

“THE POWER OF OUR WORDS” // James 3:1-12 //  
Practical Faith

Illustration: “Their Finest Hour”

France had fallen. After the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk the Nazi war machine had cornered the last remaining opposition to their conquest of Europe. Knowing that the coming battle, on their own soil, would push the courage of Britain to the breaking point, on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1940 Prime Minister Winston Churchill took to the radio and spoke these words to a fearful nation:

"What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the **long** continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and **might** of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler **knows** that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can **stand up** to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the **world** may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. **But if we fail**, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. **Let us therefore brace ourselves** to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, “**This** was their finest hour.”

Churchill, perhaps more than any modern politician, understood the power for good that noble words might play. He was a man of words. He was a man who moved a nation through words. He understood exactly what the Apostle James meant when he wrote:

*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. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it accomplishes great things.*

The ability to speak and communicate is amazing. Someone once said...

**Speech is at once the *glory* — and the *shame* of man.**

His *glory* . . .

as it distinguishes him above all earthly creatures;  
as it puts him in communication with his fellow men;  
as it enables him to pray to and praise his Creator;  
as it allies him to angelic beings.

His *shame* — in that he uses this noble faculty . . .  
to dishonor himself,  
to dishonor his neighbor,  
and to dishonor his God.

Someone calculated that we put together a 54-page book every day. And in a year, we would probably produce about 66 800-page books. You will, if you're a normal person, spend one-fifth of your life talking.

But, far more important than counting how many words we speak in a day, the Scriptures tell us repeatedly that our speech both reveals our heart and our speech is powerful.

**Notice that our speech reveals our spiritual maturity:**  
*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.*

When James says that anyone who does not stumble in his speech is perfect he's communicating two things:

First, James is saying that someone who has mastered his speech is spiritually mature. Someone who has not mastered by his speech, but constantly finds himself mastered by his speech is not spiritually mature. Your speech is the most difficult hill you have to climb. Just consider a few Proverbs:

**Proverbs 12:18** There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

**Proverbs 18:6** A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating.

**Proverbs 18:7** A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul.

**Proverbs 29:20** Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

Your speech shows either your wisdom or your foolishness. It reveals what is truly in your heart.

**Matthew 12:34** Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.

#### Illustration: Doctor Checking the Tongue

When you go to the doctor one of the first things they ask is for you to stick out your tongue. They slap that nasty wooden stick on and check things out. Your tongue tells him a lot about your physical condition.

If it is coated, you probably have a fever. If it is yellowish, your digestive system may be out of sorts. By looking at your tongue, a doctor can tell a great deal about your physical condition. Similarly, by a tongue examination, we learn quite a bit about a person's spiritual condition as well.

Justin Martyr, Church Father and Apologist, wrote, **“By examining the tongue of a patient, physicians find out the diseases of the body; philosophers find out the diseases of the mind; Christians find out the diseases of the soul.”**

**Our tongues shape our spiritual maturity because our speech is incredibly powerful.**

**Proverbs 18:21** teaches us, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”

The Apostle James knew this as well and in our passage today we'll understand the power of our words as we attend to four truths about the power of the tongue:

- Disproportionate Power
- Destructive Power
- Dominating Power
- Deceitful Power

#### **I. OUR TONGUES POSSESS DISPROPORTIONATE POWER**

*3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 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. 5 **So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.***

James begins explaining the power of our speech by telling us of the **disproportionate** power of the tongue. He illustrates this disproportion in two ways: the bit and the rudder.

Now, I'm not a big horse person. You won't catch me riding horses. It's just not my thing. But I am amazed at horses. They're these huge animals, and if they wanted to they could trample a

human. And, in James' day when there were no John Deere tractors the horse was unmatched in power.

But, you can put a tiny bit in a horse's mouth and a 100-lb. child with the right training can make a horse dance.

In the same way, think of ships. A few years ago, Chelsea and I vacationed in Sint Maarten. It's one of the biggest Caribbean cruise ports. Here are these massive ships, 30 stories tall, and as long as 3 football fields. Yet, the helmsman can sit on the bridge and turn a wheel that moves, in comparison, a tiny rudder and he can navigate this monstrous ship into port.

What does this mean? It means that, just like a bit in proportion to the horse is tiny, and just as a rudder, in proportion to the ship is insignificant, **your tongue possesses disproportionate power! It's such a small part of your body, but it wields a power over you.**

Your tongue actually **guides** you. A bit guides a horse. A rudder directs a ship. The right word, spoken in the right way at the right time opens doors.

You and I are to master our speech because our speech masters us. We are to control our speech because our speech controls us. Listen to how someone talks and you can tell where they are going. Do you want to know where you are going? Listen to what you say!

## II. OUR TONGUES POSSESS DESTRUCTIVE POWER

*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.*

The tongue doesn't just possess disproportionate power. The tongue possesses **destructive power!** Look at the words James

uses to describe the destruction: fire, a world of unrighteousness, staining, and later on he says it's restless and a deadly poison. Let's think about these individually:

### 1. "Fire"

James lived in Palestine. In the winter months all it took was a stray spark to ignite the dry brush and scrub of the desert.

In Chicago, October 8, 1871 at 8:30 P.M., a cow kicked over a lantern in Mrs. O'Leary's barn. And before it was over, that one spark, from supposedly that one cow, in Mrs. O'Leary's barn, burnt 17,500 buildings. 300 people were burned to death, 125,000 people were homeless, and in 1871, they estimated the damage at \$400 million – one spark.

Do you have a fiery tongue? Do you lash out at others? Two ways I see this happening:

**Contempt/Ridicule-** Our culture, in particular, has a fascination with ridicule. We mock, not just ideas, but the people who espouse them. In the last year we have seen our national leaders, on all sides humiliate our nation with fiery mouths filled with contempt and ridicule. We have forgotten how to communicate and listen with respect, dignity, and honor.

*Proverbs 11:12 Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent.*

**A Critical Spirit-** "I'm just speaking my mind." No. You're have a critical heart. There is a difference between someone who speaks truth in order to help and heal and someone who is blunt for the sake of demeaning someone else.

*Proverbs 27:6 The wounds of a friend are better than the kisses of an enemy.*

*Philippians 2:14-15 Do all things without grumbling or*

*disputing, 15 that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,*

## 2. “World of Unrighteousness”

“It is the microcosm of evil among our members.” In other words, you can boil all of the God hate of the world down to what we say.

## 3. “Stain”

The other day I was in my closet organizing—I think that’s one of my favorite things to do is organize—and Lincoln comes in with a juice cup. And there, in the floor, is the bag containing Chelsea’s wedding dress. Can you imagine—a beautiful white wedding dress, even with one apple juice stain—and it’s ruined.

In the same way, you life can be filled with all kinds of virtue, but the vice of your tongue can stain you.

Sinclair Ferguson said, “The misuse of the tongue can render all other graces in my life impotent.”

Does corrupt speech contaminate your otherwise Godly life?

## Coarse Language-

*Ephesians 4:29 Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.*

## 4. “Restless”

Waiting to attack. Like Satan— tongue under his control goes to and fro looking for someone to devour.

**Chattering-** The Scriptures teach that you can take glory from God by speaking too much.

We live in a world that give us the opportunity to instantly share our thoughts, and expects us to do so... i.e. social media.

It is not speaking that breaks our silence, but the anxiety to be heard. - Merton

**19** When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent. (Prov. 10:19)

**20** But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.” (Hab 2:20)

The flipside to chattering is **Negligent Lips-** The Scriptures also teach that you can take glory from God by not speaking when you should.

**6** Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy. (Pr 27:6)

## “Deadly Poison”

Chelsea and I have little children and we’re constantly watching what we say around them. We know that they hear everything, and they will repeat everything they hear. So far we’ve done fairly well.

I know a fellow pastor who said that when his son was just learning to read and sound out words they were driving somewhere in the car and the y passed a billboard. His son sounded out the words “Bud Light.”

Of course, his son then asked, “Daddy, what is Bud Light?” Now you try your best with little kids to give them just enough of an

answer to satisfy their curiosity without explaining stuff you don't want them to know about yet—so he said, “Son, it's just a kind of drink.”

The following Sunday he was standing in the foyer of the church he pastored and froze in fear when from across the room he heard his son tell a sweet older lady, “You know what my daddy like to drink? Bud Light.”

What you say can kill you. James says that your words can be a poison.

**Gossip-** saying behind someone's back what you would not say to their face.

*Proverbs 20:19 Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babblers.*

**Flattery-** saying to someone's face what you would not say behind their back.

*Proverbs 5:9 For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue.*

And we haven't even mentions boasting, lying, breaking confidences.

It's easy now to see why James says that our speech is “Set on fire by hell” Literally, “Gehenna” It was the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem. This was the place where at one time children were offered to the fires of the Babylonian God Moloch. It was a place detested by the Jews and all of the city's trash was sent there to be burned. And to burn off all that trash the fires were lit day and night.

Our tongues possess destructive power.

### III. OUR TONGUES POSSESS DOMINATING POWER

*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.*

Just the other day we went to the Lazy 5 Ranch. It's this drive through Zoo filled with tame animals. So we saw cows and pigs, ostriches and Zebras. And they're completely tame. They walk right up to the window. You can feed them and pet them. I've been to shows where I've seen trainers put their heads in lions mouths.

It's amazing that we can tame tigers, but not the tongue. This is because the tongue will not be dominated. It will not be tamed.

### IV. OUR TONGUES POSSESS DECIETFUL POWER

*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. 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.*

James ends where he began. The tongue is full of deceitful power. We may appear righteous, but our tongues reveal what is really in our hearts.

It's as if James is saying, “The proof is in the pudding.” “Forked tongue is connected to forked heart.” As soon as you open your mouth you reveal who you truly are.

Illustration: Going out to the Midwest.

I remember years ago my family took a road trip out West. We

stopped somewhere in the middle of nowhere Missouri to get gas and while we were in the store we began to draw a crowd. They wanted to hear us talk.

Now, we dressed like they did, and looked like they did, but as soon as we began to talk everyone's head turned. "You must be from the South." I couldn't help it. All I had to do was speak and they knew where I was from.

Friend, when you open your mouth it's clear where you're from. It's clear what is in your heart.

**Let me end with a Question?** What hope do we have for change? How can you possibly tame the tongue? If the tongue is full of disproportionate, destructive, dominating, and deceitful power—what hope do we have of controlling it?

Perhaps the most difficult verse in this passage is verse 8:

### ***8 but no human being can tame the tongue***

Early in the week I read that verse over and over and over and over. No human being can tame the tongue! The more I read it the more concerned I became.

I believe myself to be a fairly controlled person—but James tells me that all of my self-confidence is self-deceit because no human being can control the tongue.

In fact, I began to worry at what to do with that verse. What is the hope of the sermon if we are powerless? What is the outcome of the sermon if the answer is that we can't control our speech?

But I want you to really think about what James is and isn't saying. **James doesn't say – mark this – doesn't say it can't be tamed; he says man can't tame it.**

There's a difference. Did you get that? **He doesn't say it can't**

**be tamed, he says man can't tame it.** Thanks be to God, that even in this short verse there is an arrow pointing to the gospel:

*Augustine: "he does not say that no one can tame the tongue, but no one for men; so that when it is tamed we confess that this is brought about by the pity, the help, and the grace of God.*

Friend, there is one man who tamed his tongue—the God-Man Jesus Christ. We see that when he was reviled—he did not revile in return.

- When he was mocked and ridiculed he didn't respond in kind. When the religious people of the day tried to flatter him he didn't accept their praise.
- When he was confronted with the woman caught in adultery he didn't gossip about her to the disciples.
- Although he could perform feed the multitudes and calm storms with a gesture of his hand he never once boasted in himself.

It was said of Jesus in John 7:46, "No man ever spoke like this Man."

He was a man of no reputation  
And by the wise, considered a fool  
When He spoke about faith and forgiveness  
In a time when the strongest arms ruled

But this man of no reputation  
Loved the weak with relentless affection  
And He loved all those poor in spirit just as they were  
He was a man of no reputation.

-Rick Elias

And listen—at the end of his life he was tried as a law breaker and a blasphemer, and even though he was innocent of the charges the prophet Isaiah said,

*“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” (Is 53:7)*

Why was Jesus silent? Why didn't he speak? He didn't speak—because we had. Our sinful speech was laid upon his head, his hands, and his feet. By his silence and stripes we are healed. James doesn't say that your tongue can't be tamed—he says that you can't tame it—only Jesus can. Let's pray.