

The Untamed Tongue

James 3:3-12

God speaks the world into existence and then makes man in His image who speak like He does, taking dominion and enjoying creation. But after the fall, man speaks destructive and deadly words. “*Death and life are in the power of the tongue,*” Solomon says, “*and those who love it will eat its fruit*” (Prov. 18:21). James warns teachers and the whole church about the power of the tongue to bless God and His people, or to burn everything down.

Summary of the Text

The way to maturity, to living and loving like Jesus Christ, is to control the tongue (v. 2). We control thousand-pound horses with little bridles in their mouths, and huge ships driven by fierce winds go where the captain wants by turning a small rudder (vv. 3-4). The tongue works the same way, a small part of the body with outsized effect, like a match igniting a forest fire (v. 5). The tongue kindles a world of unrighteousness, defiles the body of Christ, the church, and sets an entire life ablaze, spreading the fire of hell (v. 6). We have tamed all kinds of land animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures, but no man has the tongue tamed (vv. 7-8). It has deadly poison, hard to keep from doing evil. With it we bless God our Father and curse people made in His image (v. 9). From the same source comes godly blessing and wicked cursing, which shouldn't happen (v. 10). We don't get fresh and bitter water from the same spring, olives from fig trees, or figs from grapevines. Salt water doesn't produce fresh water (vv. 11-12).

The Feral Tongue

Adam exercised dominion over the animals by naming them (Gen. 2:19-20). Noah also tamed the animals to get them on and off the ark (Gen. 7:8-9). James contrasts our ability to use words to subdue wild animals and direct enormous vessels while utterly failing to control our own words and prevent the enormous damage they cause. There's a moralistic way to reduce verbal discipleship to cutting out four-letter words and colorful language. But you can stop cussing and still have an ungrateful heart. “But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks” (Eph. 5:3-4). The problem with filthy and coarse language is the lack of gratitude, and you can have the same lack of gratitude on display in the gossip session at the church potluck. Satan used no foul language when duping Eve and convincing Adam to commit treason against God. A disciple of the Word of God must understand words. We can put strong language into four categories: obscenity, vulgarity, swearing, and cursing. Obscenity addresses things that take place “off scene”, often sexual in nature, meant to happen privately. Vulgarity usually refers to bodily functions. Swearing involves oaths taken to God: “I swear to God.” Cursing occurs when the judgment of God is placed upon someone or something. There is no list of forbidden words in Scripture but rather a call to speak faithfully. Ezekiel is obscene describing spiritual whoredom (Ez. 23:20-21); Isaiah vulgarly describes works' righteousness (Is. 64:4); the Lord swears an oath (Heb. 7:21); and Paul says anyone who preaches another gospel is accursed (Gal. 1:8-9). We can't tame the tongue like we can a dog, but we can grow in this grace: “Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles” (Prov. 21:23).

Fire Prevention

We understand how to prevent things from physically burning down: check to make sure the stove is off, be careful with gas, douse the coals of the camp fire, and so on. But we are slow to recognize and deal with the destructive impact of our words on ourselves and others. In verse six the tongue “*defiles/stains the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature.*” If a drop of blood falls on a white shirt, the entire shirt is dirty. In a similar way, unrighteous and worldly speech impacts a someone's entire life, and if a teacher in the church

The Untamed Tongue

James 3:3-12

talks this way, the whole body will be impacted. “Cool” pastors who carelessly use foul language, curse (“Damn it”), and gossip even if it’s masked by concern, set a pattern for the body to imitate. Gossip is unhelpful negative talk spoken by or to someone who is not part of the solution. You can talk incessantly about other people and their problems and be totally unaware that perversely it makes you feel better for not being like them. Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee who prayed this way: “God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector” (Lk. 18:11). We should deal with issues by talking to those who can help us take constructive action, and this must be our response when others say things to us: “How can I help you (which is why you must be telling me)?” James said to be swift to hear and slow to speak, and that if we don’t watch what we say, our religion is worthless (1:19, 26). Note a few principles from Proverbs:

1. Proverbs 17:28: *“Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive.”* Like the Hippocratic oath but verbally, first, do no harm.
2. Proverbs 18:2: *“A fool has no delight in understanding, but in expressing his own heart.”* Fools talk about how they feel, aren’t interested in understanding, therefore ask no questions.
3. Proverbs 18:8: *“The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, and they go down into the inmost body.”* You’ll never guess what I heard. Refuse to eat.
4. Proverbs 18:13: *“He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him.”* To assume you understand right away based on partial information and then to answer is dumb and embarrassing.
5. Proverbs 18:17: *“The first one to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him.”* The first guy always seems right until you hear the other side. It’s nearly always more complicated than it appears initially. If you are getting counsel from someone, and they “take your side” immediately and don’t encourage you to get accountability, you aren’t getting help.
6. Proverbs 26:20 & 15:1: *“Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; And where there is no talebearer, strife ceases.”* *“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”*

Blessing & Cursing

When God called Abram and gave him the gift of faith, He promised to bless him and the world through him: *“Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (Gen. 12:1-3). Abraham’s blessing only got bigger when God said he would be the father of a multitude of nations and possess the gates of his enemies (Gen. 22:17-18). Jesus is the greater Abraham to whom all the nations are coming. He told us how to overcome our enemies: *“But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you”* (Lk. 6:27-28). This is different than not having enemies. It’s blessing those who hate and attack you, overcoming evil with good.