'll listen to you until you stop talking. And then I'll say what I have to say. You listen and listen and ask, how can I fit the occasion?

How can I give grace to those who are here? Let me illustrate.

Some time ago, I was leading a team of people that were under a lot of duress, working very hard, understaffed, unappreciated, suffering false criticism. And we were together one day and they just cut loose. They just started complaining about, you know, too many hours, false criticism. Nobody appreciates what we're doing. And I let them go for a while. And I said, okay, it's time to reign in now, can I just remind you all that the fruit of the spirit is love and joy and peace? And if every word you repeated, you said were repeated in front of the people you're talking about, would they think you were speaking lovingly and spirit of the fruit of the spirit is peace, which means we trust in God's sovereignty. Christ carries through this hard time. We're going to love the people who are not treating us so well and are frustrating us so much. And they said, hey, thanks, Dan. That's great. We appreciate that -- we're going to bring it in and we're going to trust God's sovereignty. We're going to have some peace.

And then not all that much and not many days later, I was the object of unjust criticism and overwhelmed. And somebody said something that I thought was just outrageous about me. And, I pulled one of the people had been in that team a few days earlier and I said, can I just rant for five minutes? And he said, sure.

And then for five minutes he said, can I just remind you what you told all of us a few days ago? That the fruit of the spirit is love, you know, love that person who's accusing you, and it's joy. Give thanks. It's peace. Trust God's sovereignty. Can I remind you of that? I got to tell you, friends, that was a word he spoke to me that built me up on that occasion.

He said he said exactly what was most helpful. He gave me grace on that occasion. And then finally, verse four of chapter five, in this, you know you're made new in the presence of Christ. Let no filthiness or a foolish talk. Filthiness means, talking about bodily functions and crude and demeaning ways. You know, God created our bodies.

They're beautiful. We shouldn't speak about them in crude and demeaning ways. No crude jokes is out of place. But instead, let there be Thanksgiving. That's a positive approach. Instead of groaning and complaining and murmuring and whispering and gossiping, give thanks. Just pause to find yourself complaining.

Criticizing the question is how can I give thanks right now? Because my tongue has been made new by the Lord. I can't control my tongue, but the Lord can heal my tongue.

Now, James doesn't say that right now. James doesn't at the moment say, here's the cure, because the Bible sometimes is willing to leave us hanging for a while and it'll leave us in the discomfort. If you're uncut. James chapter three, because there's just a lot of statements like tongue is a fire. Why is my tongue so fiery? Answer because it's set on fire by hell.

That's what James says. That's not a comfortable word. Makes us wonder what's happening in our life. But the Bible is willing to let us do that. Can I just tell you about James half-brother of our Lord Jesus, for a second in in Matthew chapter five, Jesus says, the wise man builds his house on the rock. He doesn't say a rock.

He says the rock. And we think to ourselves, what does that mean? What does he? Then the wise man builds his house on the rock, and Matthew, in his wisdom, has us wait 11 chapters for the answer. Jesus says to Peter, who am I? You're the Christ, the son of the living God. And Jesus says, on this rock I will build my church.

That's the rock. You have to wait 11 chapters to find out who the rock is. And in James where we hear this almost terrifying condemnation of our sinful tongues, and we only have to wait until the next chapter, because the next chapter says, humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. Confess your sins to God, and he will lift you up.

God exalts those who humble themselves. Jesus says the same thing. So if your tongue is leading you astray, it's very simple. Confess your sins. Turn to the Lord, ask him to forgive you, and he will. Now, once we're made new, we try really hard to control our tongues. We should try hard when we're angry. We should maybe walk out of the room.

When we're arguing with somebody. We might need to just say, you know, I think I'm going to be quiet now. Whatever might work for you, you might ask people who are speaking ill, are you sure you want to say this? What would happen if everybody heard you saying this? We can we can fight the sins of the tongue.

But our ultimate hope is not in fighting the sins of the tongue. Our ultimate hope is in the Holy God who gives us a new life. Yes, but the Holy God, who even more than that extends his mercy and loves us as a father, loves children, including whining and complaining children. We see it a very different way. I used to have a whole lot more here than I do now.

I used to have a lot of hair and I don't have a lot of hair anymore. And one day I told my wife, you know, I'm sorry that my hair has fallen out. You married a man who had lustrous hair. Is this how disappointing is this to you? And I don't know if I use those exact words, but that was the basic idea.

And she said, honey, I didn't marry you for your hair. I mean, I liked your hair. I'm not going to deny that there was some pleasure in having a man with a lot of hair, but I didn't. I don't love your hair. I love you. And sometimes women say to their husbands things like, you know, my skin, it's just blotchy and it doesn't hang right on my flesh.

And do you know, do you still love me? And the answer is, the good answer is. The correct answer is I don't love your skin, I love you. Now, when we talk that way, when we talk the language of love. I love you. Not some superficial external trait of yours. We're actually echoing God who made us to love each other as he loves us.

Because if you look at the question, why does God love you? Why does God love his people? The answer is not because you perform really well. This is discussed in God Speaks to It in Deuteronomy chapter seven. And he asked Israel the question, why do you think I love you? Why do you think I chose you among all the nations to be my own?

And his answer is worth quoting. He says, the Lord did not love you or set his affection upon you, because you were more numerous than other peoples, but it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath. You swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with the mighty hand to redeem you from the land of slavery.

The Lord your God is a faithful God, keeping his covenant of love. Now there's two sides to this. One is God says, listen, I made promises and I keep them. And so if you ask yourself the question, do I deserve God's love? And you think the answer is no, he still made a covenant of love with you.

And God does not violate his covenants. But also, if you're disappointed in your life at this particular moment. Also please know that God did not love you because you were an awesome person. Because you looked around for the most righteous, godly, kindhearted, servant minded, mouth controlling people he could locate and say, I'll choose them. He loved you because he loved you because of his sovereign, unmerited favor.

And so our performance does not cause God's love to increase or decrease. He loves us just the same. Now, of course, he's disappointed when his children harm each other and harm themselves, but he loves us exactly the same. Now, I also want to say one word to that tiny handful of people who are sitting here today thinking, you know, it's really good that all these other people are listening to a sermon about the tongue, and it's not my problem.

I actually control my tongue very well. And actually some people do. And so I'm just going to say, if speech is not your problem, then something is and it may be pride or fear or anger or lust, stinginess, contempt, judgmental ism you keep entirely to yourself. And so I just urge you to apply the principle of God's unfailing, unfailing love to yourself.

I hope that our speech is made new. As Ephesians chapter four says, we're never going to be made entirely new in this life, but we can find substantial healing. We can grow in our ability to use our tongues to do to others what God has done to us. Speak words that give us grace. Words you give us hope.

Words that give us life. May we dedicate our tongues to God by his grace. Use them to bless others as he has blessed us with his tongue, his mouth, His word, His Son, the apostles and the prophets.

Let's pray together.

Heavenly father, we control our tongues to varying degrees. We sin with our tongues, probably just about everybody, but not the same way. And so, Lord, I pray that each of us would confess our sins as we need to, as we should, and heed your counsel and strive to give grace to those who hear. I pray that you give us more of your spirit so that we can indeed practice self-control. The fruit of the spirit is self-control, and I pray that you would give us control of our tongues because we admit really self-control. Wow. That's not quite a word we always want to hear. We need spirit control. And so, Lord, we pray that you would be gracious to us. And again assure us that you love us. Because you love us, because your children, your sons, your daughters, and you love us with an everlasting love.

And we pray this in Jesus name,

Amen.