James 3:6-12

Who Can Tame the Tongue?

Good morning! Please open your Scripture to the Epistle of James chapter 3 as today we continue with our discussion of this letter. Today is the last of a three-part message addressing the power of the tongue. So far we have discovered that the tongue is powerful in that those who claim to be teachers can use the tongue to either teach the truth or deceive others, last week we discussed how powerful it is even though it is such a small body part, and today we will conclude our discussion by analyzing how this small, yet powerful body part can be tamed. The message today will focus on two aspects of the tongue that James shares in verses 6-12 of chapter 3. We will learn firstly that the tongue is full of unrighteousness (iniquity) and that it is also a very inconsistent (non-dependable) part of the body. After we discuss these descriptors of the tongue we will conclude by looking at what God’s Word has to say about how it can be controlled.

**Let’s read together James 3:6-12.**

I. In verses 6-7 of our passage today James gives us some descriptions of how the tongue is such an unrighteous part of the body. As we begin to read this passage we see that in the NASB translation the tongue is called “unrighteous.” I would like to ask you to look at your translation of Scripture and share if your translation uses any other word than unrighteous in verse 6. In some translations the word “iniquity” is used. What James is saying in verse 6 is that the tongue can defile the entire body. What does it mean for something to be defiled? This means that the entire system has been polluted by whatever has defiled it. In what way does the tongue pollute the entire body? Let’s think of it this way. Have you ever had a bowl of apples that all became rotten because of one bad apple? What has happened is that the bad apple spread its rottenness to the other apples in the bowl. This is what happens when the tongue is left to its own natural ways. It will operate in such a way that it leads to the entire body of the person wielding it becoming corrupted.

We need to ask ourselves if we are using our speech in ways that glorify God or are we using dirty and filthy language that will pollute our lives? Now when thinking about filthy language normally what comes to mind is cursing or using foul language. These are accurate examples of dirty talk, but someone does not have to use profanity to speak with filthy intent. Using our speech to spread gossip, lies or false testimony are just as harmful as profanity because of the negative impact those words can have on the lives of others.

The second way that the tongue is unrighteous according to James is that it can lead to destruction just like a fire. In what ways can our tongues be used to destroy the lives of others? To illustrate this let us look at the words of the teacher in the Old Testament book of Proverbs chapter 16 verses 27-28 **“A worthless person digs up evil, while his words are like scorching fire. A perverse person spreads strife, and a slanderer separates close friends.”** Therefore, when we choose to use words that cause strife or slander others we are choosing to use our tongues to destroy the lives of others. An illustration of this might be members of the church who speak about other members behind their backs talking about them in a negative manner. Gossip among the family of God is something that I have personally witnessed over my years as a member of a few different churches. What is said behind closed doors behind the back of other members is still harmful and can result in divisions in the church family. Rather than talk about people and spread rumors we are called to be honest, forthright, and straight forward with others if we have a conflict with them. In Matthew chapter 18 Jesus instructs that if a fellow member of the church is caught in sin the other members are follow this procedure: 1) Go to your brother or sister who is struggling with sin and show them what they have done. If they listen to you then the situation has been addressed. 2) if they do not listen then take two other members with you to confirm that the matter has indeed taken place. 3) tell the church if the member will not acknowledge their sin and then practice church discipline after that point. At no point does Jesus command that the other members gossip behind that members back or slander them in any way. Loving others and accepting discipline from others is one way that the body of Christ supports each other in living out the faith.

Thirdly, In verses 7-8 James mentions that mankind has been able to tame all the wild beasts of the earth, but man is unable to tame the tongue because it devours just like a wild animal will do when it has not been tamed. Have you ever heard a child say this “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” If you have then you know what preceded that were some very harmful words. Is this statement true? Is it possible to not allow hurtful words to cause us harm? It is possible to be able to avoid those words sometimes, but if those words continue to be used they can become very harmful. In Galatians chapter 5 verse 15 Paul instructs the church in Galatia to be very careful the way in which they speak to each other. **“But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.”** Using our mouths to speak angrily against other members of the church can lead to the devouring of the church. It will sow seeds of division from which the church may never recover.

Finally, James says that the tongue is unrighteous in that it is poisonous and leads to death. It is possible that with the tongue it can lead to the death of others. In Proverbs 18:21 we read **“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat of its fruit.”** When we use words without the thought of their impact we can poison lives. Therefore, before speaking to others, especially when we are angry, we need to think carefully how those words might impact that other person. Let’s remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:36 **“But I tell you that for every careless word that people speak, they will give an account of it on the day of judgment.”** The way in which we use our words we will either be justified or condemned on the day of judgment. Therefore, may we choose to use words that will glorify God, not bring negative attitude towards His name.

II. Our second major point we find James making in this passage is the fact that our tongues are very inconsistent in the fact that they are double sided. There is no doubt that when we get together as the body of Christ we have a good time together and we enjoy each other’s company. Even though we use our tongues to celebrate each other we also are guilty of many times using our tongues to hurt others. James warns us that our tongues are used to worship God, but then are used to curse others who are made in the image of God. Let’s look at some ways that we might do this. If you have ever had the experience of bringing children to church over the years I am certain that this has happened to you. During the church service you do the best you can to keep the children under control and behaving well, but then afterwards on the ride home one of the children do something that makes you totally blow your top. Then you begin yelling at the family and saying very hurtful things because you have been holding it in so long. This is what James is talking about. Our tongues are such powerful parts because we can praise and curse with the same part.

It is at this point in the passage where James will inform his readers the way that God has designed our tongues to be. Rather than being double sided God desires that we use the tongues He has given us to speak in ways that both praise Him and lift others up in a positive way. A spring that sends out fresh water does not also send out bitter water just like a fig tree bears figs, not olives. Our tongues should not be producing hurtful speech that attacks others who are made in God’s image. If we are having difficulties with the way we speak towards others then our problem is that we are allowing the sinful natural self to guide our speech rather than the Holy Spirit. Jesus says in **Matthew 12:33 “Either assume the tree to be good as well as its fruit good, or assume the tree to be bad as well as its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit.”** The speech that comes from someone tells a lot about what kind of person you are dealing with. The conclusion that others will come to about us will be based upon the words we choose to use when we speak with them. Words are very important, so we need to choose them carefully.

What are our main takeaways from this passage? What are some disciplines we can develop in our lives to help us control our tongues?

1. The first thing we must acknowledge is that the words we use with our tongues are very important and carry eternal significance. We have already mentioned Proverbs 18:21 where the teacher of wisdom tells his son that the words he chooses to use carry with them either life or death. Before speaking we need to remember that everything said is important. The old childhood saying that “words will never hurt me” is not true because everything someone else hears from us carry a huge impact on their lives.
2. In addition to recognizing that our words matter we also need to think carefully about what we are going to say before we say it. When thinking about what you are going to say ask yourself: Am I always being the negative person? Am I bringing others down in what I say? Let us also keep in mind the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:36-37 **“But I tell you that *for* every careless word that people speak, they will give an account of it on *the* day of judgment. For by your words, you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”** There is an accountability placed on people by God and He will hold all people responsible for the way in which they use their tongues.
3. We must be willing to surrender our hearts to God and turn everything over to Him. Paul reminds his readers in Romans 3:10 that there is no one who is righteous or who naturally seeks after God. To develop an attitude of appreciation and control the tongue we must be willing to turn everything over to God. Only God can help us to control our speech and if we rely on our own efforts we will always fail. One way we can do this is by praying daily that God will impart to us the words so that we speak in ways that honor Him. Jesus told the disciples that when they would be put on trial for their faith the Holy Spirit would give them the words to say and that they should not fear how they should speak. God will bless us with the words we need and will direct our tongues so that they will use the words that will bring Him honor.
4. Meditating on God’s Word will equip us with the fuel that we can put in our tank that will eventually come out in our speech. Our minds are just like computers in that they will store what they have seen and heard and then later that will come out in our speech. If we are always filling our minds with garbage then that is what will come out. Here is what the Pastor John MacArthur has to say regarding this fact *“When the heart is jammed full—as the phrase, out of the abundance of the heart, indicates—it has to have an overflow valve, and the mouth is that valve. The mouth is the overflow valve to what is in the reservoir.”* So, our mouths are like the pressure releaser in that it releases what has been trapped in the tank. Let us work at filling our minds with the goodness of God’s Word and stay in constant communication with Him through prayer.
5. Finally, let us trust God that He will do what He has said He will do in His Word. We have been told in Scripture that God will never leave or forsake His people. If we truly believe that God will guide us to walk in His ways then He will do so. Let this verse be always in our hearts **“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Ps 19:14)** If we are constantly seeking to honor God then He will guide us in speaking and acting in ways that will honor Him.

In conclusion, let us all take to heart what the Apostle James has taught us in chapter 3. The tongue is such a powerful part of the body and the only way it can be tamed is through a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Just like the horse being guided by the bit, that horse can only be guided if there is someone holding the reins. The ship even though it is steered by the rudder must have a captain steering it. The question we must ask ourselves is who is the captain of the ship or the holder of the reins? If we think we can control it using only our own strength then we are fooling ourselves. The only way to tame the tongue is to place our trust in Jesus Christ and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us in what we say. If we fill our minds with God’s Word, surround ourselves with His people and commit ourselves to living in obedience to His Words then we can control the small, yet powerful tongue. Please join me in a word of prayer.