

**Taming the Tongue**  
**James 3:1-12**

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## **Introduction**

The tongue has a unique way of declaring who you are. It reveals the heart (Matt. 15:19) and discloses the real person. The misuse of the tongue is perhaps the easiest way to sin.

There seems to be no limits on what one can say.

When a person receives Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, he becomes a new creation. His whole being is transformed and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. A transformed nature will produce transformed behavior. And new behavior involves new speech, speech that corresponds to a saved and sanctified life and that reflects the holy nature of the One who has given the new life.

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## James 3:1-12

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. <sup>2</sup>For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he *is* a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. <sup>3</sup>Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. <sup>4</sup>Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. <sup>5</sup>Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! <sup>6</sup>And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup>For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. <sup>8</sup>But no man can tame the tongue. *It is* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup>With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. <sup>10</sup>Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup>Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? <sup>12</sup>Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

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## The Potential to Condemn

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The term “teachers” was a word often used of rabbis and anyone else who functioned in an official teaching or preaching role. Teachers were to understand God’s word and were given great honor and respect. In the Gospels, many of the rabbis relished this prestige and privilege.

The self-seeking motives that characterized many rabbis were contrary to Jesus. It appears that there were some in the church who desired to become teachers for the wrong reasons.

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James is not saying that people should not desire to be teachers, but that they should understand the responsibility for accurately delivering God's Word and that they are accountable before God for doing it properly. There is a stricter judgment that God holds teachers responsible to proclaim His Word properly and that they will be held responsible for improper teaching that causes others to sin.

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James includes himself with the word "we." James is saying that none of are perfect. We carry this sin nature which causes us to stumble in this world. The point is that as teachers we must understand our imperfections and be cautious as we use our "tongues" to speak. It is clear that the role of teacher requires study, prayer, and dependency upon the Holy Spirit to speak Truth properly. The teacher of Spiritual things, must make sure that he has applied the principles he is teaching to his own life, before he attempts to apply it to others.

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## The Power to Control

James 3:2b-5a

If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. <sup>3</sup> Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. <sup>4</sup> Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. <sup>5</sup> Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things.

James states that “if anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man.” The word “perfect” has two possible meanings. One carries the idea of absolute perfection, of being without any flaw or error. If that is James’s meaning here, he is obviously speaking hypothetically, since no human being but Jesus would qualify for that sort of perfect speech. But the term can also mean complete, or mature. If that is the sense intended here, the idea is that a person who does not stumble in what he says gives evidence of a purified and mature heart. The idea is that only spiritually mature believers can control their tongues. To the degree that our holiness approaches that of Christ’s, to that degree we are spiritually perfect or mature.

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James then makes a remarkable claim, declaring that a Christian who can bridle his tongue is able to bridle the whole body as well. “Body” seems to refer to the person in general, to his whole being. In other words, if we can control our tongue, which responds so readily to sin, then controlling everything else will follow.

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James uses two analogies to show the power of the tongue. The first is that we put bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us. This illustration is particularly appropriate, because the bit lies on top of a horse's tongue, and when attached to the bridle and reins, it is possible for the rider using that bit to easily make the horse obey. Controlling horses' mouths controls their heads, which, in turn, direct their entire body as well.

The second illustration is that of a ship. James states that even the great ships which are driven by fierce winds, are turned by a small rudder wherever the pilot desires.

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James gives no specifics in saying that the tongue boasts of great things. But he obviously has in mind man's natural inclination to boast, and to be self-centered. Whenever and however the tongue boasts, it leaves a wake of destruction. It tears down others; it destroys churches, families, marriages, and personal relationships. It can even lead to murder and to war.

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In order for the tongue to control our lives in the right way, we must resist the temptation to boast and brag. We should speak only gracious words, kind words, words that edify, comfort, bless, and encourage. They should be words of humility, gratitude, peace, holiness, and wisdom. Such words, of course, can only come from a heart that not only is indwelt by the Holy Spirit but is also completely surrendered to His control.

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## The Power to Corrupt

James 3:5b-6

See how great a forest a little fire kindles! <sup>6</sup> And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.

James's next point focuses on the tongue's tremendous potential to corrupt and destroy. The tongue can be used for good or evil. The emphasis here is a warning against using it for evil. The tongue can corrupt anything that it can speak about.

Fire has the amazing capacity to reproduce itself in an almost unlimited way as long as it has fuel to burn. Like the vast majority of things, water cannot multiply. When it is poured out, no matter where or on what, it never expands into a flood. But fire feeds on itself. If there is sufficient flammable material and enough oxygen to sustain combustion, it will burn on indefinitely.

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### The Tongue is a world of iniquity!

The Term “world” does not here refer to the earth or universe but rather to a system, scheme, or arrangement. In this case, it is a system of iniquity, of evil, rebellion, lawlessness, and every other form of sin. It is the source of unrighteous, ungodly behavior within sinful man. It is an evil and wicked system of fleshly humanness. No other bodily part has such far-reaching potential for disaster and destruction as the tongue.

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The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body!

The system of evil spreads out and contaminates the rest of the body. The destructiveness of the tongue is like smoke that penetrates and permanently contaminates everything that is exposed to it. Whatever fire itself cannot destroy, its smoke will permeate and ruin.

Jesus reminds us that it is not what proceeds out of man that defiles, but that which is within.

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**The tongue sets on fire the course of nature!**

Like physical fire, the destructive effects of evil speech expand, not only contaminating ourselves but also everything we influence throughout the course of our life.

To a large extent, we are known by the way we talk. That principle applies to good things as well as sinful, but James's emphasis here is entirely on the negative aspects of our speaking—such as gossip, slander, false accusations, lying, filthy language and stories, and other sins of the tongue. These are the words that can destroy individual lives, families, schools, churches, and communities.

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**The tongue is set on fire by hell!**

The verb usage here indicates a continual state of being set on fire. The word “hell” literally means “valley of Hinnom,” a deep gorge southwest of Jerusalem, where trash, garbage, and the bodies of dead animals and executed criminals were dumped and continually burned. Because the fire burned all the time and maggots were always present, the Lord used gehenna to represent the eternal, never-ending torment of hell, “the unquenchable fire, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:43–44; cf. Isa. 66:24; Matt. 5:22). Hell is Satan's place, prepared for him and his demons (Matt. 25:41). As such, it is used here as a synonym for Satan and the demons.

That it is said to be set on fire by hell indicates that the tongue can be Satan's tool, fulfilling hell's purposes to pollute, corrupt, and destroy. It is unbelievably dangerous and destructive. Even mature believers know that in their remaining fleshly humanness, their tongues still have great power to devastate and therefore need constant guarding and control.

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### So What ...

We most likely will not gain full control over our tongues this side of eternity. However, this does not mean that we should not be putting in effort to take control over what we say!

We often take out our frustrations in those we love and care about. They are safe, but it is not right...

We do not have to say or make a comment about everything. There is wisdom in being quiet. When we open our mouths, it should be words of truth and grace.