

## James 3:1-12 – Taming the Tongue.

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.” Amen.

Today we’re at week three of our four-part mini-series on the letter attributed to James. I hope that you’ve been able to read the whole letter at your own pace in the last couple of weeks. If not, there’s still time.

Today’s passage starts with a stern warning: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will face stricter judgment.” Teaching involves words, as does leading, whether in church, at home, in schools and all workplaces, including in government and in the military.

What is said and the way words are used is utterly important. James, in his letter, says, “Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is mature, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.” Another translation puts it this way, “Someone who does not trip up in speech has reached perfection.”

James accepts that, “all of us make many mistakes,” “we all trip up in many ways.” I know that my speech, what I say, is not always perfect. I hope that what I say is true. But sometimes, what I say may not be necessary or kind or loving. I’m sorry!

So, I’ll start again. “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

If you haven’t realised this part of James’s letter deal with the tongue. He exhorts Christians everywhere, including us, to be concerned with uncontrolled language and how we can better tame the tongue.

James isn’t the first to write about this issue. We have the Ten Commandments – “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour” (Exod 20:26). The 9<sup>th</sup> commandment – Don’t lie! There are several Psalms and Proverbs (I’ll refer to several of them as we go along) that give warnings about the use of our tongues. James would have been familiar with these, as well as the teachings of Jesus.

More than once did Jesus talk about speech, and from Matthew 12 in particular: “I tell you, on the day of judgement you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt 12:36-37).

James gives several images to illustrate that control of the tongue is the mark of complete self-control. Let’s look at these. The first one:

<sup>3</sup> If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies.

In the recent Paris Olympic games, you may have seen the amazing Dressage event. It is described as the highest expression of horse training. The riders communicate and control their horses with reins attached to bits in the horse’s mouth.

A well-trained horse under control of the rider is a sign of mastery, strength, and skill. Similarly, someone who can control their tongue demonstrates wisdom, maturity, and self-discipline.

"The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered. Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues" (Prov 17:27-28).

Just as a small bit in the mouth of a horse can control it, the tongue, though small, has immense power over one’s life and actions.

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

Without a bit, a horse may be wild, uncontrollable, or difficult to direct. In the same way, without control over our tongue, our words can become reckless, leading to misunderstandings, conflicts, or harm.

"To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble" (Prov 21:23)

A rider uses the bit to direct the horse toward a specific destination or purpose. In the same way, controlling the tongue allows a person to align their speech with positive outcomes - encouraging, uplifting, and guiding others toward truth and peace.

"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov 15:1).

The second image:

<sup>4</sup>Or look at ships: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

A few years ago the Evergreen container ship, in windy conditions, ran aground in the Suez Canal. 400m long (about the length of four standard football pitches), weighing 220,000 tonnes and carrying over 18,000 shipping containers, yet its rudder weighs only 100 tonnes. That's less than one twentieth of one percent!

In comparing the human tongue to a ship's rudder James draws a powerful analogy between the small size of both and their enormous impact. Just as a small rudder can steer a massive ship, the tongue, though small, has great power over the course of our lives. A rudder must be skilfully controlled to steer the ship safely, just as the tongue must be controlled to prevent harm. Without proper guidance, a ship can go off course; similarly, unchecked speech can lead to destruction.

A rudder can direct a ship safely through a storm or into dangerous waters. In the same way, the tongue can bring peace or create conflict. Words can heal or wound, inspire or discourage. The rudder needs to be aligned with the captain's intended destination. In the same way, the tongue should be aligned with God's purposes - speaking truth, love, and righteousness.

The third image:

<sup>5</sup>How great a forest is set ablaze by a such a small fire (*or small spark*)! <sup>6</sup>And the tongue is a fire.

According to NASA, on earth, somewhere is always burning, and wildfires occur all around the world. Last week the National Interagency Fire Center, based in Idaho, US, reported that, in the US alone, there were 68 large active wildfires being managed. Current fires have burned through almost 2,500,000 acres – to help visualize this vast area – it's more than two times the area enclosed by the M25 around London. Almost 1,800 fire engines and 160 helicopters with 550 crews (several thousand people) are involved. Many of these fires will have been started by a lightning strike, or accidentally, such as by a small spark or a small fire that got out of control.

James wants us to realise the destructive potential of careless words, and this image highlights how something seemingly small, like a thoughtless word, can cause immense damage if left unchecked. Like a forest fire, the damage can spiral out of control.

"For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarrelling ceases. As charcoal is to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife" (Prov 26:20-21).

"If you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another" (Gal 5:15).

The Bible teaches that the words we speak reflect what is in our hearts. Jesus teaches that sinful words, and actions, originate in the heart.

"For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure" (Matt 12:34-35).

"But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (Matt 15:18-19).

So, how can we tame our tongues?

Well, it's a challenge! James says,

<sup>7</sup> For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, <sup>8</sup> but no one can tame the tongue - a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

He declares that no one can tame the tongue, but I believe that with God's help, even the untameable can be controlled.

We can ask God for help. Earlier in his letter we read,

"If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you" (Jas 1:5).

The Psalmist also recognises the need for God to help guard his speech.

"Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!" (Ps 141:3).

This is a prayer we can use for ourselves.

Let's also practice self-control. Paul in his letter to the Galatians says,

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Gal 5:22-23).

Self-control is crucial for taming the tongue. The discipline of holding back harmful or unnecessary words is essential for speech.

There are some things we can do, with God's help. Liken it to asking a fitness instructor to provide a set of exercises to help develop all round body strength. There needs to be more than only walking on a tread mill!

Firstly. Be slow to speak. James said,

"Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (Jas 1:19).

My tendency is to want to speak first, sometimes without even allowing the other person to finish what they are saying, and certainly without much consideration to what I'm going to say. "Be quick to hear and slow to speak." This is a practical way to tame the tongue by developing the habit of thoughtful speech, pausing before responding to ensure words are wise and helpful.

Secondly. Speak words that build up.

Consciously choose words that encourage and build others up, rather than tear them down. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians says,

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear” (Eph 4:29).

We need to practice avoiding harmful words or speech and be intentional about using words that build others up.

“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Prov 15:1).

Thirdly. Cultivate a Spirit filled heart. As we heard just now, Jesus taught “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” We need God’s help and the indwelling Holy Spirit to work on our hearts. As our hearts grow in love, compassion and purity, Christlike speaking will follow.

Fourthly. Avoid gossip, lies and idle talk.

The Bible repeatedly warns against specific types of speech like gossip, lying and idle talk, which can damage relationships.

“Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene” (2 Tim 2:16-17).

Avoiding gossip helps tame the tongue. And speaking truth is essential. If we know that something is untrue, or we aren’t sure that what we’ve heard is true, especially if it is about someone else, then we must not say it again.

Finally, reflect before speaking. Before speaking, let’s consider whether our words are true, necessary and loving. A final verse from Proverbs:

“The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things” (Prov 15:28).

I’m sure this isn’t an exhaustive list. There may be other ‘taming the tongue’ exercises you know or come across that you will find helpful. If you do, then share them (kindly!) with others.

For physical fitness, to keep in shape, we keep on exercising. So it is with the tongue - to keep the tongue tamed we continue seeking wisdom from God and we work with the Holy Spirit for self-control for Christlike speaking.

Be slow to speak. Speak words that build up. Cultivate a Spirit filled heart. Avoid gossip, lies and idle talk. Reflect before speaking.

May the words of our mouths and the thoughts of our hearts, bless your name, bless your name Jesus. Amen.