

Sam Storms  
Bridgeway Church  
James #10  
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## **To Tame the Tongue, Transform the Heart** **James 3:1-12**

I'm sorry for having to begin on something of a downer, but I want to draw your attention today to the many ways that human beings have distorted some of the most precious of God's gifts to us.

Take, for example, our *minds*. God has given us brains and minds that we might understand him and grasp his truth and delight in his greatness. And what have we done with this glorious gift? Paul says in Romans 1 that although all people have known that God exists and what he is like, "they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21).

Another example would be what we have done with our *hands*. The human hand is a remarkable instrument, given to us by God so that we might subdue the earth and serve one another. But instead men and women use their hands to craft idols of marble and ivory and gold and worship them in the place of the Creator.

Yet another wonderfully glorious gift of God is our *eyes*. The intricacy of the human eye and its capacity to see is almost beyond description. God gave us eyes that we might behold his glory in creation and that we might see and enjoy one another, but we pervert their God-given purpose by setting our gaze on pornography and carnage and tragedy and ugliness and distorted images.

But there is perhaps no greater sin than what we have done with God's gift to us of our *tongues*, our speech, our capacity for words and sentences and singing and sighing. Instead of using our tongues for blessing others we curse them. Instead of using our tongues to sing of God we slander him. Instead of using our tongues to tell of his greatness and his saving grace in Jesus we use them for profanity and silliness and crude and vulgar conversation. I find it highly instructive that when the Apostle Paul turns to a description of the wickedness of mankind he says this:

*"Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness" (Rom. 3:13-14).*

The Bible is full of lengthy descriptions of how we use and abuse human speech, of how we turn it for good and for evil. I can only think of the book of Proverbs and its countless exhortations on how to make godly use of our tongues. But there is perhaps no more explicit and direct portrayal of the power of language and the sins of the tongue than what we find here in James 3:1-12. James has already addressed this point. In James 1:19 he exhorted us to "be quick to hear, slow

to speak, slow to anger.” And again in James 1:26 we read, “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.”

One of the marvelous things about this passage is that it requires virtually no explanation. It almost preaches itself, as James piles up one metaphor or analogy upon another. We hardly need to do anything other than simply read the text to grasp its meaning.

But before we dive into this passage let me direct your attention to one other example of the importance of our lips, our speech, our tongues. You may recall the incredible experience of Isaiah the prophet who was granted a vision of God enthroned in glory. We read this in Isaiah 6:1-7,

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for” (Isaiah 6:1-7).

I’m aware that all of you are aware of this story, but I can’t get out of my mind the way Isaiah responds to his vision of God’s holiness.

Seeing God does not produce giddiness or religious flippancy. It produces terror and self-loathing. Isaiah does not respond with pride or elitism, boasting that he alone has experienced this wonderful privilege. He is undone! He sees himself as insufferably unrighteous compared to the glorious purity and transcendence of the King. We arrogantly measure sin solely in terms of its effects both within the created order and upon us. Isaiah, on the other hand, measures it by the majesty and purity of the One against whom it is perpetrated.

Isaiah's experience is instructive in another respect. This man was already aware of his sinfulness and had made great strides in his growth in spiritual things. But now, in the unmediated presence of the Holy God, he sees himself as filthier than ever before. So intensely aware is he of his sin that he, in effect, calls down the curse of God on his own head. *"Woe is me"* is a cry of

judgment. It is a cry of anathema. It is one thing for Isaiah to pronounce “woe” on another human being, but quite another altogether for him to pronounce that curse upon his own head!

This is no small twinge of a sensitive conscience. Isaiah cries out: “I am lost,” more literally, “I am *ruined*,” i.e., ***“I am coming apart at the seams! I am unraveling. I am experiencing personal disintegration!”*** Contrast this with the modern obsession with “personal wholeness,” “having it all together,” and being “integrated.” In his book, *The Holiness of God*, R. C. Sproul points out that as long as Isaiah only compared himself with other human beings he was o.k. But “the instant he measured himself by the ultimate standard, he was destroyed – morally and spiritual annihilated. He was undone. He came apart. His sense of integrity collapsed” (43-44).

What I find most instructive, especially given the passage in James that we are looking at today, is that his sudden sense of sinfulness and personal ruin was linked to his *lips*. He cried out, in essence, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because ***I’ve got a dirty mouth!***” Why the focus on his “mouth? I don’t think there is any reason to conclude that Isaiah was guilty of profanity or that he told dirty jokes. Instead, there are two reasons for this conviction on his part. First, mention is made of his mouth because what we say betrays what we are. The mouth is like an old time phonograph speaker; it simply manifests what is impressed on the record of the heart (see Mt. 15:11,18).

But second and more important still is the fact that ***the one area in his life which Isaiah thought he had under control, in which he no doubt prided himself, because of which the people honored and respected him, because of which he was highly esteemed, because of which he had position and prestige was the power of his mouth. He was a prophet!*** If there was one feature in his life where he had no fear or concern, related to which he felt God’s most overt approval, which he regarded as his greatest strength and that which was above reproach and beyond falling or failure . . . was his tongue! His speech! His mouth! His verbal ministry! He was God’s mouthpiece! He was God’s voice, his spokesman on the earth! ***Yet the first thing he felt was the sinfulness of his speech!***

At this point Isaiah must have felt hopeless. He is groveling on the floor, trembling under the weight of God’s holiness and his own sin.

But here is the good news of the gospel: The infinitely holy God is also a gracious and merciful God. This God of mercy immediately provides cleansing and forgiveness. Isaiah’s wound was being cauterized. The dirt in his mouth was washed away as the corruption of his heart was forgiven. He was refined by holy fire. The fact that the coal was placed on his lips points to the principle that “God ministers to the sinner at the point of confessed need” (Alex Motyer, *Isaiah*, 78).

The point I want you to see in this experience of Isaiah, especially as we now turn to James 3, is that ***nothing more readily reveals our sin than how we use our tongues.*** And nothing is of

greater glory to God than when we use our speech to honor and praise him and to bless other people.

### *Words are Works!*

Once again we see here the importance of reading a passage in light of its context. James has just concluded a discussion on the relation between faith and works (James 2:14-26). Faith without works, said James, is dead and of no benefit to anyone. It would seem then that he now wants us to know that ***works are not limited to actions. Words are also works.*** Just as our works reveal the quality or character of our faith, so also our words. Our speech is an index that reveals the condition of our souls. Jesus said this in Matthew 12:34-37,

“You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:34-37).

Jesus is saying that words are so much a revelation of what is in our hearts, so clearly and unmistakably indicative of the state of our souls, that on the judgment day it won't even be necessary to look at what we have done or have not done to determine if we are truly born again believers in Jesus. All that will be needed is that our words be disclosed and made known.

### *The Spiritual Significance of the Tongue (vv. 1-2)*

James' first concern is with those who might aspire to be teachers or preachers in the local church. There's nothing wrong with that, especially if God has gifted and called you to such a ministry. But be absolutely certain on the front end that you know what you are in for. The sobering reality is that those of us who teach ***“will be judged with greater strictness”*** (v. 1b). Why?

The reason is that teachers are always in the business of articulating and defending truth, on the one hand, and identifying and refuting false teaching and heresy, on the other. Teaching unavoidably entails making moral and theological judgments that affect the lives of others in profoundly practical and even eternal ways. If you minister as a teacher you invariably end up instructing others on how to think and live. What, then, is the result if you yourself fail to live up to the standards to which you have called everyone else? Have you carefully considered the consequences should it turn out that, because of your instruction, others fall into sin or are led astray into false beliefs about God and what is right and good and true? That is a heavy burden to bear. So don't take the task of teaching lightly.

But James also speaks to every Christian, as is clear from v. 2. By “**stumbling**” James doesn’t mean we stutter or make grammatical mistakes when we speak or that we fail to communicate with sufficient zeal and clarity. He has in mind **verbal recklessness** that damages other people. Misleading statements, careless and insensitive assertions, and abusive language are all in view. But the man or woman who controls their tongue and uses it only for good and godly ends is “perfect” (v. 2), not in the sense that they are free of all sin but in the sense that they are obviously mature and have learned how to exercise self-control over what they say, when they say it, and the tone in which it is said.

The logic here is clear, as **James argues from the greater to the lesser**. Since the tongue is the most difficult organ to master, victory over speech assures one that he is able to hold in check and to control all other activities as well. Simply put: **the single greatest and clearest indication of spiritual growth and maturity is one’s ability to control and use for godly purposes one’s speech**.

#### *The Disproportionate Power of the Tongue (vv. 3-6)*

The point of vv. 3-6 is simple and to the point. **The tongue exerts a disproportionate influence when compared to its size**. Something very small and often hidden from sight can exert a powerful and unexpected influence on things that are obviously much larger. The “bit” in a horse’s mouth is such a small thing compared to the horse, but it controls whether or not he goes forward or backward and what turns he makes. The “rudder” of a ship is tiny in comparison with the boat itself, yet not even strong winds exert a comparable influence on the direction of the vessel. And just as a tiny spark can ignite a massive and indescribably destructive forest fire, so too the tongue can be used to wreak havoc and chaos in the body of Christ.

Before we leave this portion of the text, take a look at the language James uses in v. 6. He describes the tongue as “a fire, a world of unrighteousness” (v. 6a). I think he means that the tongue is a vast system of iniquity in the sense that it both embodies and expresses the essence of all wickedness and sin. All the evil characteristics of a fallen world find expression through our words, our tongues. Not only that, but it stains or pollutes the whole body.

But it is that final phrase in v. 6 that intrigues me: the tongue is “**set on fire by hell**” (v. 6b). The word “hell” is the translation of the Greek word Gehenna. We know from texts such as Jeremiah 7:31-32 that it was in this valley outside Jerusalem that in ancient times young children were offered as a burnt sacrifice to pagan gods such as Molech and Baal. The word thus became a fit way of referring to hell. But there may be more involved. James may be suggesting that the wickedness and evil and destructive effects of an unbridled tongue have some connection with the demonic realm. I’m not suggesting that James is saying that every time we lose control of our speech it is because a demon is involved. But I do think **James wants us to understand that Satan and his hosts will take advantage of our ill-advised speech, our vulgar language, our judgmental comments to promote division and destruction in human relationships**.

### *The Untamable Terror of the Tongue (vv. 7-8)*

***The tongue also makes a mockery of our claims to power and authority. We may domesticate virtually every wild animal but we can't domesticate or control our own speech.*** It is as James says "a restless evil," which is to say it is never satisfied with the damage it causes but continues unabated in its destructive ways. The tongue is "full of deadly poison," perhaps a reference to the "reptile" earlier in the verse. It may be painful to be bitten by a rattlesnake or a cobra, but nothing can compare with the pain inflicted by the speech of sinful men and women.

### *The Deadly Duplicity of the Tongue (vv. 9-12)*

James concludes his tirade against the tongue by describing what I call its ***deadly duplicity*** (vv. 9-12). We are walking contradictions when it comes to the way we use the precious gift of speech. We can sing and praise God, we can bless him and proclaim his beauty and greatness, and then turn around and in the next breath curse and vilify the very people who are created in his image.

So what is the point of these concluding images? Look at them. They all share one thing in common. James talks about the source or spring from which wicked speech flows. If you have a fig tree, don't expect it to produce olives. If you have a grapevine, don't expect it to produce figs. If you have a pond full of salt water, don't expect it to produce fresh water.

His point is this. If you want olives, you must first cultivate an olive tree. If you want figs, you must first plant a fig tree. And if you want fresh water, dig a cistern and fill it with fresh water. In other words, ***the only hope for obtaining a good and godly result is that you start with a good and godly source.*** Now what does that mean for us? Let me conclude with an explanation.

### *Conclusion*

James leaves us with the nagging question: What can be done about the tongue? Is there any hope at all of gaining mastery over it? Can we ever expect to tame the tongue and use it only for good or will it always be filled with poison?

Some of you aren't going to like this, but here goes. Over the years, both here at Bridgeway and long before I arrived, people have urged me to give more explicitly practical advice about how husbands and wives can communicate better with each other. Still others have said: "Sam tell me what to say so I won't get in arguments with my children." Or, "Sam, give me some tips or a simple formula so I won't constantly be at war with my co-workers and always tempted to curse at my boss."

People have this idea that if a pastor will simply suggest two or three skills at more effective communication that the problem we all have with the tongue will come to an end. I'm sorry, dear friends, but that just isn't true. I'm not denying that there is a place for learning new skills for

more loving and effective communication. New conversational techniques that help us avoid unnecessary arguments are important. But in the long run that won't solve the problem. Why? Here is why, and it's not my analysis or because I'm especially smart or wise. Jesus said it:

***“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34).***

**The problem, dear friend, isn't your tongue: it's your heart!** The tongue is a tool wielded by the hand of the heart. The tongue is an instrument on which the heart plays out its songs. If I'm going to be of any help to anyone here today the answer isn't to play the part of Dr. Phil or Oprah and give you three techniques for talking to each other in a more civil manner. There's nothing wrong with talking in a more civil manner. Please, for heaven's sake, do it! ***But approaching the problem in that way is like putting a band-aide on a festering, fast-spreading malignant tumor! It will cover over the problem for a season. You might find yourself getting along better with your spouse or your child or your co-worker or your boss. But the cancer is still growing and if not treated will eventually kill you.***

**The only way to tame the tongue is to transform the heart!** The problem isn't ultimately with our tongue but with our selfish souls, our prideful hearts, our idolatrous way of life in which we look to everything other than Christ to make life work. The problem is with our self-indulgent habits, our greedy desires, our ambitious aspirations, our sensual fantasies, and our stubborn refusal to believe God. In a word, ***the problem is with our sinful and corrupt hearts.*** And until such time as we begin to experience genuine, lasting, Spirit-empowered change in our hearts, our mouths will continue to spew forth filth and anger and revenge and cursing and criticism and judgment and slander and a multitude of other verbal sins.

So, if you have ever wondered why I preach the Bible verse by verse or why I try to unpack and explain to you the deep things of God's grace and his love and the beauty of Christ and the majesty of God's mercy and the power of the Spirit and the truth of our spiritual adoption and all the glorious things that God has done for us in Jesus, the simple reason is that ***I'm aiming at your heart***; I want to see God transform your heart; for ***“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34).*** It's just that simple.

I know you would feel better if I would just give you some formula to help your speech or some verbal techniques to improve your conversational expertise. When I think they would actually be helpful, I'll do that. But I'm not in the business of making you feel good for a couple of weeks. I'm in the business as a pastor and preacher because I want to be used of God to change your hearts, not for a couple of weeks or even a couple of months, but for a lifetime.

So, let me close with a simple story that I learned from watching the Andy Griffith Show! It concerns a husband and a wife name Fred and Jenny. Andy and his deputy Barney Fife were called with complaints that the noise coming from the home of Fred and Jenny was unbearable. When they arrived they found the couple engaged in a brutal war of words. Andy decided that the solution to their strife was to have them come to his office every morning for a week where

they would be forced to speak politely and kindly to the other. And it's not just your words, said Andy, but the tone of your voice when you address one another. So over and over Fred and Jenny repeated these words through grit teeth and barely subdued snarls:

Fred: "Good morning, honey."

Jenny: "Good morning, dear."

At the end of the week the fighting between Fred and Jenny had subsided. But in its place the two started snapping and yelling at their neighbors, including Andy and Barney. Finally Andy decided to let them return to their former ways. It was deemed better that they snap and yell at each other than that they do so to everyone else in Mayberry.

It all made for a clever episode of the Andy Griffith Show. But Andy's counsel in this case was seriously flawed. Merely training the couple to speak politely and in a civil manner was doomed to failure, because *nothing changed on the inside. Their newly learned conversational techniques only served to divert their anger and disdain at different targets. Their hearts were still corrupt. If Fred and Jenny were ever to make good and godly use of their tongues, not only in their relationship with each other but with everyone else, their hearts would have to be transformed.*

And so it is with all of us.

If that is a somewhat silly illustration of the principle, let me close with a more serious one.

I recently read the story of 11 Christians in Aleppo, Syria, who were brutally tortured and martyred by ISIS (the story is reported by Annie Cotton of Christian Aid Mission).

Although the Christians had every opportunity to flee the city, they chose to stay and maintain their witness for Jesus. They were told that if they would but verbally deny Jesus they would be spared. "Every time we talked to them," the ministry director said, "they were always saying, 'We want to stay here—this is what God has told us to do. This is what we want to do.' They just wanted to stay and share the gospel."

The Christian workers were captured on August 7 and on August 28 were given one final chance to save their lives: simply renounce Jesus Christ and return to Islam. They refused to deny their Lord and Savior. Three of the men were brutalized and then crucified, their bodies left on the crosses for two days.

The other ministry team members, including two women, were taken to another site in the village that day and were asked the same questions before a crowd: "Will you deny Jesus?" The women refused. They were repeatedly raped in public. During the ordeal the women continued to



pray aloud and profess their faith in Jesus. As they all knelt before being beheaded, they persisted in their prayers.

Villagers reported that some were praying in the name of Jesus, others said some were praying the Lord's Prayer, and others said some of them lifted their heads to commend their spirits to Jesus. "One of the women looked up and seemed to be almost smiling as she said, 'Jesus!'" After they were beheaded, their bodies were hung on crosses. Eyewitnesses reported that "they kept on praying loudly and sharing Jesus until their last breath. They did this in front of the villagers as a testimony for others."

The ministry director also told of a Muslim from northern Syria who, like all men in areas that ISIS takes over, was coerced into joining the caliphate or be killed. Recruited into ISIS, he fled the country after his brother was killed in the fighting. Disillusioned with ISIS but still adhering to Islam and its teaching that Christians and Jews are unclean "pigs," he went to Amman, Jordan, as he had learned that relatives there were receiving aid from Christians.

The Muslim went to a Christian meeting with the intention of killing the aid workers gathered there. Something kept him from following through on his plan, though, and that night he saw Jesus in a dream. The next day he returned and said, "I came to kill you, but last night I saw Jesus, and I want to know what you are teaching—who is this One who held me up from killing you?" He then received Christ with tears, and today is serving the church and providing aid to those who are persecuted.

I share this all too common story of what is happening today as an example of the great power of the tongue in bearing witness to Jesus. In the face of unbelievable torture and eventual martyrdom, these men and women verbally testified to the saving grace and sovereign Lordship of Jesus. Why? Because their hearts had been transformed. In the absence of an inward change, they would have found it quite easy to deny Jesus, to renounce him, and thereby to gain their lives. But in this case, transformed hearts, hearts captivated by the beauty and majesty of Jesus, led to testimony and praise and prayer that undoubtedly baffled their persecutors and eventually, no doubt, led some of them to faith in Christ.

Jesus was so right when he said, ***"For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34).*** Their hearts were abundantly full of the grace and mercy of Christ, and from such hearts they spoke life and joy and hope.

To what use are you putting your tongue?