

## James 3

### Taming the Tongue

Have you ever picked up a magazine and seen one of those multiple-choice personality profile tests. You know the ones where you answer a bunch of questions, add up the score to find out what a wonderful person you are – kind, warm, generous and so on. I guess we all have a longing to know who we really are – what we indeed are like on the inside. There is no shortage of these tests, and I guess they feed into the deep-seated desire to know we're ok, how we fit into society and we that belong somewhere meaningful within our communities. It appears we are poor judges of what is going on, on the inside. The question we all want answered is what kind of person am I? Well, there is one indicator that is entirely accurate and far better than any R20 magazine personality profile tests. If we genuinely want to know how we are doing on the inside, we simply have to listen to the words that come out of our mouths. Luke 6:45 says, "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." Now I'm not talking about the words we use on Sunday after the service – our lingo sanctitas - I'm talking about the words we use when we are under pressure or the words we use when stressed or angry. We speak a different language to ourselves when we are alone or isolated to the language we speak to others and it is those words that are a true reflection of what is going on within our hearts. Feeling uncomfortable? Good! That's the bad news but we will get to the good news later.

We are continuing in our James series and this morning we look at James chapter 3 which looks in depth at the topic of Taming the Tongue. James gives a series of analogies to describe the tongue, but of course, he is not writing about that muscle in our mouths he is referring to what it's connected to. Our tongues are connected directly to our hearts – or to put it another way, our words are an exact representation of our souls. The words and language we use are a precise and accurate barometer of what is going on inside our souls. The illustrations he uses are, a bit (as in a bit and bridle in a horse's mouth) a rudder on a ship and a spark of fire:

***3 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. 5 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 body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.***

There is a universal law that says big things are controlled by small things. A horse is controlled by a little bit, a small rudder steers a huge ocean liner, and a forest fire is started by a tiny spark.

I don't know much about horses or horse riding, but I once saw a demonstration of five colossal Clydesdale workhorses spanned together ploughing a field. It was quite a sight as these powerful, magnificent horses were controlled by a small bit.

The rudder of a vast ocean liner steers the whole ship. During World War Two the pride of the German Navy, the battleship Bismarck, launched in February 1939, was thought to be invincible. It was supposed to decimate the British Navy and Allied convoys crossing the Atlantic, however, on her maiden voyage in the North Atlantic her rudder was hit by a torpedo and without steering was sunk by the British.

Living in the Western Cape, we are all too familiar with veldt fires. Last year you will remember the devastating fire that spread almost the full length of the Western Cape coastal region spreading

virtually to Port Elizabeth, destroying thousands of acres of forests, many homes and farms all caused by a small spark of flame.

James goes on to say that although big things are controlled by small things the tongue is like a wild, untameable animal:

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

All kinds of wild animals can be tamed. Your dog, cat, horse and guinea pig all have their origins in wild animals but the point here is that wild animals have successfully been tamed but in comparison, the tongue cannot. The deadly poison that comes out of our mouths is the deadly poison stored up in our hearts.

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

We don't know for sure, but when James wrote these words, he may have remembered his teenage years growing up with his "perfect" big half-brother Jesus. He may have, like all teenage boys, said something cruel or sarcastic that he now regretted – "My brother thinks he is the Messiah! ha, ha, ha."

The truth is that our words carry enormous influence and we underestimate the power of the tongue; the tongue is more powerful than we think and here James says if we can't keep a rein on our tongues we're in deep trouble. Going back to chapter 1:

***James 1:26 Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.***

The word religious in the original language means in God's service, and so James tells us that there is a great deception in that we may do all kinds of work and service for God but it means absolutely nothing if can't keep control of our words. The deception here is that we assume someone who is articulate and not afraid to express their opinion is spiritual but it could be that Christian maturity is demonstrated by a lack of words.

***Proverbs 18:21 "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.***

Words can either release life or death. When we speak words, we speak power – either constructive power or destructive power. Words determine your future and the future of others. We use words so carelessly; loser, doff, stupid, retard and a ton of others but it is not so much the words themselves - it is not the vibrations of air particles passing from my mouth your ears – but it is within the perception or interpretation of the message they carry. We can speak labels into the lives of our children, "He's such a loss-kop." "You're just like your father." We speak identities over others; "She's such a drama queen." "He's thick as two planks."

Now of course James is not talking about casual conversations among friends or some sociable banter around a braai. Sometimes relationships are built on frivolous and informal chat. As a grandfather my job in life is to tease my grandchildren – it's what we do. I like to think of it more as a calling. But that is not what James is talking about. Taming the tongue is about using words with the intention hurting the other person, they are words designed to cause injury and harm.

It works both ways – we speak toxic words over other people, usually over the people we love or are closest to, and we receive hurtful words from other people. Many of you this morning carry the wounds of poisonous words spoken over you. Broken people use broken language, hurting people use hurting language, shallow people use shallow language, impulsive people use impulsive language. However, healed people use healed language, loving people use loving language, and kind people use kind language. A disciplined person has a disciplined tongue.

Sometimes we communicated in very subtle ways where the words themselves seem so harmless but the tone in which they are used are toxic and where body language shouts a message of poison. “So nice to see you again,” but our non-verbal communication says, “Help, get me out of here.” – We can communicate with an attitude of contempt, disdain, an exaggerated sigh, raising eyebrows or rolling of the eyes.

If you go across to the mall, outside the pet shop is a booth where you can get name tags for your dog or cat. The person selling them has metal discs, a hammer and set of letter punches which are used to stamp the name of your pet onto the disc – Rover, Fluffles etc. The hammer comes down and permanently embosses those words onto that disk. Sometimes the words we speak over people’s lives are like a hammer coming down and are permanently embossed into their souls. It works the other way around as well, some of you have had words spoken over you that have been like a hammer stamping that title or label deeply into your soul.

When I was about 15 years old, at school (an all-boys school), we had to do PE (Physical Education) where our class had some to do some kind of exercise, keep the kids fit and get air into their lungs – you know the drill. At 15 I was heavy for my age and a bit overweight and somewhat awkward. On one occasion our PE teacher divided the class into two teams and to identify the sides there was the shirts and skins – one team with shirts on and the other without. I, of course, was on the team without shirts, and on the playing field one of the boys in the class called out in a loud voice, “Hey Day (in those day they only use surnames); Hey Day, you forgot your bra!” All the other kids laughed, and I responded with something like “Haha, very funny.” Now I’m not profoundly emotionally scarred over the comment, and I’ve gotten over it – kids say stupid things all the time, but it is interesting to note that 50 years later I still remember those words, somehow at that moment a hammer came down and embossed that comment into my heart.

In our pastoral role, we regularly deal with people who have been injured by words; lies spoken over them. The problem is when they hear those lies often enough they begin to believe them and start to form an identity that is not how God sees them. If someone is told, they are a failure often enough (Now no one explicitly says they are a failure, but it is communicated in subtle ways of nuances and suggestions) eventually they believe the lie, and they take on the identity of failure.

There was a popular teaching some years ago that still lingers today which teaches we shouldn’t say anything negative, so if you have the flu, for example, you need to declare how healthy and well you feel, but that is just living in denial. The Apostle Paul spoke negatively about himself on several occasions. In 2 Corinthians 11 Paul described his hardships in detail: prison, flogged, pelted with stones, shipwrecked, in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, gone without sleep, hunger, thirst, cold and naked. So Paul faced the reality of his situation, he wasn’t in denial, but here is the crucial point, he never took on the identity of being hard-done-by. In the same way, we all face trials and hard times, but sometimes we take on the identity of that trial which comes out in the words we use. You see it is out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks and something very subtle takes place in that the words we speak reinforces that identity and a transition takes place within our

hearts. The shift can be extremely subtle, and a statement of technical truth or fact can change into an identity; let me explain:

Think of the word “divorced.” Now divorce is an incredibly difficult experience that many of you have experienced, and I don’t for one minute want to minimise the heartache you have experienced, but it is a statement of fact. The problem is when divorced people make that transition and believe the lie of isolation and loneliness and take on the identity of failure. The same would apply to the word widowed. The pain of widowhood is incredibly hard but sometimes people who have lost a loved one take on the identity of pain, extreme sorrow, sadness and isolation. There could be an endless list: depressed, addict, gay, unlovable, ugly, not good enough, not intelligent enough, overweight, underweight, not old enough, too old; on and on the list goes on, all because we take on an identity that God never intended for us to take.

People often take on those ungodly identities when they have lies spoken over them by authority figures. Maybe an angry parent spoke a word over your life as a child and like a hammer stamped those words into your soul, or a teacher or even a pastor spoke toxic words over you. I believe that is why James wrote in verse 1 about teachers:

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

Remember James was writing (James 1:1) to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations – converted Jews in communities in Turkey, Greece and Rome where controversies erupted as to how these new Christians should live their lives. There were many opinions – some said the converts should integrate their new found faith in Christ with the old Jewish tradition, a kind of best of both worlds thinking, while others were telling the Jewish rules and regulations were a burden and bondage and had no place in the new church.

James is not saying we shouldn’t teach (Teaching is one of the Gifts of the Spirit), but teaching carries great responsibility. When James wrote this book, there were lots of self-appointed teachers who weren’t necessarily teaching the truth and the reason he makes this point is that he understood the words spoken by authority figures carry tremendous power and influence over people’s lives and consequently will be held accountable for the words they speak.

I want to get really practical here. If the call from James 3 is to tame the tongue, then how do we go about that? One thing is for sure; we will never tame our tongues by using willpower, trying harder or determination. Our tongues, remember verse 8, are untameable so gritting your teeth in determination will only wear you out, you need something far better. If we genuinely want to change the words that come out of our mouths, then the only we can do that is to change our hearts and the only way to change our hearts is to find our identity in Christ.

James 3 verse 13 and on talks about two kinds of wisdom:

***13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. 14 But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. 15 Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.***

That is worldly wisdom, but there is another type of wisdom:

***17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.***

Worldly wisdom is full of bitter envy and selfish ambition and is unspiritual and demonic. In other words, when our identity and focus is selfish, it is expressed in toxic words, but when our identity is in Christ, Godly wisdom, it is worked out in the language of purity, peace, consideration, submission, mercy, good fruit, impartiality and sincerity. You see when our identity is in Christ words come out naturally and easily because it's in your heart.

I want to put some practical handles on what we've covered this morning:

Some of you have spoken damaging hurtful words over others, maybe your children, your parents, or spouse, or family, colleague or employee. You can clearly remember, like a hammer coming down and embossing those words into their souls a change has taken place within your relationship. For years you have been telling yourself you were justified in what you said – “They jolly well deserved it” but you know within your heart something was never the same since that time. You need to confess those words, ask forgiveness and repent.

Others of you have received damaging, hurtful words, and there is a stronghold over your life you don't understand, and from which you can't break free. Some of you here this morning are going through financial struggles, and the reality is things are very tight, but you have taken on the identity of deficiency, and there is a stronghold of poverty over your life. Some of you struggle with depression, and I am aware that the condition is very real, we don't live in denial, but you have taken on the identity of being depressed, apart from body chemistry that is not working as it should, leaving you feeling trapped and helpless. Some of you sitting here this morning have believed the lie that you aren't welcome in this church or that you don't really fit it. Maybe a doctor has diagnosed an illness, but you have taken up the identity which works out in poor health, some of you have been labelled ADHD which has become a stronghold over you. Some have taken on an identity of addiction, and you are living that out. Some here have taken on an identity of loneliness which is expressed in isolation and withdrawal. Some have believed the lie that no one cares about you. For some it is that you are unlovable, ugly, not good enough, a failure, you are a disappointment, not clever enough, overweight, underweight, not wealthy enough, my best isn't good enough, I'm unworthy,

This morning you can break free from that stronghold on your life by understanding your identity in Christ.

***1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.***

James chapter 3 is telling us that taming the tongue has nothing to do with self-discipline, determination, willpower or fortitude. You see when we fix what is on the inside, when we discover our identity in Christ the words that flow out of our mouths will be sweet, gracious, uplifting, encouraging and God honouring.