

James 3:1-12 Sermon

This morning we're going to be discovering a text out of James concerning the use of our tongues. The tongue is an amazing piece of our bodies.

- We each have between 2,000-10,000 taste buds on our tongues that help us enjoy food.
 - If you have more than 10,000 taste buds you're a "**supertaster**" and may have a promising future using your tongue to taste food and get paid for it.
 - If you have less than 2,000 you're in the category labeled as "**nontaster**" and you should likely keep your present job.
- When your doctor asks you to stick out your tongue and say "**awww**" he's partially looking at your tongue:
 - If it's a **nice pink shade** then it's an indication you're healthy
 - If it's **red and swollen** it could indicate you have allergies or infections
 - If there are **white patches** on your tongue you might have a fungal infection called thrush.
 - If your tongue is **smoother than normal** it may indicate your lacking in essential nutrients such as iron, folic acid or B12.
 - If your tongue is **blistered** you may not be producing enough saliva
 - A **fat tongue** may be an indication of sleep apnea.
- An average tongue is about 10 centimeters long (or approximately 4 inches) – unless you're **Nick Stoberl**, a 27 year old from California who is the current record holder for the longest tongue. His tongue measures in at 10.1 centimeters from the tip of his tongue to his upper lip, which makes his tongue almost double of most of ours.

But there's much more to the tongue than just the physical characteristics of it. For with our tongue, in conjunction with our words, we can accomplish tremendous good with it or tremendous evil – and it's this aspect of the tongue that James will be addressing this morning. So, please stand and follow along as I read James 3:1-12. And I'll be reading out of the NIV.

Read James 3:1-12 You may be seated.

James begins by addressing teachers of God's Word and cautions us against taking this too lightly. If you're considering being a teacher of God's Word don't ever take it too lightly for it's a serious thing, at whatever age you're teaching, from little ones to adults. And the reason it's so serious is because with the teaching of God's Word you can greatly influence the eternal destiny of someone's life. With your words and with my words I can either lead someone closer to God to drive them away from God. And that's why I take the preaching and teaching of God's Word with utmost seriousness. I spend more time on preparing a sermon and Bible studies than anything else I do because I don't want to misrepresent God's Word and thus lead any of you astray.

After that initial caution he addresses all of us with this summary statement in verse 2 that I think we can probably all agree with.

James 3:2-3 (NIV) *We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.*

Let's test James' bold statement. How many of you here this morning have never once spoken a word that you wish you could take back – raise your hands high. Who's never, on purpose or by accident, said something that ended up being hurtful to someone else. Apparently, James is correct. And James goes so far as to say that if you can completely control the words that come out of your mouth then you are quite likely doing a really good job controlling the rest of your body as well. Because an interesting observation is that while our bodies may deteriorate and we may not be able to do the same physical feats we once were able to accomplish – you can still, at whatever age you're at use your words with the same power to either encourage or discourage someone else.

Someone calculated that about 1/5 of our lives are spent talking: some of you are quite a bit more than that and many of you are significantly less than that.

The Scriptures, outside of James, talks extensively about the use of the power of our tongues and speech.

Proverbs 12:18 *The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

Proverbs 15:4 (NIV) *The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.*

Proverbs 17:27 (NIV) *"The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint,..."*

Proverbs 18:21 *The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.*

King Solomon tells us that a healthy tongue can produce healing, life & death and should be used cautiously... but that a reckless tongue can feel like a sword and it can crush and produce death.

I think of those who have felt bullied in school and end up taking their own lives to end the inner pain.

In verse 3-4, James points out how disproportionately powerful the tongue is, in comparison to the rest of the body. The tongue is a relatively small element of your body and yet it's potential to change others lives is almost unparalleled. You may have the ability to punch someone and perhaps give them a black eye for several days, but hurtful words can damage someone for years.

And James says, similarly a small bit placed in a horse's mouth can control the direction the horse walks or the small rudder on a large ship can control as well the direction of a very large ship.

These massive ships can be controlled by one man in the helm controlling a rudder 1/1000th the size of the ship.

Similarly you don't have to be a big muscular bound person to be able to use your words to directly affect someone else's life. Your words can either affect others' lives in a positive way or in a destructive way. James is talking about how your spoken words can affect others' lives. But in our media age, your words can also appear in lots of other ways: via Facebook, or emails or texting or notes etc.

In this light, I love the story of Johnny. He attended a business training that was conducted by Ken Blanchard and Barbara Glands that was given to 3,000 front line workers at grocery stores and retail outlets across the country. They talked about the power of words and how what you say really does make a difference in people's lives. A month later, Barbara, said she got a call from a guy named Johnny, who was at the training. Johnny told her, *"I'm nineteen years old. I have Downs Syndrome. I work as a bagger at a grocery store. I went back to the store and I didn't know how to apply your statements. I liked your talk but I didn't know what to do with it. I went home and talked with my dad and got an idea. My dad and I sat down at the computer and everyday we come up with a statement that is affirming of people, that's encouraging. If I can't find one in a little quote book, I'll make it up. We'll type it up six different times on the computer. I print off fifty sheets and cut all of them."* So he has three hundred of these quotes.

Then, every night, Johnny signs each one of them personally. Then the next day at the grocery store he puts this stack right by where he bags the groceries. He gets everyone's groceries bagged up. Then on the last sack he puts the quote of the day, the encouraging word, in the sack. He makes sure he looks them in the eye and says, *"I put something very special for you in this sack. I hope it will brighten your day."* He'll take them out to their car and help them load up.

Johnny does this every single day. Barbara said after about a month she got a phone call from the manager of that grocery store. He said, *"Barbara I can't believe it. Something really amazing is beginning to happen. I was walking around the store and I noticed while we had lots of checkers at the checkout line, there was no one there but maybe one or two people. The line where Johnny was doing bagging went all the way back to the frozen food section." True story!* He said, "I would tell them over the intercom that there were other lines you could move over to. We would walk down the line and tell people there were other lines open. People would just look at us and say, *'No, we'll wait because we want Johnny's encouraging word for the day.'*" One woman came by and grabbed the supervisor. She said, *'I used to only come to the grocery store once a week or once every other week. Now I come by almost every day. I buy something just so I can get Johnny's encouraging word for the day.'*" About a month later, the store manager called

Barbara and said, *"It's changing our entire culture of our store. Even in the floral department when a flower was broken they used to just throw it away. Now they walk out into the lines, on their own initiative, they pin it onto elderly women or young girls. They brighten their day."*

We can all chose to be a Johnny every single day. We can all choose to use our words, either spoken or written, to positively influence someone else's life. But for most of us it needs to be a conscious choice we make every single moment throughout a day. Say to yourself, what can I say to encourage that person today. What can I say to affirm them in someway and help them to realize how important and special they are to God? I'll come back to this a little later in the sermon with some action steps on how you could do this.

Next, James compares the powerful influence of a tongue to the powerful destructiveness of a spark to a forest fire. We've seen the pictures many times of the destructive force a fire can be sweeping across regions of our country. Most recently we were praying for God to turn back the fires racing through the lands out in California and that were threatening Deb and John Quirt's home. And praise the Lord, He answered those prayers and protected their home. And yet often these fires are started with just a single spark.

On October 8, 1871, at about 8 o'clock in the evening, Mrs. O'Leary was milking her cow when the cow kicked over the lantern that started a fire which quickly wiped out half of the city of Chicago. All because of a spark from a lantern. Similarly, James says our words can have that same effect. Once words are uttered out of our mouths it can be very difficult to stop it's influence and it's spread.

Here, James uses very strong language to describe the destructiveness of one's tongue.

He says, *The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."*

Satan often uses our words to destroy other's lives and even drive them away from God. More churches have been destroyed over the years by careless or intentional words spoken by people who were driven by either Satan or purely self-centered motives and because of that caused individuals to turn their back on God and then Satan wins. The word James uses for "hell" here is the Greek word Gehena which was a stench filled garbage dump just outside of the city of Jerusalem where they'd take the cities' garbage and dump it and burn it. It was unpleasant to be around and smelled like rottenness – similar to words that can so easily come out of our mouths.

In verse 7, James points out that we've been able to tame all sorts of animals over the years (I think of **Lassie**, and **Shamu** the whale, and **Gentle Ben** (the bear) and **Flipper** (the dolphin) and yet we have such tremendous difficulty sometimes controlling our tongues. Why is that? I think the reason has very little to do with our tongues and the words that come out but rather the problem goes much deeper. And it's this root problem that James addresses next.

James 3:9-12 (NIV) *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*

James' point is that what a tree or a vine or a spring produces is always consistent with its nature. An apple tree isn't going to produce pears and a grapevine is going to produce what – grapes, not figs. Similarly, a person produces words that flow out of who they are inside of them. If hurtful words come out of a person's mouth, the challenge is not to just to try to control a person's words but rather a person's heart. If in your heart you really strongly desire to be a person who speaks words that affirm

their God given value and speak words of encouragement – then that’s what most likely will flow out of your mouth. But if you’re self-centered and obsessed with your own prosperity or status in life then words will flow out of your mouth that reflect that type of heart.

Jesus pointed out this principle many years before James when He said:

Luke 6:45 (NIV) *A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*

So, if you look at the words that typically flow out of your mouth, what do they indicate about your heart? Now, my guess is that most of you are normally pretty nice and encouraging but what happens when someone upsets you or a situation in life doesn’t go your way. Then how do you react? What words fly out of your mouth then? Does a person who hurt you get the full venting of your anger? Or are you more subtle about it, do you gossip, talk about them behind your back. Churches are famous for being much more subtle, that people will share information, even if it’s true, in the form of a prayer request as a way to diminish the value of that person in the eyes of others and yet appear to be concerned about them. What flows out of you – particularly when you’ve been upset or hurt speaks volumes of where your heart is at. Pay close attention to those warning signs, i.e. your words.

Scripture says that we’ve been given the mind of Christ and a transformed heart. Therefore, if we’re using the transformed mind and heart our words ought to reflect Christ and not us.

I want to close this sermon with two guides on using our tongues wisely.

The first one is an acrostic, not invented by me but I like it. It’s a guide to the use of your words.

THINK – Before a word is uttered from your mouth ask yourself the following 5 questions.

T – is it true

H – is it helpful

I – Is it inspiring

N – is it necessary

K – Is it kind?

Lastly consider these three essential steps in transforming the use of your words.

Steps to Transform Your Speech

1. **Ask God for help** (Psalm 19:14; 141:3)
2. **Confess your sins to God and others** (1 John 1:9; James 5:16)
3. **Use your tongue to praise and encourage** (Psalms 34:1; Eph 4:29; Heb 3:13)