

JAMES Lesson 10 - James 3: 3-13
“Spiritual Maturity: Control of Tongue”

1.11.09

Intro: In World War II an oft seen poster was “**LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS!**” (see poster on PowerPoint) This phrase was coined as a slogan during WWII as part of the US Office of War Information's attempt to limit the possibility of people inadvertently giving useful information to enemy spies.

James, in Chapter 3 of his letter teaches us that “loose lips” also can sink lives and reputations and even churches. He wants us to know and learn that SPIRITUAL MATURITY demands the CONTROL of the TONGUE. Let's learn this lesson well.

OUR TEXT: JAMES 3: 3-13

- 3** Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well.
- 4** Behold, the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder, wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.
- 5** So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!
- 6** And the tongue is a fire, the very world [kosmos] of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell.
- 7** For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race.
- 8** But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison.
- 9** With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;
- 10** from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.
- 11** Does a fountain send out from the same opening *both* fresh and bitter *water*?
- 12** Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor *can* salt water produce fresh.
- [13** Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.]

We have long heard that the tongue ranks high on the list of the **dirtiest parts of our body**, with a high count of bacteria. James here reinforces that this is true spiritually as well.

Of course, it's not the tongue specifically that is the problem – but the fact that **THE TONGUE IS CONNECTED TO OUR HEART**

Matthew 12:34 [Jesus:] “The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.”

SO WHAT IS JAMES SAYING?

1. You can't tame the tongue (humanly speaking)

3:8 “But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil . . .”

There are those who have kicked tough habits of smoking or drugs, disciplined their body for major weight loss and overcome everything from emotional bonds of phobias to spiritual bonds of sinful behavior.

But all of us know by experience, that no matter how much think we have our tongue under control IT SURPRISES US and **JUMPS OUT TO BITE** – it IS restless!

So, is James pointing all this out to absolve us from guilt over the tongue and save us the trouble of even trying to control it? NO

2. You must control the tongue (spiritually speaking)

1:26 “If any man thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.”

To not control the tongue is to DECEIVE OURSELF into thinking “it can't be done”

To not control the tongue is to “fail” at SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Note: James in our chapter 3 passage **does not zero in on specifics sins** of the tongue, which are many: lying, exaggeration, gossip (saying behind the back what you would not say to the face), flattery (saying to the face what you would not say behind the back), unwholesome words – whether cursing or blasphemy, angry words, manipulation (with which I particularly struggle), bitterness or negativism.

James leaves the specific application to us. He rather **prods us to consider** the POWER of the tongue, the POISON of the tongue and the POTENTIAL of the tongue.

James uses **6 illustrations, in pairs, to give us 3 key points** to prod us to CONTROL of the tongue by the Spirit.

3 KEY POINTS, BY 6 ILLUSTRATIONS

1. The POWER of the tongue DIRECTS (“bit” and “rudder”) - 3:3-4

Reread 3: 3-4 Control = OBEDIENCE and DIRECTION

Proverbs 18:21 "Death and life are in the power of the tongue"

Words can **chart "the course of our life"** (3:6). Words such as "I do" or "I promise" or "I commit."

Words and the attitude behind them can **make or break** a business deal or even a career. They can "grease" or squelch a romantic moment or a decision to receive Christ as Savior. And they can encourage or discourage a loved one's heart in a critical life-changing decision.

Just like a small bit in a horse's mouth or a small rudder on a huge vessel can control and change the course of something powerful, the small tongue (and its words) can control and change the course of **lives, reputations and relationships**.

SO – THINK, CONSIDER, CHOOSE CAREFULLY, SEIZE THE MOMENT for **"death and life are in the power of the tongue"**

2. The **POISON** of the tongue **DESTROYS** ("fire" and wild animals) - 3:5-8

Reread 3: 5-8 We must CONTROL boasting, iniquity, defilement, hell itself, wildness, restlessness and poison. This is a supernatural task!

RE: "very world of iniquity" – "world" is the Greek word "kosmos" meaning the sinful world controlled by the "prince of the power of the air" the devil. The phrase can be well be translated as "the adornment of evil." Or to say it in our vernacular, **words can be "dressed to kill."**

RE: "sets on fire the course of our life" – we must again take special notice that poisonous and fiery words can be so destructive as to chart the very course of our lives and those around us!

RE: "set on fire by hell itself" – our English word "hell" is the Greek word "gehenna" which was the garbage dump outside of Jerusalem that was forever burning on fire. It reminds us that our tongue is a favorite conduit for evil by the forces of the evil one. Beware!

Proverbs 26: 20-21 "For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down. Like charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife."

Psalms 39: 1, 3 David: "I said 'I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue; I will guard my mouth as with a muzzle ... My heart was hot within me; while I was musing the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue'"

Just a fire **burns and defiles, quickly and openly** – so can fiery words do the same. Just as the poison from a wild animal **cripples and contaminates, slowly and secretly** – so can poisonous words do the same.

As Paul counseled in *Colossians 4:6* "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt.."

3. The **POTENTIAL** of the tongue **DELIGHTS** (“fountain” and “fig”) - 3: 9-12

Reread 3:9-12. We must **CONTROL** the **INCONSISTENCY** and **HYPOCRISY** of both foul and sweet words from our tongue.

Just as cool water can **refresh and satisfy**, so can appropriate, God-directed words.

Proverbs 18:4 “The words of a man’s mouth are as deep waters, and the wellspring of wisdom as a flowing brook.”

Proverbs 13:14 “The law of the wise is a fountain of life.”

Just as a fruitful fig tree or grape vine can **feed and nourish**, so can appropriate, God-directed words.

Proverbs 10:21 “The lips of the righteous feed many.”

The most important part of a fountain is its **SOURCE**. And, the most important part of tree or plant is the **ROOTS**. So, our spiritual root structure must go deep into God – our prime source of control of the tongue is **time spent with Him**.

Then the **POTENTIAL** can become **REALITY**. Inconsistency from our tongue is a “**warning sign**” that our time with God must be more.

HOW TO TAME THE “UNTAMABLE”

1. “Cauterize” the tongue in confession

Isaiah 6: 5 “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand . . . and he touched my mouth with it and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.”

2. Commit the tongue in consistent prayer

Psalms 141: 3-4 David’s prayer: “Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips. Incline not my heart to any evil thing.”

3. Empower the tongue in self-determination + Spirit-filled self-control

Ephesians 4:29 “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

Ephesians 5:18 “Be not controlled [drunk] by wine, but be controlled [filled] with the Holy Spirit.”

Galatians 5: 22-23 “...the fruit of the Spirit is . . . self-control ...”

Closing: Around 1900 the songwriter Kate Barclay Wilkinson penned these words which became the first stanza of a beloved hymn. She must have been moved by

the same God who gave James our text of the day. Note them on the PowerPoint overhead. [Sing:]

May the mind of Christ my Savior
Live in me from day to day
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say

CLOSING PRAYER of CONFESSION, COMMITMENT and SPIRIT FILLING

JAMES, Chapter 1 (My Paraphrase)

1. To my Jewish brothers of all twelve tribes, wherever you might be after having been forced out of your homeland – this letter is from James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, by calling and by choice. Dear brothers:

Confidence in Trials

2-4. Take a different perspective at the many trials you face, seeing the positive in them, rather than the negative. One, your faith is being proven and strengthened. And two, you are developing endurance for the long haul of life. Don't balk at being tested, but hang in there, letting the tests accomplish their Godly purpose: your maturity, that you may be spiritually "buff" without flabbiness or weakness of character.

5. Remember, if you need wisdom (and who doesn't?), just ask God, who gives it abundantly and without making you feel bad for asking. Just ask, and Godly wisdom will indeed be given to you.

6-8. But you have to ask, really believing the answer will come. No doubting allowed! Because if you doubt, you are acting just like the waves of the sea blown around by the wind – up one minute with your belief and down the next with your doubts. This kind of supposed "faith" won't get you anything from God. He doesn't accept on-again, off-again faith, which by the way, indicates instability in other areas of life.

Confidence in Status

9-10. Hey, believing brother - how about this for God's "upside down" perspective on wisdom? If your earthly status is on the "humble" side, be proud that you are standing rich and tall in God's spiritual kingdom. And if your earthly status is on the "well off" side, be proud that in God's kingdom you are just a spiritual beggar. After all, your earthly status is about as secure as flowering grass in the heat of the sun.

11. See the picture? Just like the sun rises, so does your status. Then comes the "Santa Annas" of life – and just like the grass withers and the flower falls, so does your status wither and fall. What once appeared beautiful is no more. Our status, and the futile pursuits of achieving it, will soon fade away.

12. So what's worth achieving? - persevering through the trials of life and proving your Godly character through it all. This is how you will receive the true "crown of life" – God's heavenly reward – which He promises to each one of His lovers.

Confidence in Temptation

13-16. I don't ever want to hear you saying, "I am being tempted by God." One, evil can never tempt a perfect God. And two, a perfect God could never lower Himself to tempt any one. Rather, it's really you that brings on temptation by your own luring lustfulness. Sin comes when you give in to temptation by acting on your lust. And when that sin gets full sway in your life it kills your relationship with God. My dear, believing friends whom I love - don't be sucked in by temptation!

17. Everything that is good is a perfect gift, especially given to you from God. "Good" is never by accident. The Giver is always our Heavenly Father, and like a bright light he never wavers or compromises in His delivery of good.

18. God exercised His Divine prerogative when He chose to pull us into truth by the power of His Word. This was so that we Jewish believers could be considered as the first ones to receive His special blessing of spiritual victory.

Confidence in Reactions

19-20. Now I'm going to tell you something you already know, but you must apply it to your reactions. One, be quick to listen to others and especially to God. Two, be slow to voice your opinion. And three, put any tendency to anger on a slow fuse. Pleasing God and getting angry never go well together. The short version: open your ears, close your mouth and chill your anger.

21. You know all that leftover filth of the old life that's still seeps out? Dump it in the spiritual trash can. You know God's Word that He has planted deep inside of you? Humbly receive its wisdom and let it save you from drowning in your own foolish reactions.

Confidence in Religion

22. It is delusional to think that you are religious by merely hearing the Word, believing it, and participating in a few religious activities. Rather, you prove and demonstrate your true religion by living out the Word actively in every area of your life.

23-24. Hearing the Word and not doing it is like looking at yourself in a mirror and not fixing what needs fixing. Why even look if you just go away unchanged and oblivious to the need?

25. God's Word is the perfect rulebook for life, with rules to set you free, not tie you down, and therefore worthy of a long and hard look. If you let them sink in, and turn your thinking into meaningful action and change, your life will surely be blessed for it.

26. Do you think that your religion is healthy? Then put it to the test by whether you can control your tongue. If you can't, not only is your religion worthless but you're deceiving yourself into thinking your religion is OK. It's not.

27. I'll tell you what real religion is about. It's about practicing love and care for those with special needs – like children without parents or women who have lost their husbands. Bottom line, true religion is keeping yourself pure from the wickedness of the world!

JAMES, Chapter 2 (My Paraphrase)

Conviction in Equality

1. Don't you dare call yourself a believer in our amazing Lord and Chosen One, Jesus, if you treat people differently based on their appearance or background.

2-4. Here's a test. If one person walks into to your church service looking like "a million" and another comes in looking like a "bum," will you treat them the same? Or will you give special attention or seating to the one looking great and ignore the other, even making him or her sit in a place where they might not so easily draw attention. If you'd honestly treat them differently, you fail the test. You would be making an ungodly judgment based on unfair distinctions.

5-7. As my brothers in the Lord, I really do love you. So, listen up. Don't we read that God so often has chosen the poor in wealth to be rich in faith and receive His kingdom inheritance? This is exactly what God promises to all who love Him. It doesn't make sense to dishonor the poor person. More often than not, it's the rich one who will give you a hard time, even pulling you into court or using your precious Lord's name in vain.

8-9. The highest law of God's kingdom is this: "Love others as you would want to be loved." If you do this, you're right on. But if you love people differently based on externals, you're practicing sin and guilty of breaking God's #1 law.

10-11. Here's the hard fact. Even if you were to keep all of God's law perfectly, one sin (like favoritism) makes you guilty of all in God's eyes. God forbids adultery, just like he forbids murder. But if you are clean regarding adultery, yet commit murder – you're guilty of adultery, and all the other laws as well. Ouch!

12-13. Now don't be frozen with fear in your words and actions toward others – God's royal law of love is meant to motivate and free you, not condemn you. If you show no mercy, then mercy won't come your way. But if you learn to show mercy in your assessment of others, that demonstration of mercy will trump any judgment that is due you.

Conviction in Works

14. Tell me, fellow Christians, what is "saving faith?" If someone claims to be a Christian by their faith, and yet there is little visible sign of that faith in their actions, it seems to me that kind of faith is useless faith – not "saving faith."

15-16. For example, if a believing brother lacks some basic necessity such as clothing or food and you essentially tell him "blessings on you, I hope you'll be okay!" and don't make an effort to meet his need, I say your supposed faith is a sham.

17. The principle is this: Faith, if it isn't backed up by action, is dead faith.

18. Now, I can just hear someone say, "Some Christians are more private, and some are more outgoing in expressing their faith." Well, if you're one of those "private in your faith" types, I dare you to prove your faith without any action, while I prove my faith to others by living it out in action.

19-20. You believe that God is one? That's good, but think of this: the demons, as they shudder, believe the same (and they're not believers!). Can't you admit that believing alone without actions to back it up means nothing?

21-23 After all, haven't we heard Father Abraham was "justified by faith" when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? His faith and works "teamed up" so that his behavior proved his belief to be authentic. This was the fulfillment of the Scripture that says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Remember, this faith matched with action resulted in Abraham being called the friend of God.

24. So here's the principle said another way: A man is made right with God by action that demonstrates inward faith, and not by action less faith.

25. Another example would be Rahab, who was once a harlot. But she too was justified, (that is, made right with God) by her works. Remember, she received and hid the spies (Joshua and Caleb) and then let them exit by a safe way.

26. To say the principle a final way: Just like a body without a spirit is lifeless, so also faith without demonstrative action is lifeless.

JAMES, Chapter 3 (My Paraphrase)

Control of Giftedness

1-2. Think long and hard about whether God has called you to be a teacher of His Holy Word. Why? First of all, God will give teachers a stricter judgment when it comes to handling His Word. Secondly, we are all sinners. (And this implies that a teacher will be rightly held to a higher standard by his students, as well.) And thirdly, since teaching uses a lot of words and many words lead to certain stumbling, a teacher will never be perfect in his teaching.

Control of Tongue