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Sermon Notes

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Why Christians Must Tame the Tongue

James 3:1-12

In 2012, I went on a mission trip to Nepal. At one point, we were driving in our van past a raging river swollen by a month of rains; the river had a brown muddy look, not attractive at all; but I had never seen such a rushing torrent of water in all my life. It looked like a stampede of bison back in the old west... rising and falling and roaring and undulating, with peaks and troughs and unspeakable power. It was terrifying just to drive beside it, wondering if at any moment it might suddenly rise and swallow up the road we were driving on. It was ugly and powerful, threatening and dangerous. If anyone were to fall into it, they would be instantly swept downstream and pulled under by its undulating currents and deadly force.

As we come to this passage in James this morning, that picture is in my mind... an overwhelming force, a rushing torrent, a deadly power, able to sweep away whole villages and swiftly bring death. But look at what we are talking about this morning... the HUMAN TONGUE! This tiny little organ hidden in our mouths, behind our teeth. James zeroes in on this organ as if it were a weapon of mass destruction... for I think he would say that is exactly what it is.

The human race speaks an immeasurable torrent of words every single day. Estimates put the average ration of words per human at between 18-25,000 words every single day. Given that the world population is somewhere around 7.5 billion, that's a staggering 150 trillion words every single day.

But what's really terrifying is not the quantity of those words, but what the Bible says about how evil are many if not most of those words. And that is exactly what James 3:1-12 is addressing... the absolute necessity of Christians to TAME THEIR TONGUES by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In context, we have just passed the theological center of this epistle of James... James is a very practical book, seeking to instruct Jewish Christians on what genuine faith really looks like in the real world. He has just finished making it plain that "faith without works is dead."

Immediately after that, James addresses the issue of the tongue! That is because there is such a powerful connection between the HEART and the TONGUE. James wants his readers to know that the transformation of the tongue is essential to genuine saving faith. It may be the single greatest proof that someone is truly saved.

We're going draw out six reasons **WHY ALL CHRISTIANS MUST TAME THE TONGUE** by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I. Because by Our Words We Will Be Judged

James 3:1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

A. The Tongue is a Clear Reflection of the Heart

1. James says teachers will be JUDGED MORE STRICTLY and then immediately discusses the tongue, that instrument by which teachers do their ministries
2. Make sure your life lines up with your doctrine

Richard Baxter in *Reformed Pastor*:

Take heed to yourselves, lest you live in those sins which you preach against in others, and lest you be guilty of that which daily you condemn. ... Will you preach God's laws, and willfully break

them? If sin be evil, why do you live in it if it be not, why do you dissuade men from it? If it be dangerous, how dare you venture on it? if it be not, why do you tell men so? If God's threatenings be true, why do you not fear them? if they be false, why do you needlessly trouble men, with them, and put them into such frights without a cause

3. So... not many should presume to be teachers, because we will be judged more severely if we sin; but on the other hand, the church definitely needs faithful teachers of the Word, and there is the opposite danger in the parable of the talents; the last man was a lazy coward who hid his talent in the ground
4. People with the gift of teaching MUST USE IT!

Romans 12:6-7 If a someone's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. ⁷ If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach

5. James's point here is that teachers should be very careful about what they say and how they live

B. Jesus Clearly Links the Heart to the Tongue

1. Why the focus on the TONGUE? Clearly the tongue doesn't have "a mind of its own"
2. That's true, but it is the nature of Hebrew thought to zero in on the part of the body that does the evil deed as though it were indeed responsible for the sin

Romans 3:15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood

As though the murderer's feet carried him to the place of the crime.

3. But it is absolutely true that the real issue is the HEART... Jesus made this perfectly clear

Matthew 12:33-35 "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. ³⁴ You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵ The good

man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.

4. “Out of the FULLNESS or OVERFLOW of the heart the mouth speaks
 - a. The heart is a storage facility of all manner of things
 - b. What you ponder, what you delight in, what you ruminate over, what you fantasize about, what you covet, what you lust after, what you desire and pursue and love and choose and consider and plan for... that is what is filling your hearts
 - c. The basic nature of the unregenerate human heart is wickedness

Jeremiah 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

Romans 3:13-14 Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." ¹⁴ "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

- d. But the tongue is a clear TATTLETALE on the nature of the heart... those things will come spilling out of your mouth at some point

C. Jesus Says “By Our Words We Will Be Judged”

Matthew 12:36-37 But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. ³⁷ For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

The tongue is such a sure-fire reflection of the true nature of the heart that all Jesus will need on Judgment Day to evaluate every single person is the full catalog of their words

And he clearly implies that God has kept track of “every careless word” we have spoken

- D. Therefore, we should TAME OUR TONGUES, because by the words of our mouths we will be judged on Judgment Day...

E. Amazing the number of verbal sins

arguing; blasphemy; boasting; coarse speech; complaining; cursing; deceit; disrespect; exaggeration; false doctrine; filthy joking; flattery; foolish talk; gossip; insults; lies; mockery; rebellion; sarcasm; seduction; slander; threats; words of unbelief

1. For all these verbal sins, God will bring people into judgment, and his record of our words is perfect
2. Job wanted his words recorded...

Job 19:23-24 Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, ²⁴ that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever!

Well... they ARE... remembered in the mind of God

And on Judgment Day, we will give an account for each one.

II. Because by Taming the Tongue We Control Our Whole Bodies

James 3:2 We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

- A. Controlling the Tongue is a Key Step to Controlling Your Whole Life
- B. James says if you're never at fault in what you say, you are a perfect person
 1. Now absolute perfection will elude us in this world
 2. There was only one man who ever lived who never spoke any evil ever... that was Jesus Christ, the Son of God
 3. Jesus alone spoke the perfect word at every moment based on the needs of the person

Proverbs 25:11 A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.

4. Jesus spoke perfect doctrine, and dealt perfectly with all types of people... the “bruised reed he did not break and the smoldering wick he did not snuff out”... but he also spoke like a lion when needed to his hard-hearted enemies
- C. James is not claiming that we can ever be perfect... but if we are to grow into Christ-like maturity, we have to begin with the tongue
- D. His Point Here: The Tongue Determines the Whole Course of Your Life

1. Later point

James 3:6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

2. James literally says the tongue sets the whole course of his life on fire when it is used for evil
 - a. Literally the word is “wheel”, like the direction of life, the “wheel of fate” or we might consider it the “steering wheel”
 - b. In verse 6, James is speaking of the unregenerate person and the way evil seizes hold of the tongue and directs the entire course of his life toward the FIRES of HELL!
 - c. Conversely and positively, when God is saving a person he must redeem the tongue, because sanctifying the tongue will direct the whole course of his life toward holiness and heaven

So, if you want to grow in grace and the knowledge of Christ, ask the Holy Spirit to purify your tongue... to control your speech patterns... to weed out the bitterness and complaining in trials, to kill the gossip with which you have in the past assassinated the character of some unwitting person, to put lies and deceitfulness to death, to put an end to the exaggerations with which you have enhanced your own reputation at the expense of the truth, to kill the habit of flattery by which you have manipulated people to do what you want them to... there is SO MUCH WORK to be done

3. And if you diligently pursue this small organ, you will make amazing progress in your sanctification

E. Two Illustrations: The Bit in the Horse's Mouth, and the Rudder of a Large Ship

James 3:3-4 When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.

1. The bit in the horse's mouth is a clear illustration of how a whole animal, a powerful animal, is turned in a direction—this way or that way—by the tiny piece of metal put into its mouth
2. No horse automatically wants to help a farmer plow a field... it has to be controlled and turned to do the farmer's will
3. Neither does any wild horse want to allow a human being to ride its back... the bucking bronco has to be broken and then have a bit put into its mouth so the whole animal can be turned
4. James also speaks of the rudder... a very tiny piece of wood or metal by which this massive ship can be turned by the pilot
5. James is saying to us Christians, if you want to turn the whole direction of your life toward godliness and Christlikeness and fruitfulness, then allow the Holy Spirit to TAME YOUR TONGUE

III. Because the Tongue Has a Powerful Effect on Others

James 3:5-6 Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

A. The Tongue "Makes Great Boasts" Because it has Great Power

1. I cannot help but think about the future of the world, and the Antichrist that is coming

2. Daniel 7 describes him as being staggeringly BOASTFUL, able to sway people by his soaring claims
3. He will set himself up in God's temple proclaiming himself to be God... and people will listen to his soaring boasts and worship him
4. Think about how Adolph Hitler was able to arouse the passions of the entire nation of Germany by his overpowering speeches
5. The history of governments is a history of the power of words... the power of speeches that sway people and move people and motivate people and galvanize them
6. Think about all such speeches ever made that made people willing even to die for a cause... like Lincoln's Gettysburg Address that showed the true purpose of the Civil War was to ensure that government of the people, by the people, for the people, would not perish from the earth; like Winston Churchill's calling on England to endure the might of the Nazi war machine in his first speech as Prime Minister, May 13, 1940: **"What is our aim? VICTORY at all costs! In spite of all terror... however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no survival!"**

This speech electrified and galvanized the British nation to stand alone against the Nazis.

Many other examples can be multiplied, and I am leaning toward the positive.... What the tongue can do for the glory of God.

But James is clearly speaking of the negative... what the tongue can do to steal and kill and destroy... to serve Satan

B. He Likens the Small Tongue to the Smallness of a Spark of Fire that Consumes an Entire Forest

1. The worst wildfire in American history is the Great Peshtigo fire of October 8-14, 1871. It burned 3.8 million acres and killed at least 1500 people in northern Wisconsin and the upper peninsula of Michigan... amazingly, that fire burned at the exact same time as the great Chicago fire that some claim was started when Mrs. O'Leary's cow knocked over a kerosene lamp

2. James's point is that a tiny spark can eventually take out a massive forest... so also the tiny tongue can start rumors and spread gossip or teach false doctrine or utter complaints that suck the spiritual life from an entire congregation or even hundreds of congregations and thousands of people

IV. Because the Tongue is Set on Fire by Hell

A. The Satanic Origin of this Evil Fire

James 3:6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

1. This may be the single most devastating verse in the Bible on the evil of the tongue
 2. James speaks in layer upon layer of the damage the human tongue can do... it is a fire, burning up and destroying much good; he calls it a "world of evil"... the Greek implies it is a system or network of evil... there is a logic to the fire that takes hold and destroys the faith of people and their spiritual well-being
 3. Think of Shakespeare, the tragic play Othello, in which the evil character Iago whispers in the ear of Othello that his loving wife Desdemona has been unfaithful to him with his lieutenant Michael Cassio. Just that whispered insinuation destroys their marriage, causes Othello to kill his innocent wife, and then eventually to commit suicide.
 4. Though Shakespeare's play is fictitious, this kind of evil of the tongue goes on every single day in this corrupted planet of ours
- B. James says (as I mentioned) that the tongue directs the whole course of someone's life in evil... they are moved by words and use words to do evil; and in this, the tongue is set on fire by hell
- C. Satan himself uses the tongue to do his work... to cause Jesus' enemies to plot against him; to move Judas to betray him; to incite Jews against Pilate to have Jesus crucified... and it continued in every era of church history

V. Because the Tongue is So Wild

James 3:7-8 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸ but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

A. James Likens the Tongue to a Wild Animal... basically untameable!

B. Every Kind of Wild Animal Has Been Tamed by Man

1. Think of the lion tamers in a Barnum and Bailer Circus, who are able to put their heads in the mouths of lions or get elephants to stand up on stools
2. Think Indian snake charmers who use music to cause King Cobras to rise and sway as they see fit
3. Think of the shows you've seen with dolphins and even Orcas—the deadliest animal of the sea—and they are made to jump in tandem and do other tricks

C. But NO MAN CAN TAME THE TONGUE

D. God Alone Can Tame It... and That is Our Great Hope!

1. God is moved by our helplessness... he is magnified by our weakness
2. For us to be honest about our consistent sins with the tongue and to say to him in prayer, “Lord, if you do not change my tongue I cannot restrain it... please help me!”

Psalm 141:3 Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.

Illustration: like the guards at a maximum security prison; their primary job is to keep the murderers inside the walls, unable to flood into the community where they will do immense damage

LET NOTHING COME OUT THAT IS HARMFUL OR CORRUPT!

LET ONLY GODLY WORDS COME OUT, WORDS THAT WILL BUILD UP MY NEIGHBOR!!

Need to **slow down** in our speech... think about what you're about to say:

James 1:19 be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry

Ponder your words... ask yourself if they glorify God and build the neighbor up

FCC, Networks have used a SEVEN-SECOND DELAY in their live broadcasts to give censors a chance to bleep out profanity or shield the audience from shocking events like violence.

VI. Because the Tongue is Given to Praise God

James 3:9-12 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

A. Our Changed Nature Should Result in Praise and Worship to God

1. The first sins committed after the Fall were sins with the mouth:
Genesis 3:12 "The woman you put here with me-- she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."
2. When we are filled with the Spirit, look what happens to our tongues

Ephesians 5:19-20 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

B. This is James's Central Point: Our Tongues Show our Nature

1. If we are truly converted, we will speak praise to God and speak blessing and benefit to people who are created in the image of God
2. We will use our tongues to heal and strengthen and build and encourage... as instruments of God, speaking the word of God

C. How Can we Praise God one moment... and sin the next??

1. This is where the rubber meets the road in our sanctification... with our MOUTHS
2. We have this wonderful time of worship together, then we go home and argue with our spouses or other family members
3. "My brothers, this SHOULD NOT BE!"
4. How can the same spring produce both fresh water and salt water
5. When God goes to you to drink, does he get delicious refreshing water of praise and worship, and edification for his people... or the salt water of cursing and bitterness and anger and selfishness?

VII. Applications

A. This Should Make Us Repent

1. Everyone of us should be seeing poisonous patterns of speech in our lives that we want to get rid of
2. Start with complaining
 - a. How often do you complain when you are going through afflictions? How often do you speak words of unbelief against your loving heavenly Father?
 - b. How often do you complain to the people around you and poison their experience of the day... you don't like the weather or the food or you have some aches and pains or someone wasn't kind to you or some driver honked his horn at you... you speak words of complaint and poison the people near you
3. What about gossip?
 - a. Do you spread stories about other people that cause people to think poorly about them?
 - b. We are able to assassinate people's character and reputation when they are not around to defend themselves... it is very cowardly, like back-stabbing

4. What about lying? Or shading the truth in your stories about yourself? Exaggerating? Twisting the truth to suit your own interests?
5. What about filthy language... cursing... my brother in law used to commute from placid Lancaster County in PA up to New York City several times a week... the closer he got to NYC, the more horrific language he heard... words that should never be said at all punctuated every other word
6. So also people get a taste for dirty jokes or off-color humor... this is wickedness and the kind of corruption James is discussing here
7. Ask the Lord to show you

B. Learn to Be Quiet in God's Presence

Habakkuk 2:20 the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.

C. Use the Mouth Filter!!

Ephesians 4:29 Do not let ANY unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but ONLY what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

D. Clean Out Your Heart

1. What are you storing in your heart?
2. Be much in God's Word... meditate on it deeply and richly; memorize it, and you will find yourself talking more and more about what you're reading and memorizing

Philippians 4:8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-- think about such things.

E. Non-Christians: Get Ready for Judgment Day

Matthew 12:36-37 But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. ³⁷ For by

your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.

Not one of us can survive this... that is why God sent Christ into the world!!