

Holiness and the Tongue

Text: **James 3:1-12**

Introduction: In 1994, a tabloid that you can purchase while standing in line at any local grocery store ran the headline "Killer Bug Ate My Face."

Although the reporting was intentionally sensational, the story was based on seven real cases of invasive strep "A" bacteria in a city in England. When invasive strep A, which is not the same as strep throat, takes hold in a victim's body, the flesh starts to die at an incredible rate of several inches per hour. Each year about 1,500 people die from this ailment.

Newsweek writer, Geoffrey Cowley, describes what happens after the deadly microbes take hold in a person's body: The bacteria then multiply rapidly, producing toxins in the process. For three days, the patient may suffer swollen lymph nodes, a rising fever and excruciating pain at the site of the infection.

Penicillin can stop the attack at this stage, but by day four, infected tissues start dying. Bacteria soon saturate the bloodstream, destroying muscles and organs and sending the body into shock. Death can follow within hours...Invasive strep is rare, but it's also unforgiving.

Most of us here wouldn't wish that on our worst enemies. If there is a counterpart to strep A bacteria in the church today it has to be sins of the tongue.

Nothing can so quickly destroy the body of Christ as gossip, slander, criticism, complaining and lies.

Often the damage is so severe that, apart from the redeeming grace of God, it is nearly impossible to recover from it.

This morning in our fifth message in our series "In the World, But Not of It," we're going to talk about holiness and the tongue.

I expect that there will be much interest in what the Bible has to say about this subject for a couple of reasons.

First, every one of us has stumbled badly at one time or another in how we have used our tongue. (SHARE ACCIDENTLY ASKING ASKING HOW FAR ALONG SOMEONE WAS...)

Second, I suspect that it is equally true that you and I have been the recipient of harsh words from someone that have damaged us as well. So, I invite you to listen and learn from the Holy Spirit as He speaks to us from the Word of God found in **James 3**.

Background: The body of believers to whom James writes his letter was led by people who had no formal training that qualified them for preaching and teaching. (This is not to argue that formal training by itself makes for authentic teaching.)

In fact, it was relatively easy for people with some communication skills to promote themselves as teachers...and they had a lot of false teachings.

These people, often motivated by personal gain, taught in word and deed that God was the source of temptation (**James 1:13**), that a person could have faith that was not evidenced by works (**James 2:14**) and that the wealthy deserved preferential treatment over others (**James 2:1**).

James' response is to call for control of the tongue, citing the problems associated with it, the potential impact of the tongue and the perils that arise from its misuse. Let's look at it together.

I. A Caution Regarding the Use of the Tongue (James 3:1-2).

James begins with a strong warning to those who would assume the office of teacher.

Though their function is very necessary to the church,

“So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” **(Ephesians 4:11-13)**

...teachers (James included himself among this group) are cautioned that God will judge them more strictly.

The line of thinking behind James' comments goes something like this: If every casual or useless word is going to be judged...

“But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.” **(Matthew 12:36)**

...how much more are the words of those whose task it is to instruct the body?

Or again, if those who taught the Jews, Rabbis and Pharisees, were to be judged severely...

“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” **(Matthew 23:33)**

...how could one who is responsible for the religious education of God's people consider himself to be exempt?

This danger was compounded by James' reminder that *“we all stumble in many ways.”* Not only do we all sin, but we all commit a variety of sins (**Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 8:46**), including the particular offenses associated with the uncontrolled tongue.

The Scriptures remind us that the more we speak, the more likely we are to sin...

Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues. (**Proverbs 10:19**).

...Perhaps this is why the brother of Jesus argues that mastering the tongue is visible evidence of two realities: sincere religion (See **James 1:26**) and spiritual maturity (See **James 3:2**), both of which are important for any follower of Christ, but especially for those who teach.

Application: Have you ever noticed that of all the qualifications for a spiritual leader, only one has to do with a particular ministry skill, and that is teaching?

Every other one relates to a specific character quality that is meant to be applied in everyday life so that the leader models Christ-like behavior. Only then will what is said be in sync with what is done (See **1 Timothy 3:1-7**).

Illustration: Oswald Chambers once said, *"The greatest test of a man's character is his tongue."* The Bible tells us that the tongue reveals the kind of character that is being formed in our hearts. *"Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks"* (See **Matthew 12:34** RSV)."

This reminds me of a rather pompous, self-righteous Sunday School teacher who was trying to make the point that good Christians don't keep their faith a secret.

With her head held high and her chest thrust out, the teacher strutted impressively back and forth across the room. She asked, "Now, class, why do you think people call me a good Christian?" The room was silent for a moment. Then one of the boys slowly raised his hand and said, "Probably because they don't know you." Obviously, her students saw something in the character of their teacher that she wasn't able to see herself.

II. A Caution Regarding the Power of the Tongue (See James 3:3-5).

In the next paragraph, James seeks to make a case about the power of the tongue for constructive or destructive purposes when it's put to use.

A. The constructive power of the tongue.

Here he uses two illustrations...a bit in the mouth of a horse and the rudder at the back of a boat.

Regarding the first, as a result of having grown up around friends who lived on farms and owned horses, I have some limited knowledge about them.

For instance, I know that horses eat hay and sleep on straw. I know that they live an average of about 20-25 years and can weigh up to 2,000 pounds.

I also know that if you're going to ride one, you can do so without a saddle, though you might be uncomfortable, but it's not recommended leaving the bridle at home.

As you probably already know, the bridle consists of a metal bit that goes in the mouth of the horse, a halter that fits over the animal's ears and two long leather straps (reins) that enable one to control the horse so that it will go whenever and wherever the rider directs.

It never ceases to amaze me that a person of any size can get on a horse and with the proper use of a bit in its mouth, make the much larger and more powerful animal do his or her bidding.

The second illustration is meant to prove the same thing. The rudder on a ship is comparatively small and yet it is able to direct a large vessel through a few simple maneuvers by the ship's pilot.

This in spite of the wind and currents that may be seeking to move the vessel in a completely different direction.

In these illustrations James reminds us of the redemptive power of the tongue, a power that is disproportionate to its size, when put to proper use.

Illustration: Remember the story of Joshua as he led the reluctant Israelites into the Promised Land and then challenged them to be faithful to their God? Though they had not completely taken the land, and

certainly there was a greater price to be paid in doing so, they rallied to his side when he inspired them to make the right choice (**Joshua 24:15-18**). .

¹⁵ But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. ”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods! ¹⁷ It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. ¹⁸ And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God. ”

B. The destructive power of the tongue.

The power of the tongue is indeed impressive, but we should not forget that it offers tremendous potential for destruction as well. Certainly James did not.

The word "boasts" reminds us of Paul's frequent condemnation of any boasting other than boasting in Christ (See **Romans 1:30; 2 Corinthians 10:17**).

The tongue can make great boasts and wreak havoc on others as a result.

Illustration: “On a sweltering summer day in 2021, fire suddenly swept through drought-dried underbrush and leaped across treetops in California's Sierra Nevada. A local father and son, charged with starting the 222,000-acre Caldor Fire with their target-shooting equipment” (Sci AM) James likens our words to a small spark that can be fanned into a

voracious flame that consumes everything in its path. He then expounds on this idea in the next seven verses.

III. A Caution Regarding the Abuse of the Tongue (See James 3:6-12).

James now creates a portrait of the tongue that is less than flattering.

A. The tongue corrupts the whole person.

How can he say this?

Because he knows that the world is not only out there...it is in here (i.e. in our mouths)

“The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.” See **James 3:6**

This is difficult Greek but what it means is that all the evil characteristics of a fallen world, its covetousness, its idolatry, its blasphemy, its lust, its insatiable greed flow from the tongue.

The whole person is stained by the filth of it.

This is sad enough, but as we all know, the effect doesn’t stop here.

Whoever said, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," was profoundly wrong.

The flames of hate and jealousy and envy and slander come straight from the Devil himself says James and leave a slew of wounded and suffering victims in their wake.

B. The tongue cannot be tamed by any person.

Sure animals can be tamed by man, but not the tongue. At best it is unstable and prone to evil. James says that it is full of deadly poison (See **Psalms 140:3**). The same tongue that we use to bless God we use to curse others who are made in His image (See **Genesis 1:26**).

Praise and cursing are inconsistent with one another!

James argues that nature doesn't work this way.

Salt and fresh water don't come from the same source. Neither does a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs.

God warns us about the hypocrisy of using the tongue for both purposes and the seriousness of marring His likeness when we do so (See **Genesis 9:6**).

Application: When we use our tongues to injure others we are, according to this passage, demeaning the image of God in them!

Conclusion: What does all of this mean for us who are attempting to live holy lives in the here and now and understand that this involves bridling our tongues?

Let me give you two suggestions:

(1) Lead with your ears

“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,” (See **James 1:19**)

(2) Surrender your tongue

“but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” (See **James 3:8**).

Only when we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit are we able to demonstrate self-control in speech.

In April of 2001, in the midst of the Arab/Israeli conflict, a motorcade carrying the Security Service Chief of Gaza came under fire from Israeli troops. The frightened official immediately called Yasir Arafat from his car. Arafat in turn called the U.S. Ambassador, who then called the U.S.

Secretary of State, Colin Powell. He called Ariel Sharon, the Israeli Prime Minister and he ordered the shooting to stop saving a man's life.

IT PAYS TO HAVE CONNECTIONS IN HIGH PLACES. I HOPE YOU REALIZE THAT WE HAVE AT OUR DISPOSAL THE VERY POWER OF GOD THAT IS CAPABLE OF TAMING OUR TONGUES AND SAVING OURSELVES AND OTHERS FROM NEEDLESS SUFFERING AND PAIN. WILL YOU AVAIL YOURSELF OF IT THIS MORNING? WILL YOU TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE GIFT AND BLESSING OFFERED TO YOU!