

It Shouldn't Be This Way

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[0 : 0 0] Our sister Kara is serving us this morning. James chapter 3. This is verses 1 down through verse 12. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

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. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

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. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 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.

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed, and has been tamed, by mankind. But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

[1 : 1 6] With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

Good Father, would you please bless to us the reading of your word, and bless us now as we continue in this time of worship. We ask this for your glory and for our good.

In Jesus' name, amen. Go with me, if you would, back to the very first chapters of Scripture.

I want to remind you of something that happened then, because it continues to impact us today.

Genesis 1, 3 says, In his very first recorded work of creation, God speaks, and light springs into existence.

[2 : 3 6] And that little phrase, and God said, is repeated throughout the creation story in Genesis chapter 1. God, our God, is a communicator.

He uses words. And God created humans in his image. Genesis 1 and verse 27. We are also communicators. We use words.

How can I know what you're thinking if you don't explain yourself? How can I understand what you are feeling unless if you share that with me?

We are also communicators. Two chapters into the Bible, we meet another creature. He is also a communicator.

But unlike God, who uses words to create light, the serpent uses words to obscure what God has made clear.

[3 : 3 6] According to the serpent, God's commands are open for debate. They're subject to our interpretation. And with poisonous subtlety, the serpent challenges God's authority and questions his goodness.

Adam and Eve, they are enticed by the serpent's words and they rebel against God. How will God respond to this rebellion?

Well, it shouldn't surprise us that our God, in mercy, communicates again. Genesis 3 and verse 9. The Lord God called to the man and said to him, Where are you?

How will Adam and Eve respond? Now that God has been so gracious in summoning them, how will they respond to God's summons?

Will they follow God's example? Will they bless each other? Genesis 3 and verse 12.

[4 : 54] The man said, The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree and I ate. It is not my fault.

It's the woman's fault. She took the fruit. She ate first. She gave it to me. I only ate because she gave it to me. It's her fault. And since you created her, God, it's your fault.

As the proverb says, in the multitude of words, sin is not lacking. James has already had plenty to say about our speech.

Chapter 1 and verse 13. Let no one say, I am being tempted by God. Chapter 1 and verse 19. Let every person be slow to speak and put away all filthiness.

Chapter 2, verse 3. Don't say kind words to the man with a gold ring who comes into your church and then say disrespectful, dismissive words to the person who comes in in shabby clothing.

[6 : 11] Chapter 2 and verse 12. So speak as those who are going to be judged by the law of liberty. Chapter 2 and verse 14. What good is it to say that you have faith, but not faith that works?

What good is it to say to one in need, God bless you, and not give them the things that they need? Let's see how James continues his teaching about the tongue.

But let me warn you. One author calls this section of scripture the most penetrating and convicting exposition of the tongue in all literature.

Chapter 3, verse 1. James isn't arguing against having more teachers.

His concern here is not quantity. His concern is quality. Some who teach are abusing their authority.

[7 : 45] They are careless with their mouths, and as a result, they are causing harm to the believing community and even to its individual members. And so James warns, one day, God will judge teachers more strictly.

Why? Well, teachers use more words, so they have more opportunity for error. And teachers speak with authority, and so their hypocrisy is more damaging.

Teachers may have more understanding, and so the calling, chapter 1, verse 27, to be unstained by the world carries even more weight for those who teach.

But perhaps just as teachers within the community are feeling overwhelmed by this, James offers this little word of encouragement in verse 2. We all stumble.

We all make mistakes. None of us are perfect. And yet, the one who does not stumble in what they say, who does not sin with their mouth, that person, James says, is perfect.

[9 : 04] It's the idea we saw back in chapter 1 and verse 4. That person is mature, complete. That person is a fully formed, fully developed follower of Jesus.

The ability to control the tongue is evidence of sanctification. In other words, it is evidence of being more like Jesus.

And notice this too. Because James is addressing teachers, it's possible that body at the end of verse 2 points not only to the individual, but to the believing community.

The church. In other words, a teacher who controls their speech, who does not sin with their words, is the kind of person that a church should look to for guidance, for direction, for shepherding, for care.

to underscore the importance of controlling our mouths, James offers three illustrations. And notice this as we go through them.

[10 : 20] In each one, something small controls something much larger. Look at verse 3. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

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.

So also, the tongue is a small member and yet it boasts great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire.

a thoroughbred racing horse at the Kentucky Derby. Do you know how much they weigh? I did not either, but I looked it up because I was curious about this illustration that he makes.

A thoroughbred racehorse weighs about 1,100 pounds. 1,100 pounds. And the bit, the bit that the 115 pound jockey uses to control that massive creature, that bit weighs about one-tenth of one percent of the horse's weight.

[11 : 40] the bit in the horse's mouth is so very small and yet its influence is enormous. Similarly, compared to the size of the boat, the rudder is tiny.

Perhaps you remember this summer at the lake seeing the rudder, the small little rudder that you can use to control the paddle boat. Compared to that boat even, the rudder is so small.

Or think about how you can just dip the tip of your oar into the water and you can steer your kayak with just the tip of the oar. That's what James is poking at here.

The rudder is small and yet its effect is decisive. Whoever is captain, whoever is piloting, who's ever paddling the kayak, that person can steer wherever he or she wishes to go.

and it only takes a spark to get a fire going. Some of you probably remember that old song.

[12:49] I don't know if this is where that song came from. I suspect probably not because here it's used in a negative sense, but here we are. It only takes a spark. A person who is careless with a match can ignite a forest fire.

A candle that's left unattended can destroy an entire house. I did a little more basic math. Are you ready for this? My tongue is about one-tenth of one percent of my entire body weight.

It's approximately the same proportion as the bit to the horse. Your tongue is small and yet its influence is not.

Middle of verse 5, it boasts great things. James likely is talking about arrogant, divisive, quarrelsome speech.

We'll see that next week. Words that exalt the self and tear others down. It boasts great things.

Look what the tongue can do.

[14:04] Here's the point. like a bit and like a rudder and like a spark. Your tongue is small, but its influence is out of proportion to its size.

That's the problem. And verse 6 reveals the danger. fire. 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 is set on fire by hell.

evil. This is a challenging verse. So let's start with this phrase, a world of unrighteousness. You may recall back in chapter 1 and verse 20, James wrote this, the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Let's remember that James is the first New Testament letter that God preserved for the church. So when he writes about righteousness, he's not talking about justification by faith the way that Paul does in the book of Romans, for example.

[15:30] James is writing primarily to a Jewish community of believers. So when he uses this word righteousness, it leans more towards the Old Testament word of justice.

Justice. That is, the right order of a community that reflects God's character and purposes.

So, if the tongue is a world of unrighteousness, that means that the tongue, if it is misused, can oppose God's design for his people.

our words can destroy the kind of just, peace-filled community that God intends for his church.

James continues, the tongue stains the whole body. That means it mars your whole being. It corrupts your whole character. And if body in verse 2 hints at the community of believers, then the same thing may be true here.

[16:46] Words, and especially the words of the teacher, can pollute the body of Christ. Words can tear down members of the community. Words can wound rather than heal and divide rather than unify.

What seems like perhaps just a careless, thoughtless word can have disastrous effects, James says, the tongue is set, sorry, he says, the tongue sets on fire the entire course of life.

It can damage a whole reputation. It can destroy a whole ministry. It can ruin God's testimony in a community.

it can even bring shame on the name of Jesus. No wonder then that James concludes the tongue, the tongue that is abusive or inflammatory or slanderous or divisive, it is set on fire by hell itself.

we know the problem and now perhaps we understand the danger. So then the question is, why can't we control our tongues?

[18:17] This is the difficulty. Verse seven. For every kind of beast and bird of reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind.

But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil full of deadly poison.

In Thailand, elephants have been trained to hold paint brushes. And they can paint pictures of trees, flowers, even self-portraits, which kind of blows my mind a little bit.

At Los Alamos National Laboratory, bees have been trained to stick out their tongues when they smell certain chemical compounds.

In Tanzania, rats have been trained to detect dynamite and even tuberculosis. Researchers at Harvard trained an African gray parrot named Alex to identify a hundred different objects.
[19 : 46] And this parrot, Alex, not only could identify these hundred different objects, but could also understand abstract concepts like same or different. a border collie.

This one makes more sense, but it still is stunning. A border collie named Chaser learned the names of a thousand different objects and could return the correct one by command.
Take your pick, James says. Humans have tamed all kinds of animals. It was true in James' day and it's even more true for us now.

In 2021, Purdue University, pigs, pigs, were taught to use joysticks to play a simple video game. What? We can train animals, James says, but no one, and I think he uses a bit of hyperbole here to drive home the point, no one can tame the tongue.

[21 : 00] It is volatile. It is unstable. It is evil, and it is full of deadly poison.

poison. Psalms 140 in verse 3 describes people whose tongues are sharp as a serpent's with venom, the venom of asps under their lips.

So the tongue is set on fire by hell, and it is full of the serpent's deadly poison. no wonder in verse 15, James will call this type of speech demonic.

That is a fitting description for the tongue of anyone, and especially a teacher, whose words undermine the community and fracture its unity.

As at the beginning, James returns to first person pronouns here in verse number nine. Look at it with me. With it, with the tongue, we bless our Lord and Father, and with it, we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

[22 : 30] from the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, these things ought not to be so.

does the spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?

Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

water. Can good water and foul water come out of the same drinking fountain? Can a fig tree produce both figs and olives?

Or how about a vine? Could it ever produce both grapes and figs? Of course not. The answers to James' rhetorical question is of course not. Of course that can't be true.

[23 : 34] We know better than that. Then neither should we, James says. Neither should we, and especially those who teach, hurt people with the same mouth that we use to worship God.

My brothers and sisters, it shouldn't be this way. James circles back to a thread that has run through the past several paragraphs.

Think about it with me. If you claim to have faith, but then you show favoritism, you're committing sin. If you claim to love God, but you refuse to love your neighbor, you're breaking God's law.

If you say you have faith, and yet your so-called faith does not result in works, what good is that faith? James is concerned about hypocrisy.

Do your actions align with your faith? Adam and Eve were created to glorify God, but on that dreadful day in the garden, Adam rationalizes his sin and throws Eve under the bus.

[25 : 03] He was made for communion with God, and yet he curses Eve, who was made in God's image.

And I do the same. I worship God out of one side of my mouth, and curse people made in his image out of the other side of my mouth.

My brothers and sisters, it shouldn't be this way. We cannot curse people with the same mouth that we use to bless God.

We curse others in subtle ways, like gossip, saying behind their back what we would never say to their face.

Or how about flattery, saying to their face what we would never say behind their back. Or how about innuendo, implying more than is actually true.

[26 : 13] Sometimes we curse others in subtle ways like that. Sometimes we curse others in more direct ways. Just overt criticism, judgmental attitudes, and then we just say whatever is on our mind.

These kind of attacks originate from some sort of arrogance inside of us, or some sort of insecurity inside of us. Sometimes we slander others, we intentionally twist the truth in order to damage another's reputation.

Sometimes we curse others in direct ways. Sometimes we curse others in disrespectful ways. We talk to our parents with the same dismissive attitude that we used with friends at school. We grumble. We grumble when we should be grateful. We use sarcasm to bring down those that we ought to be honoring.

Sometimes we curse others in mean ways, name-calling, using labels to strip away dignity and God's image from someone, belittling unkind words, snapping at those who annoy us or inconvenience us.

[27 : 50] The tongue that blesses the creator must not curse his creatures. it shouldn't be this way.

Verse 8 says, no human being can tame the tongue, and yet we are not, we are not without hope. The word who spoke creation into existence became flesh and dwelt among us, and his words healed the sick and calmed the storm and brought the dead back to life and forgave the guilty. He committed no sin and neither was deceit found in his mouth. Even while suffering on the cross, Jesus refused to revile those who reviled him.

He absorbed the wrath of God against our poisonous speech flesh so that our blasphemous tongues could again bless God and those made in his image.

[29 : 10] If you have not yet trusted in Jesus as your savior, there is no lasting hope of taming your tongue apart from him. you need a savior and Jesus is that savior and he will save you today.

He will make you new. I wonder, will you trust him as your only hope for salvation? follower of Jesus.

The power that you need to curb cursing people while blessing the beauty of God is yours through your resurrected savior.

It is yours. The power that you need is yours through the resurrected power of your savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is flowing to you through the gift of the Holy Spirit who indwells you.

So look to Jesus for the help you need to control your mouth. Ask the Holy Spirit to produce his fruit of self-control, gentleness, and love so that you are slow to speak and slow to anger.

[30 : 33] Bless God and bless others by sharing the gospel with them and by speaking the truth in love.

True faith, true faith is tested and steadfastness through suffering results in this delightful gift of becoming wiser with Jesus.

And this wisdom is shaping us in humble holiness and gentle reasonableness and merciful goodness and every word we speak, every single choice we make, every need that we encounter is an opportunity to make our faith visible, to testify to our Father's goodness, to offer hope, and to offer healing through lives changed by the gospel of Jesus.

And so, my brothers and sisters, my beloved brothers and sisters, may our faith be not alone. May our worship each Sunday be matched by our words throughout the week because the tongue that blesses the Creator must not curse His creatures.

It shouldn't be this way, and by God's grace, one day it won't be. But until then, may our mouths bring healing and hope looking forward to that day when every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[32 : 22] Until then, by God's grace, let's be doers of the word and not hearers only. Let's pray. Father, as we reflect on this portion of Scripture, we find that even among the boldest of us, even amongst the most confident, even among the most mature, spiritually well-formed, what we surmised at the beginning is true.

This is a penetrating, convicting portion of Scripture. Thank you for bringing it to our attention, and thank you, Holy Spirit, for giving us so much help, for giving me so much help to make it clear and to make it plain.

Would you please take your word as we read earlier in James and plant it deep down inside of us so that we are not just hearers but doers of this word.

Father, forgive us for blessing you in worship and cursing others with gossip and slander and disrespect and criticism and grumbling and sarcasm, belittling, unkind words.

Thank you for the forgiveness that is ours through the life and the death and the resurrection of our Savior, Jesus. We plead his blood and we receive your forgiveness for these sins that are now fresh on our minds.

[34 : 17] Thank you that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Would you help each of us who have been given the Holy Spirit to walk worthy of the gospel that we have received.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.