

## Taming the Tongue

*Walk the Walk: James Pt. 5*

The book of James is a practical book. It says if you believe the gospel, this is how your life should look practically. This is what your community will look like practically. And this morning in chapter 3, we get to the subject of how belief in the gospel affects your speech, your words, your tongue. We're taking our series title very literally this morning – there is a great deal of connection between talking the talking and walking the walk, when it comes to the Christian life.

Have you ever noticed, by the way, you go to the doctor for a check-up and there's always that "open wide say awe" moment? The doctor looks to see what's going on with your tongue and mouth to gauge what's potentially going on in other parts of you. Actually that's what this chapter is about. Look at what's going on with your tongue and you'll learn an awful lot about your soul and your heart.

But let's just start off by reading our text for the morning. It's **James 3:1–18**: *Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. 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 person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, 8 but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

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

*13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. 14 But if you harbor 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, of the devil.*

*16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. 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 raise a harvest of righteousness.*

Now, there are three things I'd like to show you that the text tells us about words. There's more than that, but there are three things we're going to deal with today. And that is it tells us about the *power* of words; secondly, the *poison* of words; and thirdly, the *healing* of the poison.

**First, The power of words.** Verses 1–5 were all about how powerful words are. Verse 1 says that teachers will be judged more harshly. Well, what's that got to do with the subject? Everything. This is one of the Bible passages that causes me personally a good deal of angst. It's saying the more words you use, the more severely you'll be judged, and that shows that God takes words very, very seriously.

Why does Jesus say in **Matthew 12:36 (ESV)** this amazing statement which still makes me tremble, "*I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak.*". Gulp! Every careless word! Why? **Proverbs 18:21** says, "*The tongue has the power of life and death...*"

Look at these three metaphors at the beginning of the chapter. "A small bit in the mouth of the horse turns the whole horse." "A little rudder turns the whole huge ship." "A little spark can start a forest fire that destroys thousands of lives and millions of acres." What are all these metaphors getting across? The *power* of your speech. The power of your words. Your words are much more powerful than you think.

Why? If you go back to the beginning of the book of Genesis, the very first page, it tells you. That's the first place we see anything about talking or speaking in the Bible. Where is it? "And God *said*, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." God is a speaking God, and God's words create reality. And even though we're human beings and we're not God, *yet our words have the ability to create reality*. Our words are much more powerful because we're made in the image of God.

We're more powerful than we think. So for example, what is a self-image made out of? Your regard of yourself completely shapes the course of your life. But do you know where your self-image comes from? Words. Your self-image is the accumulation of all the verdicts, the things that have been *said* about you by parents and teachers and friends over the years.

If you say to a child, "You're stupid," and you're close to that child in some way as an adult, that word goes into the child and affects that child. It's like toxic chemicals underneath the soil and it affects the child for years and years, and you *know* that because a lot of you are *dealing* with that. See, words make or break the self-image. Your self-image is created by the words. Your word has power.

Also, words make or break, not just individuals, but community. Community. Let's go top level – macro. If you can't trust the words of your government or the words of a news media or the words of a business, you have complete breakdown. If you can't trust the truthfulness of those words, you have complete civic, economic, social breakdown.

Next month I'm going to miss a Sunday with you because I will be preaching at a couple of churches in Sicily. And in preparation for that I've been reading a bunch of books on Sicilian history – and you can't talk about Sicilian history without talking about the Mafia. And up until the late 1990's Palermo was almost a third-world city – in the 80's it was called the “Beirut of Europe”. Thousands of people were killed in bombings and assassinations. Judges, police officials, politicians, priests, anyone who spoke up would be targeted for death. Palermo for years had no night life because it wasn't safe to go outdoors. The corruption - and violence used to protect it - destroyed every element of their society – economics, family, the church, civic participation, all of it.

But the whole system fed off silence. Nobody would even admit the Mafia even existed until the late 80's. It was dangerous to admit the truth. A famous local artist remarked that in Sicily, “you can find dramas, pastorals, idylls, politics, gastronomy, geography,

history, literature...In the end, you can find anything and everything, but you can't find truth...” (Renato Guttuso) And without truth, you have no society.

Let's go small – micro. If you have a relationship and you lie to that person, the person doesn't even know it yet but you know there's a barrier between you now. You have to watch what you say now and you have to be careful you don't let the person see the actual truth...there's a barrier between you. Marriage. Words make or break a marriage, and do you know why?

Because words have a power that is irretrievable once you say them; words have a *power*. If you take a sword and stick it into somebody's flesh and then pull it out and say, “I'm sorry,” guess what? The sword is out, but the wound isn't gone. And if you make cutting remarks to your spouse and then say, “I'm sorry,” guess what? The harm isn't gone because words have a power.

Proverbs says life and death are in the power of the tongue! Do you know how many murders, suicides, and wars have been caused by careless words? Careless words! Jesus wasn't exaggerating! Judgment day has already started on our careless words, do you know that? Let's wrap up this first point on this power of the words.

This is the reason you'll never see anywhere in the Bible, no author in the Bible will ever say anything like this, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me." You know, one of the most ironic things is whenever you hear a child sing that song, you know that child is *completely* gas-lighted by whoever taught those words to the child. The *words* of that song will hurt you if you take them to heart.

That's *stupid* to say sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me. That's crazy because frankly, here's what the Bible teaches: sticks and stones may break your bones but words can go places sticks and stones can never go! Right into your *soul*, right into your self-regard, right into the center of your relationships. And it can destroy by creating terrible new realities.

What is done *to* you is of very little account compared to what is done *in* you. Words can destroy confidence, morale, relationships, marriages, and families in a way sticks and stones can't. Words cause murders and suicides and wars by the score. Even a single word can do this. Words are sparks; they are bombs. So we must not discount the power of words.

However, it's not all words obviously that are bad. And that brings us to the second point, **The poison of words**. Because some words are what here in v. 8 in James calls poisonous. See, he says the tongue "...*is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*" Well, what kinds of words are poisonous? Proverbs says life and death are in the power of the tongue.

So the tongue can kill and it can poison but it can also give life, so what *kinds* of the words are poisonous words? What *kinds* of words bring about this destruction? And you're not going to find the answer in this chapter. Chapter 3 is where James talks about words and speech at greatest length, but he doesn't actually mention what kinds of words are the poisonous words. For that you have to go to chapter 5.

Now we're going through the book of James pretty quickly and so when we get to chapter 5, you're not going to hear me talking about these two places. But in two verses there James lays out what the two basic categories of the poisonous words are. Words are poisonous and they destroy and bring death if they're **untruthful or unloving**. Now let's take just a couple minutes to talk about that. Untruthful, unloving words are poison.

Actually it's in **James 5:12** where he talks about how it's absolutely critical to tell the truth. He actually quotes his older brother Jesus - remember, James is the younger brother of Jesus Christ; he's a son of Joseph and Mary. James says, "*Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple “Yes” or “No.” Otherwise you will be condemned.*" And that's quoting Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, because Jesus says, "*Don't swear by heaven or earth or by Jerusalem, but let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no.*" Ok, so what is that?

Here's what he's saying. You know how people say, "Well, when you go into court and you swear on a stack of Bibles, 'I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help me God,' *now* we have to tell the truth." And do you know what Jesus is saying? If you're a Christian, you're always under oath. Everywhere you go, everybody you talk to, every "yes" and every "no" ought to be as truthful as if you just swore on a stack of Bibles. You shouldn't need to ever go under oath in order to tell the truth. You're *always* under oath. That's what James 5:12 is saying.

Then in **James 5:9** he says, "*Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged.*" And the word he uses for "grumble", by the way, simply means a sigh of exasperation, a rolling the eyes as you speak - "Oh, *this* idiot again."

Oh my gosh. My entire Gen X ironic ethos is going to hell! Listen. Let me not take long on this, but just to say those two verses in chapter 5 summarize everything the Bible says about poisonous words. Poisonous words are untruthful and unloving.

Or Paul puts it positively in **Ephesians 4:15** when he tells us not to be immature but, "*Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.*"

Meditate with me for a second. Unless you're speaking the truth *in love*, unless your words are characterized by truthfulness *and* love - at the same time! - your words are poison. You're destroying people. Now think about this with me. First of all, truth. What's wrong with telling a lie? Why are untruthful words right or wrong?

Joy Davidman - who was C.S. Lewis' wife - she was an American poet who wrote a book about the Ten Commandments and said about "thou shalt not lie", "There are the lies of gossip, which make haters out of us; the lies of advertising and salesmanship, which make money out of us; the lies of politicians, who make power out of us." In other words, lies turn us from human beings into objects to be used. Every lie demeans, destroys, and violates the dignity of the person you're talking to.

When you lie, you're creating a reality for that person, but it's not *real* reality. You're not giving them the *facts* about things. You're holding back something they need to know, some information they need to know, so they're flying blind.

So whenever you lie, you're exploiting people. You're making haters out of them. You're making pawns out of them. You're making money out of them, or whatever. An untruthful tongue creates an illusion around people and disempowers them, right? That's bad, right? But guess what? There's another way for you to have an untruthful tongue, and that is through cowardly silence.

If you know something a person ought to know and you - out of cowardice, because you're afraid - you don't tell them, you are actually keeping them in a distorted reality by *not* saying anything. See, an untruthful tongue can be untruthful through lying, *and* through just shutting up when you really ought to open your mouth.

When you're afraid to tell people something they really need to know because you don't want to hurt their feelings, or you don't want them to get mad at you, or something like that, you're disempowering them. You're withholding the truth from them. So you can withhold the truth from somebody as much by lying as by shutting up in a cowardly way. So that's untruthful speech; that's very poisonous. We know about that.

*But...* then there's also unloving speech. Now, a lot of people feel in the Christian community - here I'm especially talking to Christians - that if I tell the truth and I tell people, "This is what the Bible says. This is the truth. This is what God says." It doesn't matter so much *how* I say it; what matters is I'm telling the truth. But you're supposed to speak the truth in love, and if you speak the truth in a way that's not loving, it's not *really* caring about the truth.

In **Proverbs 25:15**, there's this curious verse that says, "... *a gentle tongue can break a bone.*" It's kind of a strange image, isn't it? A gentle tongue can break a bone. What is Proverbs saying there? One commentator tries to explain this beautifully when he said something like, "Breaking a bone means gentle words are the most able to break down the most hardened resistance to an idea a person may possess." Did you catch that?

Look, if you're trying to tell somebody something they don't want to hear - if you're trying to tell them the truth - if you're *harsh*, if you lash out at them, what are you doing? You're actually *enhancing* their resistance to the truth. They're going to get their backs up, aren't they? And therefore, you don't really care about the truth; you want to punish or you want to win a point. You don't really care whether the person believes you or not. You're not standing up for the truth; you're just hurting the person.

And what the Proverbs is saying is, the best way of breaking down a person's resistance to the truth is to be kind! It's telling the truth, *but*...be gentle; be humble; show love; show respect. Because when you hear somebody telling you something you don't want to hear, you *want* to believe they don't like you. Then you can dismiss them. "Ahh, I know him. Consider the source." But when a person loves you and is humble and is gracious in the way they tell you the truth, it breaks down your resistance.

So here's the irony. If you're not loving, if you're not kind and gracious and *timely* in the way you speak to people...it's still poison. Find the right time. I've had so many people tell the truth at the worst possible time and when the person doesn't believe, he says, "Well, I did my job." No you didn't! Unloving truthful words aren't really, in the end, committed to truth. And so-called loving, cowardly silence isn't committed to truth. But also, you see, love without truth is a lie. Truth without love is not really committed to the truth, so truth without love isn't really truth, and love without truth isn't really love!

Only when your words are *both* truthful and loving *at the same time*...is your tongue life-giving. Think about it. And by the way...listen...when I say lies, don't forget exaggeration, strategic omission, and spin, all of which are *technically* factual but designed to misrepresent. Don't do that either. When we do that, we are spreading poison.

Now, if this is the case, if words that are not truthful and loving at the same time, apt and timely and wise and gracious and direct and honest all at once, you're destroying self images, you're destroying relationships, you're destroying marriages, you're destroying society...because the word is a bomb. Your words are like sparks that burn down the whole neighborhood.

Then having said that, what do we do? Oh my gosh, what do we do now? That's the **third point, The healing of the poison**. The answer is complicated. I don't have that much time left here, but I need to be honest about the fact that the healing of words is complicated, and here's why. The beginning and the ending of the chapter seem to give us two different strategies.

At the beginning of the chapter in verses 1–3, the thesis is, "If you can control the tongue, you can control your whole body." And that's a Semitic term that means your whole life. So verses 1–3 are saying, "If you can get control of what you *say*, it helps shape what goes on in your heart." But when you go to **verse 12** and it says, "*My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water,*" that seems to be saying the opposite. There, James is tapping into the important teaching that your heart controls your tongue.

See, at the beginning of the chapter, he seems to say, “Get control of your tongue and that will influence your heart.” But here he’s saying, “Ultimately, it’s your heart that influences your tongue.” And this is what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. I already quoted part about being judged for every careless word, but here’s what Jesus says right before that: **Matthew 12:33-35**, “*Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.*” See, James is essentially quoting that.

So the first strategy says, “Get control of the tongue and that will help you understand and affect what’s in your heart.” But the second strategy is, fill the heart with something new and that will affect your tongue. Does that sound contradictory to you? Those two strategies are not contradictory; they’re complimentary, my dear Watson, complimentary. And here’s how. Let’s work through it. I told you this isn’t easy, but there’s a balance here.

First of all, strategy one. Get control of your tongue in order to shape what’s in your heart. I participated in a Discipleship By Design course in Chi Alpha back in college. And I will never forget one of the assignments.

It was a lesson on the tongue, and the assignment was, for a week, never boast or defend yourself, and never gossip or speak negatively about somebody else. It’s about this effort to control the tongue. On the one hand, don’t boast or defend yourself - that’s building yourself up - and don’t gossip or speak negatively about someone - that’s tearing others down – don’t do either of those for one week.

Now, would you like to know if I succeeded? Of course not! No one succeeded. And if they walked in at the end of the week and said, “I did it!” Well that’s boasting about yourself and you failed! A week? Are you kidding?” Look – let’s modify it - I would like you to do this. Tomorrow morning, from nine until noon, do not defend yourself or boast, do not gossip or speak negatively about anybody. Just try it for a *morning* and then you’ll need a long lunch.

And here’s the reason why. You will be amazed by how much pride, how much defensiveness, how much insecurity, how much superiority, how much self-righteousness, how much you *need* to put people down and how much you *need* to build yourself up, and how untruthful and how unloving especially your words are. Because, when you’re defending yourself, you won’t be completely truthful, and when you’re talking about other people you will not be loving.



I used to think the assignment was stupid – after all no one can accomplish it. But then I realized that was the whole point of the assignment. It’s a diagnostic tool. And it’s an *important* one because when you start to come to grips with your mouth and see how you’re speaking, only then does it *expose* what’s in your heart and help you come to grips with it and deal with it.

Something you may not know about your pastor is that an area of specialized knowledge for me is the life and Presidency of Richard Nixon – I’ve read every book he’s ever written, and many about him, I met him, he sent me a personalized letter. You ask “why?” – believe me, we don’t have time to get into all that. But the bottom line is most people think he was brought down by Watergate. Not true. He could have survived a third-rate burglary.

What got him in the end – the little spark that burned the Presidency down – was his tongue. Between February 1971 and July 1973, Nixon had secret voice activated tape recorders in the White House that captured 3,700 hours of conversation – his private conversations that he never thought would become public in his lifetime. He was speaking casually, speaking spontaneously - out of what was in his heart, his mouth was speaking. And the tapes were subpoenaed by Congress and they were made public.

And history will tell you the reason he had to resign was that on one of the tapes, there was obstruction of justice, which of course was against the law. But frankly what happened was, if you ever listen - read the transcripts of those tapes. The way he talked about his enemies, the way he talked about his friends, the way he mocked people, the way he disdained people, the viciousness, the pride, the ego, the defensiveness, was appalling. It was so bad that even his allies – at least the one’s with a conscience – had to turn against him.

Richard Nixon lost the presidency because he never took the Discipleship by Design course and he never took that assignment. And that assignment would have made him come to grips and say, “Do you realize what your unguarded words are telling people about your heart, telling *you* about your heart? Deal with that!” But he never did. But *you* must. You have to find those things. You have to *listen* to your tongue. You have to listen to your words. You have to get a hold of those things and that will help you come to grips with your heart.

But what about the other strategy? Let’s look at that other one. On the one hand, it’s true that coming to grips with and getting control of your mouth helps you come to deal with what’s in your heart. But more fundamentally, what fills your heart controls what you say with your mouth. When Jesus says in Matthew 12, “*Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks*” that word translated “overflow of the heart” is the word for “excessiveness”.

And here's what that means. Jesus is saying every single person has something in your life that's filling your heart. Excessiveness. Over the top passion and desire. What do you most want in life? What is it that really, really, really you feel like, "If I had that, then I could receive life joyfully"? If it's your reputation - if a good name is the most important thing to you - then when somebody criticizes you, you'll cut them down with your words. It won't be loving.

If approval is the most important thing, if what really matters to you is human approval - "I want people to like me," - then you're going to be a coward. You're never going to open your mouth and you're going to be untruthful by *withholding* the truth from people. Or maybe if you want money and you want status, you'll be spinning and exaggerating to get contracts. You won't be truthful. If whatever fills your heart isn't God and His love, you will find yourself either being untruthful or unloving or both.

Well then finally, how can it be healed? Here's how it can be healed. It looks like just a rhetorical flourish in **v. 6** when James says, "*The tongue...corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*" Is it just a little rhetorical flourish that our tongue is empowered by the fires of hell? Nice little preacher glitter to make the prose sparkle? A persuasive trope to get the audience emotionally worked up?

No, I don't think it's just a rhetorical flourish, because he knows there are two kinds of fires that can power the tongue. Because on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, fire from heaven came down in the form of little tongues of flame over everybody's head and the people who received the Holy Spirit, their tongues were healed. They were able to speak, so everybody could understand them, words of compelling and surpassing beauty of what Jesus Christ had done.

And Acts 2, Pentecost, the fire *from heaven* - not coming *up* from hell - the fire from heaven *coming down* and healing the speech, is the opposite of what happened in Genesis 11. The Tower of Babel: when the people came together to make a name for themselves and to live for their own glory and to create a society based on their own power and their own pride and their own reputation.

Do you remember what happened? Their *speech* was confused. Their words became poison. Their society broke up. Their relationships fragmented. They fought with each other. Do you remember that? Why? Because whatever fills your heart affects the mouth. And if what fills your heart is pride and reputation and status and approval and money and all that sort of thing, what will happen is your speech goes bad.

But Pentecost was the reversal of the curse of Babel. And when they saw the beauty of what Jesus Christ had done, their hearts were filled with praise and it healed their speech. Why? How would it heal their speech? Here's why. They weren't just praising God in general; they were praising God for what he'd done in Jesus Christ, for what Jesus Christ has done on the cross. On the cross Jesus Christ brought **truth and love** together.

Why did Jesus die? Was it because of truth or was it because of love? Yes! Did Jesus die because God is truth and God is holy and God is just and wrath on sin must be satisfied? Yes! Or did Jesus die because he loved us and he didn't want us to bear the punishment our sin deserved and because he wanted us to be saved and his heart was filled with mercy? Yes! There is the ultimate example of truth and love at once.

And so you see, on the Day of Pentecost those Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit – and one of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to remind us of everything that Jesus said and did – to drill that deep into our hearts. And so when those first Christians had their hearts filled the power of the Holy Spirit so that their mouths overflowed with praise, it was because they understood what Jesus Christ had really done for them on the cross.

When Jesus Christ called out to the Father on the cross, what happened? Silence. You know, solitary confinement is torture. Do you know why? Because we're made in the image of God, and we need words like we need food. Solitary confinement is torture, and on the cross Jesus Christ got cosmic, ultimate solitary confinement. He got the silence of God.

Why? It's what we deserve. It's what we deserve for the abuse of our wonderful gift of speech. It's what we deserve for the destruction we have spoken into the lives of our children and our spouses and a thousand other people that have crossed our path. And probably pastors deserve a double judgement because our words carry even more weight. I tremble to think of the damage my words have caused over the decades.

But Jesus Christ got the silence we deserve, the punishment we deserve, so that we could get *the* word he deserved. And what is that word? The word from God that comes down and says, "This is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased." When you believe in Jesus Christ, John 1:12 says you're adopted. Romans 8:16 and Galatians 4 say the Holy Spirit comes into our heart crying, "This is my beloved child in whom I'm well pleased."

And if *that* word comes into the center of your being, it doesn't matter what your father has said about you...or what your mother has said about you...or what Mrs. Andrews your 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher said about you (that seems a little personal!)...or what *anybody* else has said about you. Your heart now is filled with the sense of the beauty of what Jesus Christ did for you, and now your words will be healed because you don't care about your reputation the way you did before.

You don't care about what people think about you like you did before. Approval, reputation...those things don't matter. All that matters is the beauty of what Jesus did. He took the silence you deserve so we could get that word in the center of our being, that God loves us. That'll heal your heart. That'll heal your words.

Let's pray...

Our Father, we ask that you would so fill us with your Spirit of love and grace and mercy that our tongues would be healed. That we would be so changed at the core of our being by the good news of the gospel that what overflows from our heart would be words of kindness, words of peace, words of encouragement, words of love.

We desperately need this. Our world desperately needs this. We have been poisoned. And we are poisoning those around us. The poison of words spreads death from parent to child like an inherited genetic disease. And of course that's what sin is – the malignant genes of the human race passed along for generations.

The cycle must be broken. The cycle *has been* broken...by what Jesus Christ did for us. And one day, as the Holy Spirit completes the work that he began, it will be broken forevermore. The day is coming when we will live in a world where the fruit of our tongues only brings life. We take comfort in that hope, but we desperately need a taste of it today. Heal our hearts. Heal our tongues. Heal our world. In Jesus' name we pray.