

The Tongue: The Indicator of the Heart

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[0:00] James 3, the first twelve verses. Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

! 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. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.

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. 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. 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.

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man. But no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

[1:12] With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.

Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Mark, in his Gospel, chapter 5, tells us that in the region of the Gerasenes, there lived a wild man who was demon-possessed. And for a long time this man went around naked, living among the tombs, crying out in the hills, and cutting himself with stones, night and day.

And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained, hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet.

No one was strong enough to subdue him. Mothers, if you were living then, you would not let your children play outside after dark.

[2:28] And children, you would never want to wander far from your homes. This was a scary, dangerous man that no man could tame. But one day, Jesus Christ, God's Son, met this wild man and, through his all-powerful grace, tamed him.

He left him there, demons cast out, clothed in his right mind, and telling everyone what wonderful things the Lord had done for him.

Now, James tells us in his letter that there is something more wild and dangerous and uncontrollable than this man. It is as influential as a bit or a rudder that steers a horse or a ship. It is as destructive as a forest fire and is itself set on fire by hell. It is empowered by the devil and by the flesh.

It is as evil as the world. It is as corrupting as a bad apple in a bushel of good ones. It corrupts the whole person and sets his whole course of his life on fire.

[3:52] It is as restless as a caged lion. It is as poisonous as an inland taipan snake whose toxic venom released in every bite is enough to kill a hundred people.

And like the garrison demoniac, it has frustrated all of man's attempts to subdue it. And it is not running around out there in the cemetery north of town.

It is right now lying between the double gate of your lips and your teeth. It is your tongue, James says. And though you cannot tame it, you must tame it.

Or it will destroy you. And that is where we left this treatment of the tongue last time. I can't tame it, but I must tame it.

Now, James is not done with his withering indictment of the tongue. We'll see more today. We just ran out of time and we'll see something of its duplicity.

[5:04] We'll see two points. Its deadly inconsistency and its actual consistency. It's at one and the same time inconsistent and yet very consistent.

First of all, James says, tells us of its deadly inconsistency verses 9 and 10. With the tongue, we praise our Lord and Father and with it, we curse men who have been made in God's likeness.

Now, here's a forked tongue if there ever was one. Now praising, now cursing. The tongue has many functions, but its highest use is to praise God.

What we have been doing already this day, verbally acknowledging and honoring him for who he is and for what he has done. To speak well of him, that's what it means to praise him.

And we do that in our conversation. Hear what the Lord has done for me. We do it in our songs.

Praise him, praise him, tell of his excellent greatness.

[6:21] We do it in our prayers as we remember all of his benefits and praise him for it. How you forgive all of our sins and heal all of our diseases.

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He does not treat us according to what our sins deserve. We are praising the Lord with our lips when we speak well of him.

And that's what the tongue was made for above all else, to praise our Lord and Father. Now, a devout Jew three times a day would say the 18 benedictions, each ending with the words, blessed art thou, God.

Blessed art thou, O God. And some Jews, every time they used the name of God, would immediately add, blessed be he. So, praising God was a common practice among the early Christians.

But what James is exposing is the fact that the same tongue that praises God was also cursing men who have been made in God's likeness. That out of the very same mouth came praises and curses.

[7:42] Now, cursing is a strong word. It means to call down evil upon someone else. Even ultimate damnation.

To call on them to go to hell. But in this context, it includes far more than just telling someone to go to hell or speaking such words of condemnation.

It's wishing them evil and then using our tongues to express that wish. So anytime we express some desire inside to hurt them, to harm them, to do them evil, it's using unkind and angry words to hurt them, sarcastic and denigrating digs at them, slicing and dicing them and cutting them down, calling them names, speaking evil about them, wanting to destroy their reputation, wanting other people to think less of them.

In so many ways, we cut down, we tear down men. And we're doing all of this and more to none other than image bearers of God.

And that's what makes it so criminal. God made mankind in His own image. He made Him to resemble Himself. We bear His likeness as personal, rational, feeling, emotional, volitional, spiritual beings.

[9:26] We are like God. And that is what separates you from the animals that God has made. They are not made in God's image. You are. Indeed, all of mankind are.

And so we're mirrors. We're pictures of God. We've had the stamp of God creating us in His own image so that when people see us, they see something of what God is like.

And even after the fall, it still remains, according to James. Though there's much that has been marred about it. God and that's why in Genesis 9 and verse 6, the one who takes the life of a man must be put to death because he has destroyed the image of God.

That's how serious God takes His image in man. You destroy it. Your life must be taken. sin. No, when we look at a beautiful sunset, we are right to give praise and honor to God.

What a God that would create this scene. What beauty in Him. What glory. And if that's true of the sunset, as it's to be of all God's works, we are to praise Him for all of His works.

[10:47] How much more when we see man, who is His highest creation, who's made in His very image, when we look at man, should we not praise God and not curse Him. But to curse man is to curse God in His image.

That's serious. To curse man is to curse God in His image. Here's a people, and they have a king.

And when these people have an audience with their king, they bow down and they praise Him. You're the greatest, O king, they say. And they talk about His excellencies. And then they go out and they see an image of their king. They see a poster of their king and they paint profanities and graffiti all over his face.

They throw rotten eggs and tomatoes at his face. Do you know, in some countries, to deface a poster of the king is as serious as if you did it to the king himself.

[11:53] And that's how God takes our cursing of his image in man. Cursing God's image is an attack upon God himself whose image man is.

Now, you might not have ever thought of it that way when you got all bent out of shape and just vented and poured out of your mouth all your angry words upon some person made in the image of God.

But I assure you that's how God sees it. That what you say with your tongue about man he takes is said about his image.

And so James is saying, whore of whores, we are cursing the very same object that we were earlier praising in worship. In the one setting we praise God and in the other setting we curse him.

We curse him in his image. Indeed, the tongue is full of deadly poison. Just ten minutes after the closing hymn of praise to God, men's tongues can be found defacing the image of God.

[13:08] So quickly the tongue can move from worshiping God to wounding men. Bunyan says of the man talkative in Pilgrim's Progress.

Kids, that just means he liked to talk and talk and talk and talk. Listen to him. He's a talker. And this is what Bunyan says about this man. He was a saint abroad and a devil at home.

It means he can pray and preach and talk like a Puritan at church and he yells at his wife and kids and tears them down at home. a saint abroad, a devil at home.

And that's what James is exposing here. Tongues that every Sunday were found in churches lifting up God in their songs of praise, which during the week are employed in tearing down man who is made in God's image.

And so they move from the highest business of heaven to the low-down business of hell. Praising and cursing. Out of the same mouth come praising and cursing.

[14:20] Dear brothers, this should not be. It's wrong. It's wrong. It's an aberration. It's a monstrosity.

It shouldn't be. It should not exist on the planet. Now that's where we begin. A deadly inconsistency. but now James shows that what should not be now cannot be.

What James says should not be, he now says cannot be. And he takes this idea of praise and cursing coming out of the same mouth to the natural world to see if anything like it happens there. And though he's now speaking of springs and fruit trees, he's still talking about man's mouth. He's teaching a spiritual lesson from nature.

So kids, he's going to ask a string of questions and I'll clue you in before we even look at one of them. He asked them in a way that expects a negative answer.

[15:25] So if you say no to all the questions, you get an A plus. Here are the questions. The first one, verse 11, can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?

The answer kids? No, no, they can't. Palestine was a place of many springs and some of them were salty springs, sulfuric springs.

They stunk. They were not fit to drink. They would kill plants if you put it on plants. And other springs were fresh water and you could drink and you could refresh yourself and you could water and irrigate the land.

Now you might have a farm in Palestine and on that farm and some place in that farm, you might have a spring that produced salt water. And on the same farm, maybe an acre away, you might have a spring that would produce fresh water.

It just may so happen that way. But something you would never, ever find is a spring that would produce both salt water and fresh water so that as it flows up out of the spring, if you taste it on this side, it's good.

[16:37] And if you taste it on this side, it's bad. That will never happen. It's impossible. James is saying it cannot be. And then he turns to plants.

Again, plants that were very common in Palestine. If they're not common in your backyard, they were almost in every backyard of the Israelite. My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives?

Kids, what's the answer? No, no, they can't. A fig tree bears figs. Can a grapevine bear figs? No, a grapevine bears grapes. There's no confusion in nature. There's no double dealing. It's all quite simple.

There's a wonderful consistency and order to all God's works in nature because he's not the author of confusion. He is a God of order and he created each tree to produce fruit according to its kind.

[17:47] Wasn't that good of God that he made fig trees produce figs and grapevines to produce grapes? Maybe you would want to grow up kids and become a farmer with an orchard and you want to make apple cider so you want an apple orchard.

Well, what kind of trees should you go out and plant? Oh, well, if we lived in a disordered world, we might think, well, I'll plant all apple trees. Oh, but then when they grow up, one starts producing grapes and another starts producing figs and another olives.

It would be a mess. But God has so made things simple and clear and consistent. the tree never bears fruit contrary to its nature.

If it's a fig tree, it'll give you figs. If it's an apple tree, it will give you apples. So the fruit tree tells me, the fruit on the tree tells me what kind of tree it is.

That's the simple beauty of God's creation. creation. And it works that same way with springs of water. And so he returns back to this in his concluding statement.

[19:01] Neither can. It is not possible. Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. It cannot be. There is a consistency, an actual consistency between the spring and the water it produces.

and that I say is the actual consistency that James now applies to the tongue. That through this lesson on nature, James is teaching us something very important about the tongue.

That there is a consistency between the heart and the tongue just as there is between the spring and the water that flows from it or from the tree and the fruit that is produced by it.

If the heart is bitter and salty and sinful, then the tongue will be bitter and salty and sinful. If the heart is regenerated and holy and full of grace and truth, then the tongue too will be holy and full of grace and truth.

If the heart is evil, the tongue will be evil. If the heart is good, the tongue will be good. So what do we have? the tongue is an indicator of the heart because it only speaks what your heart tells it to.

[20:25] That means that if you talk long enough, you're going to reveal your heart. Thomas Brooks says, we know metals by their tinkling and men by their talking.

It will reveal your heart when you speak. Now, James is not the first to discover this inescapable connection between the heart and the tongue.

His older stepbrother, Jesus, the Son of God, taught of it in Matthew chapter 12 and verse 33.

Would you turn over to that passage? It's a key cross-reference to what James is saying here in James 3.

Matthew 12 verse 33 and we're talking about speech. It's in the context of speech and words that we say.

And notice the consistency in nature is also true in the matter of your speech. Jesus says, Matthew 12 33, make a tree good and its fruit will be good.

[21:37] Or, make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad. For a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, you brood of poisonous snakes, how can, 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.

But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted and by your words you will be condemned.

Simply put, Jesus is saying what's in the heart comes out of the mouth. What's in the heart comes out of the mouth. For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.

Now there's a helpful picture in that language. You know what an overflow valve is. You check the next time you're in your bathtub kids you'll find an overflow valve in case the bathtub gets too full instead of pouring over into the room it will go down that overflow valve.

[23:02] We have the same thing over in our baptismal tank in the other end of the building takes a long time to fill up that tank so they may turn the water on and go home and wait several hours and come back if perchance we wait too long and the water gets up instead of flowing over into the church building what happens is it it goes down an overflow valve it can only get up to that point and

then it goes down that overflow valve down and outside the building now posit this I'm on the outside of the building and I'm looking at the end of the hose coming from the overflow valve if water is coming out of that overflow valve I know what's on the inside of the baptismal tank water if orange juice is coming out of that overflow valve I know that there's orange juice in the baptismal tank and I'm not even in there but by seeing what is overflowing

I know what's inside Jesus says it's the same with us and our tongues our tongues our mouths are just valves overflow valves of our heart and whatever comes out there shows us what's on the inside of our hearts it tells the world what is filling and controlling our hearts whether it's under the control of sin or under the power of God whether it's good or evil whether dead in sin or alive in Christ you see the overflow valve gives it away so Jesus says the tree must be good for the fruit to be good the heart must be good if the habitual flow from that heart is to be good he says in Matthew 7 every good tree bears good fruit but a bad tree bears bad fruit a good tree cannot bear bad fruit and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit you see what he's saying there is this wonderful consistency in nature and in a man's mouth as well his mouth will be consistent with his heart plants springs and tongues all produce according to their natures now do you see what I said what I meant when I said what

James says should not be he is now telling us cannot be both praise and cursing come from the same mouth this should not be and now he says both praise and cursing cannot flow from the same heart and mouth it may seem to but it cannot and where the habitual outflow of the mouth is salty bitter destructive words to men there you may be sure is an unregenerate heart full of deadly poison incapable of true praise and any apparent freshwater speech of graciousness and praise to God that comes out of such a man's mouth is empty it's only an outward form it's not true praise at all it cannot be from such a spring from such an unregenerate heart and such a pattern of double dealing then proves hypocrisy at the bottom their worship is a farce their their apparent praise for God is not what it seems to be their evil tongue corrupts the whole person and their evil tongue to their fellow man corrupts even their praise to God and makes it an offense to him James is only driving home here the end of chapter 3 verses 9 through 12 what he said earlier in chapter 1 in verse 26 look at it with me chapter 1 verse 26 James remember he told us where he's going in his letter here it is in the glossary as it were chapter 1 in verse 26 this is what he's unfolding now he says if anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue then he deceives himself and his religion is worthless now follow me if anyone considers himself religious no one would consider themselves religious if they did not have praise for God God on their tongues no they go to church and they praise God with their tongues and so they consider themselves religious they talk about God and how wonderful God is and yet they do not keep a tight rein on their tongue they don't have control of it it wags wherever it wishes and it slices and dices people at will if anyone considers himself religious!

[28 : 14] and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue what what well if he continues to think that he's religious he's deceiving himself for sure and possibly others and the other thing is that his religion is worthless James does not say his religion is not quite as good as some Christian who keeps their tongue under control no he says his religion is worth zero you can add up all the songs of praises all the words of testimony all that he says about God if the pattern of his life during the week is to chop down the image of God then you can be sure his religion is worthless and so he's simply unpacking that reality here in chapter 3 James or Jesus interprets this man who seems to be praising God and cursing man out of the same mouth Jesus interprets him in

Matthew 15 7 and 8 this way these people honor me with the lips but their hearts are far from me they worship me in vain they worship me for naught their religion is worthless their praise means nothing to me no there is no true praise for God here true praise and worship only arises from a heart made good by grace and such a heart will show itself not only in words of praise to God but also in words of grace and mercy to men who have been made in God's likeness now all across our nation this morning people have been praising God just as we have done here this morning but the true condition of your heart is not told by just what your tongue has done for the last hour or two the true condition of your heart is told by what your tongue does all seven days of the week what's the pattern what's the consistent habit of your tongue if it's to tear down the image of God then there is no true praise being given to God today regardless of what it looks like words of praise a corrupt heart given to wounding men can only pretend to produce true praise to God so what do we have we have the tongue becomes another test of true saving faith that's what he's

been telling us in chapter two that the man who claims to have faith but has no deeds how can that faith save him it can't well some of the deeds that are done true saving faith are to keep a tight rein on the tongue and only a genuine faith in Jesus Christ is strong enough to produce self controlled tongues and so wherever you see it you have a mark of saving grace not perfect control of the tongue even the choices of

God's people have meltdown! moments we see that with Peter and his tongue don't we in the gospel we know it in our own lives oh but where there is true saving faith the habitual flow the consistent flow of their life is grace and truth through their tongue it must be because the heart is good the speech will be good Jesus and James says now let's step back a moment and get the big picture where has James been taking us on this journey through his letter well in this letter James is calling us to the all out pursuit of holiness isn't he to perfection to to settle it nothing but likeness to Jesus the pursuit of holiness and it takes us down the pathway of trials and it takes us down the pathway of his word it takes us down the railroad tracks of

God's law and it's driven by the engine of faith powerful faith but now we have an insurmountable barrier in the way of holiness it's that toxic tongue and we face that tongue and we want to be perfect and we want nothing but praise and nothing but holy words to come out and we find our tongues stickle to holiness and James lets us feel the tension doesn't he in his writing that I can't tame the tongue but I must tame the tongue or my whole religion is a farce my faith faith faith is not saving faith Jesus himself says without me you can do nothing do we believe that not just tame the tongue that but anything else in holiness we can't do it without Jesus and as long as

[33:32] I think that I've got what it takes to tame! my tongue I'm not going to get serious about looking to Christ and appealing to him with desperate believing prayer to come and help me tame my tongue and that's why James is so relentless in his depiction of our tongues and their untamableness it's fullness of evil fueled by hell what's he doing well he knows that you and I will not go to Christ and look to him alone for power and pardon until we despair of all confidence in ourselves so James is out to do something with us he's out to bring us to an end of ourselves that we might put all of our weight of confidence upon Christ oh religion is being short sold in our day as if it's just a little thing salvation is just a little thing and sin is being sold short today

James is telling us sin is much stronger than you may have realized and there's only one savior from sin any sin your tongues included and it's not you that's what James is wanting us to feel it's not me I can't fix it so he nails the coffin shut on any self help strategies of holiness he's out to slay any vain imaginations of seven easy steps to a better you five easy steps to a tame tongue and kids he will nail as dead on arrival this thought that you're being told over and over that you have everything within you to do whatever you want whatever you set your mind to do you can do it James says okay then tame the tongue let's see how far you get how far into the week can you get before your tongue starts to wag some evil slandered another cutting down someone lying stretching the truth deceiving no we cannot tame the tongue and few things convince us so thoroughly of our own inability as our tongues so that's where

James is going it's where the Bible is constantly taking us it's back to this foundational reality holiness is not within the reach of man's ability salvation from any sin is beyond us it's a supernatural life that we're called to brothers and sisters and I ask you is that not where every sermon should bring us shut up to Christ no hope here all sorts of help there and so to throw us helpless upon Christ for pardon and power you know it's no small thing to get self sufficient independent people like you and me to be at the end of ourselves and to keep us at the end of ourselves oh we don't mind once in a while being brought to the end of ourselves and we confess I'm poor and helpless but no to keep us at the end of ourselves now that's another thing to never be anything but broken and contrite looking away from self to

Christ grace thrives in the soil of acknowledged weakness acknowledged inability I can't Lord I must but I can't and my flesh hates to say those two words I can't love it would have me think I got this holiness thing in my back pocket it would have me think that I've come a long way in the Christian life and I can handle my tongue thank you and so I must mortify any imagined self sufficiency of having it all together in this department or any other I must get over my own backwardness to begging I must learn to be content to live as a constant and helpless beggar at the throne of grace and James is saying brothers and sisters do not seek by yourselves what is only found in Christ and through Christ all tongue control all progress in holiness anytime anywhere the grace of holiness must be given by

God or we will never be holy however we try no this grace for taming the tongue comes through faith in Christ that's what Paul James has been arguing at the end of chapter two it's faith is a powerful thing faith looks outside of ourselves to Christ in believing prayer and it draws from him all energy and power and life from the vine to the branches and so that day in the region of the era scenes Jesus Christ did something that no man could ever do he tamed the wild man and it is James firm conviction that this same Jesus has the same power to do what you and no other man could ever do and that's to tame your tongue but he knows you won't go to him until you're done trusting!

[39:23] mighty savior when we turn to this Christ what do we see we see the one perfect man what does James chapter 3 and verse 2 say we all stumble in many ways if anyone is never at fault in what he says he's a perfect man able to keep his whole body in check there's only been one such perfect man who is never at fault in anything he said and it's the Lord Jesus and his deity his proof of sinlessness is seen in his mouth Peter says in 1 Peter 2 22 and 23 he committed no sin and the very next supporting words are these he committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth when they hurled their insults at him he did not retaliate in returning an insult and when he suffered he made no threats rather he gives blessing for cursing and prays for the forgiveness of those who insult never at fault in what he says say there's a there's a high priest that meets my need there's a righteousness to to cover all my sins of speech!

such a high priest meets our need one who is holy blameless and pure who never was at fault in what he said here's the lamb of God without blemish and without spot who's atoned for all my sins all the sins of my tongue this week and next week and in my past in my future it's found in Jesus he's the go to man when we have sinned he has righteousness for us this God man has pardoned to forgive my sins and power to cleanse my sins and as the only man who's ever tamed the tongue he has tongue taming grace for me and so I'm going to go to him he is able to cap that pipeline to hell that runs right into my mouth he can seal!

that off he is able to empower what I could never do myself to control my tongue and make it a fountain of life rather than a fire of destruction so brothers and sisters let's go to this savior wouldn't that be a good thing to do let's go to him now let's confess what we are and let's plead with him for tongue taming power let's all pray oh our God you are a communicating God who has spoken words of life to us and who has created us in your own image giving us the capacity to communicate with spoken word surely our first words our most often words should be full of praise and thanksgiving to you our God forgive us for all the wicked words the spiteful hateful angry words that flow from our mouths Lord we find ourselves unable to control this tongue we can try to erect a gate around it but it finds a way out it burns right through the gates father we we have no control of the heart you do though and you can reach and cleanse the heart the very fountain make it good sanctify us in our hearts that our mouths might be more and more sanctified we want this part of our body to become more and more an instrument of righteousness that would be to your honor and praise oh teach some sinner this morning the folly of trying to turn over a new leaf and trying to be good enough for

God show them that just in this one instance of the tongue it's a futile exercise and bring them to cast all their hope on Christ and ready to save us we pray in your name amen