

James 3:3-12

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[0 : 00] And turn back to the book of James. We're going to be continuing right where we left off last week. In chapter 3, starting in verse 3. As advertised by Nathan last week, I'll be continuing right where we left off, continuing this discussion that James is giving on controlling our tongues.

As many of you know, my firstborn just came into the world four weeks ago as of today. So as you can imagine, I'm pretty tired. So if I start to slur or whatever, I'm sorry.

But also because of that, last week I came here and I volunteered for band, which I probably shouldn't have. Because I was pretty tired by the time the service came around. So I was pretty much asleep during the whole sermon.

Not because it was boring. I was just that exhausted. The only part I remember was Nathan saying, hint, hint, Zach. So I remember it because it woke me up.

But I want to tell you now, I have no idea what that hint was. But all joking aside, I did check with him. And to be honest, it really wasn't much of a hint. So I mean, I guess I could have just kept saying, I don't know.

[1 : 19] But anyways, we'll be picking up in James chapter three, starting verse three through 12. That's our text for this morning. But I'm going to start by reading in verse one for continuity sake.

So James writes, Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers. For you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

Look at the ships also. Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a fire is set ablaze by such a small fire. And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.

[2 : 29] The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life and set on fire by hell.

For every kind of beast and bird of reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no human being can tame the tongue.

It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. Brothers, these things ought not be so. Does the spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?

Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

[3 : 26] So our outline today is not so much a series of points. Today we're going to be looking at this text more so observationally. So I have three observations. I'm not entirely sure what the difference is there, but this is two hours sleep brain thinking.

But three observations. And the first one being the influence and power of the tongue. The second one being the duality of the Christ proclaimer who does not control his tongue.

And third, the lack of a solution to controlling the tongue within ourselves. So I'm going to repeat those later on as we work through this. But just considering that first observation, the influence and power of the tongue.

The influence and the power of the tongue. So we're going to see this in verses 2 through 8. So James gives us a few images to depict the influence and power of the tongue.

And the first is of a horse. He says, if we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies. In verse 3.

[4 : 32] I don't know how many of you are familiar with horses. I'm by no means an expert, but I've ridden two or three times in my life. The bit is what you put in their mouth. You control it with the reins.

You yank it to the right, they go right. You yank it to the left, they go left. Right? You've probably seen it in a movie or something like that. And so it's painful. It's a process because the horse wants to direct itself.

It wants to do what it wants to do. And an untamed horse will fight against your will ferociously. He'll jump around and he'll try to buck you off. He does not want to be controlled.

So this is an image the people of the first century world would know well. And the second image is an image of a ship. He writes in verse 4, Look at the ships also.

Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. Again, this image is very similar to our first image.

[5 : 32] We have a ship, a large ship. A ship that requires strong winds to be moved. But what's amazing about this ship that's so large and needs such strong winds to be moved is that neither of those things determine the direction of the ship.

The direction of the ship is determined by the smallest part of it, the rudder. It's on the back end of a ship. You turn it, sometimes with wheels, sometimes with a stick. It tells you where you go. So the tongue, of course, is meant to be read into this.

It's the bit. It's the rudder. That's what these images are depicting, which is why he says in the first half of verse 5, So also the tongue is a small member, just like the rudder, just like the bit.

A small member, yet it boasts of great things. So the tongue is one of the smallest members of our body, yet it influences more of our life in its direction than any other part of the body.

That's not to say it's the controlling member, which we'll see momentarily, but the tongue's influence is vast. And picking back up in the second half of verse 5, James writes, How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire.

[6 : 50] An entire forest consumed by this fire, consumed by this tongue. So the image here is of a kindling small fire, a fire growing to consume a great or large forest.

So James is shifting from talking about the influence of the tongue, and now he's talking about its power, what it can accomplish or destroy in this case. In the first two images, the potential influence by the tongue is considerable, given a small bit and a small rudder.

But now the power and its destructive capabilities. It consumes this forest. This forest is not going to bear fruit. This forest is not going to provide shade.

This forest is not going to allow for materials like wood to be harvested. There's no profit left in this forest because it is utterly destroyed by the uncontrolled tongue.

Now, you might think this is an overreaction to the tongue on James' part. At worst, it's just words, as some may say. And James gets away from the similes that we've been reading in verses 3 through 5, and in verse 6 states in plain and matter-of-fact language, he says in verse 6, And the tongue is a world of unrighteousness.

[8 : 09] The tongue is set among our members. It is staining the whole body. It is setting on fire the entire course of life, and it is set on fire by hell.

All right, so we're getting into the meat of it, and there are three things here to consider. So the tongue is a world of unrighteousness, which is why it stains the whole body.

So recall from week 1, I preached on James 1, verse 1 through 4, and I talked at length about the importance of these words, whole and perfect, especially throughout the book of James.

And here, one of those words comes up again, whole. This means in entirety. Not one aspect is left out. And earlier in the book of James, he tells us that we are given trial so that we may become whole, lacking in nothing.

But in our text today, he is saying that by our tongues alone, our wholeness or our entirety is stained and unrighteous. So there's a tension in reading this.

[9 : 14] There's some difficulty. How does this all work out? How does it equal zero, right? How does this sum up? And again, we'll come back to this tension in a moment. But the second thing is that the tongue sets on fire the entire course of life.

Here we see what the tongue destroys. It destroys our very lives. How many times have you spoken, and it led to strife, anger, fights, quarrels, you name it. And I can recall times in my life where I or others have said things intentionally to hurt somebody. So those are the easy ones to think of. Like, oh yeah, I can see where that's possible. But I am even more amazed at the number of times I said something or somebody I know has said something, totally good intentions, no ill will, not even any kind of, I don't know, volatile language or anything like that.

And yet there was strife, yet there was anger, yet there was bitterness that came up unintentionally or unintentionally. But again, that image of a fire, it's really perfect in capturing the tongue. There it is. And to be frank, if you don't understand how destructive your tongue is, how destructive it can be, whether willfully or unwillfully, it's only because you haven't paid attention a day in your life.

[10:35] I mean, almost every day, I'm having to clarify something, rehash something, reiterate something, repeat something, redact something, contrast. And these are just some of the verbs we have in our language to describe the editing process.

So that gives you an idea of just how often we are having to go back, to clear up, to clarify. And to inject all that back into James' imagery is as if we are constantly trying to put fires out, caused by our own words.

Again, whether intentional or unintentional. Not one aspect of our life is unaffected by the words we say. Not one. And thirdly, the source of the tongue's fire is hell itself, which we see at the end of verse 6.

And that's kind of a weird phrase, isn't it? You might think like me when I first read it, I thought, well, God rules in hell. He punishes the wicked in hell. So is James saying, our tongue is set on fire by God?

Like, that doesn't make sense. Earlier he said, no one can be tempted by God. But the actual word here is Gehenna. It's not hell, it's Gehenna, which is a real place in Israel.

[11:48] Sometimes it's slang, so to speak, for hell. Sometimes people use that as a word for that. But oftentimes, it just means plain old Gehenna. And I think this is one of those cases.

And in the Jewish world, Gehenna was a place where trash was burnt, which is why it often evoked hell symbolically for the people. But it also was a place known for cultic worship and became a symbol of demonic activity to the Jewish people.

throughout the Old Testament, many Israelites who abandoned God gave into worshiping the pagan god, Moloch.

Worship of Moloch typically included child sacrifice, and Gehenna became a popular place for such sacrifice. In 2 Kings 16, 1-4, we see King Ahaz, king of Israel, sacrifice his son to Moloch, and it is assumed that that happened in Gehenna.

And likewise, King Manasseh soon after was recorded as having done much the same. In 2 Kings 21, 6, which says, So notice all that cultic, demonic activity.

[13:15] The mediums, the necromancers, the fortune tellers, the omens. This worship of Moloch and Gehenna became such a recurring issue that God pronounced judgment on the people and the place.

in Jeremiah 7, 30-34, by declaring that in latter days, Gehenna will be known as the Valley of Slaughter because he will use Babylon to slaughter many Israelites in that area.

So I say all that to say, this is a well-known place to your Jew in the first century. They know this place. It has well-established connotations. Any Jew in James' time would immediately think of such things.

And this all relates to James' argument because he is saying that the source of our tongue's fire is earthly, it's demonic, it's ungodly. It's not of God.

It is the influence of the world and the demons that work in it. In other words, it is evil. Not only this, but James is again alluding to the sermon on the mount.

[14:21] in Matthew 5, 22, Jesus is correcting everyone's understanding of the law regarding murder, a serious sin. And Jesus says, but I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.

And catch this, whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council. And whoever says, i.e. the tongue, whoever says, you fool, will be liable to hell.

Or there's that word again, Gehenna, right? will be liable to the hell of fire. So there is an implicit warning in James' statement. Essentially, he's saying, if you let your tongue loose and consume everything around you by its fire, then you too will perish by fire.

So to wrap up the discussion on the influence and the power of the tongue, James makes another argument. He contrasts controlling the tongue with controlling the wild animal kingdom.

And it's so interesting what he says, picking back up in verse 7. He says, for every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind.

[15:33] He's referring to the garden when Adam named all the animals. But he goes on, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil full of deadly poison.

It takes a lot of work, it takes a lot of skill, it takes a lot of time, but mankind can and has tamed all the animal kingdom, according to James. But the taming of the tongue is even harder, so much so that it is impossible to tame the tongue.

As James says at the outset of our text, which Nathan preached last week, if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

Meaning, if you can beat your tongue, if you can control it perfectly, there's no other temptation that will take you over. This is difficult. If you beat the big baddie, you can beat all the little baddies, right?

That's kind of the idea here. If you control the tongue, you can control everything. So that man would be perfect, but that man, James is implying, does not exist apart from Christ.

[16:39] The tongue cannot be tamed, and it is an unrelenting, restless, evil, poisonous, and leading to death. So the tongue has massive influence and massive power.

The potential for damage that a fully loose tongue can inflict is unimaginable. And now, James is going to continue speaking about the tongue and its dangers with one last critique, but there is a subtle shift in what James is addressing.

He was addressing the tongue itself, as we have seen, but now, he's addressing the one who professes to be a Christian, but whose tongue runs wild.

And we observe this in verses 9 through 10, which leads us to the second observation, observation number two, the duality of the Christ-proclaimer who does not control his tongue.

That's long, so I'll repeat that. The duality of the Christ-proclaimer who does not control his tongue.

So, picking back up in verse 9, James says, with it, referring to the tongue, with the tongue, we bless our Lord and Father.

[17:51] We bless him. Oh, that's nice. And with it, we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. That sounds so nice. And from the same mouth come blessing and cursing.

My brothers, these things ought not be so. I've talked much about the concept of bless and blessing, so I'll forego explaining that in depth, but suffice it to say, James is saying we wish well things toward God in a general sense, right?

It's goodwill, right, towards God. But the idea of cursing I've not had a chance yet to talk about. So to us, cursing, it's kind of lost its meaning that it would have had in the ancient world.

To us, you know, we think of like witches turning some princess into a frog, like, oh, cursed, you know. But in the ancient world, cursing carried one idea. It carried, I want you to be totally cut off from God in any and all blessing and I want you to be tormented in hell for eternity.

It's the worst thing you could possibly say to somebody. There's no greater threat, there's no greater expression of ill will. So he's saying, on the one hand, you bless God, but at the same time, you curse his image bearers to hell for eternity.

[19:04] So it's serious. This is not a light thing to say. So this person that James is describing wants to bless God with his lips, but he wants to curse God's image bearers to hell.

So what does he want? Does he want to bless God or does he want to curse people? Like, is that tension with one another? These are two contrary things. So these people that James describes are hypocrites in the full sense of the word.

And when you really consider the kind of person that James is describing, this person seems crazy. Or in James' words, he would call this person double-minded.

The double-minded man is a concept that James deals with throughout his letter. And we saw this already in James 1.8 where the double-minded man is one who doubts God.

He tries to live for both God and the world and is, quote, unstable in all his ways. We're going to see the double-minded man again in a couple weeks in James 4.8.

[20 : 05] James brings up the double-minded man again and it becomes abundantly clear that only false believers are double-minded. He's not addressing weak Christians in our passage today but warning his brothers of false Christians.

This man is double-minded in our passage that he's describing. He wants to bless God but curse God's image. And if you recall Christ's teaching from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 6, verse 28, Jesus commanded his disciples, bless those who curse you.

Pray for those who abuse you. So the man with the uncontrolled tongue in James is not even cursing those who curse him. He's just cursing people seemingly arbitrarily.

Definitely not a believer. And as James says in verse 10, my brothers, he's shifting address, my brothers, these things ought not be so.

How can they be so? I thought James said it was impossible. So the tension that I mentioned a while ago, it's here again and I promise we will resolve that tension in a moment.

[21 : 17] James is building it a little longer and so we're compelled to do the same. And so one final stab at it with our third and final observation this morning. There is no solution to controlling the tongue within ourselves.

Observation number three, there is no solution to controlling the tongue within ourselves. So let's look at the imagery here in verses 11 through 12.

James continues on, does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bare olives or a grapevine produce figs?

Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. So in case anyone is wondering the answer to these questions that James asked, the answers are no, no, and no.

It's all impossible. Essentially, James asks on repeat, can good things produce bad things or can bad things produce good things? And this is another allusion to the Sermon on the Mount.

[22 : 29] And if you're still questioning the idea that James is addressing false believers in our text, this quotation from Jesus that I think James is alluding to furthers the point. So Matthew 7, verse 15 through 20, Jesus says, beware of false prophets.

False prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. These are false believers pretending to be in the church. And Jesus goes on, you will recognize them by their fruits.

Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? So Jesus is essentially asking the same questions that James has asked. He's making the same kind of argument for the same kind of purpose.

And he continues, so every healthy tree bears good fruit but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. So James' allusion to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is to reinforce the point that these are false believers who have a much bigger problem than merely their tongue.

[23 : 51] The issue for them, for all of us apart from Christ, the issue is their heart. Later on in Matthew's Gospel Jesus picks up this topic again and says to false teachers in Matthew 12 verse 33 to 34 he says either make the tree good and its fruit good or make the tree bad and its fruit bad for the tree is known by its fruit.

You brood of vipers how can you speak good when you are evil? And here it is for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. So the mouth the tongue as uncontrolled as it is as great of a fire as it is as consuming as it is it's really just revealing our hearts.

This is what James is getting at with his rhetorical questions he is saying these double-minded men are salt ponds and that is why their water is not good for drinking it is why their words are full of poison he is saying they lack faith which means their heart is unaffected had they true faith saving faith it would show in their works according to James in chapter 2 verse 18 had they true saving faith we know from James 1 5 through 8 that they would ask God for wisdom and for restraint in controlling their tongues but they don't because he addressed this the double-minded man doesn't ask by faith now perhaps you're beginning to see that James is addressing unbelievers and their double life but you're probably really wondering what does this have to do with me what is this text how is this profitable for the church today well at the very least we can say that this serves as a good warning of how to discern true believers from false believers as well as false teachers from

true teachers bringing us back to verse 1 right not many of you should become teachers my brothers so this text should always serve as a discerning guide in these matters but also the serious righteousness and weight with which

James speaks to controlling our tongues ought to grab our attention we are reminded that apart from Christ we can do nothing good apart from Christ we cannot control or even restrain our lips in the slightest and so it becomes all the more imperative that we have a healthy habitual and regular prayer life in which we confess our sins to God and ask for help and wisdom there will be more on the wisdom piece next week hint and sack I think yeah we need to put aside all double talk and double living again our lives are meant to be given wholly and completely to God right don't curse God's image bearers while professing love for Christ it's an oxymoron right we need to put aside all double talk we are able to do this because Christ now lives in us who by grace through faith have been saved we are without excuse and we have every possible means at our disposal to resist sin and the devil yet we will inevitably fail at times until

God's sanctifying work is finished so there's that tension right we're never going to fully control our tongues in this life we're never going to fully arrive in this life but a general pattern as we've been talking about throughout the book of James we're going to be growing more and more looking like Christ representing Christ acting like Christ though failing and for our failures of course we are atoned for and covered by Christ so that tension is resolved it's it's it finds its relief in Christ and Christ alone yes we'll still say stupid things intentionally and unintentionally but by grace we will learn to restrain our lips more and more to speak holy words for a holy God now before we get to our closing applications I want to read this passage from Romans 7 verses 4 through 6 you can turn there if you want it'll be quick but in this text

[28 : 13] Paul is addressing us as believers post salvation right this text speaks to our present reality with our sinful nature and with the holy spirit at work in us and again when you read this at first you might be tempted to see that same tension that we've felt in our text for today but Paul seems to think of this as freedom and I think if you really look closely at what he's saying you'll see that and you'll feel that so Paul writes in Romans 7 verses 4 through 6 he says likewise my brothers you also have died to the law through the body of Christ so that you may belong to one another to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God for while we were living in the flesh that's a lot of W's for while we were living in the flesh our sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit for death but now we are released from the law having died to that which held us captive so that we serve in the new way of the spirit and not in the old way of the written code we are free indeed to serve in the new way of the!

by restraining! our lips application number one speak sparingly which is a nice way of saying as I would hear in my house often shut up in love but I'd hear it so this is a general rule of thumb right obviously there will be times when you speak more but generally it's better to just not speak if you don't have to to restrain your lips which is them from our text today you're playing with fire every time you talk right so you want to be careful to speak sparingly in fact Proverbs 10 19 says as much Solomon wrote when words are many so when you speak a lot when words are many transgression or sin is not lacking but whoever restrains his lips is prudent or wise so I found that this is especially true when

I am surrounded by strangers or people who do not know me as well you can say things around your friends and family where they know what you are and what you are not saying oh my gosh I revealing a heart that is in submission to God or am I revealing things that aren't in submission and how can I correct those things right by repentance and faith so again restrain your lips speak sparingly application number two assume the best in one another so two reasons to assume the best in one another first because communication is tough as James has made abundantly clear in our text today so even though it was unintentional sometimes something is said poorly sometimes something is heard poorly either way allow time and space for someone to say what they need to say and think carefully over what they mean and don't mean and

I'll throw some advice in from James as a bonus he says in James 1 19 be quick to hear slow to speak slow to anger for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God the other reason we are to assume the best in one another because we are commanded to Paul says in 1st Corinthians 13 7 love bears all things believes all things hopes all things endures all things he's writing to a church that has an issue with unity so in context he's saying here that we should hope and believe in the best of those whom we love who are we are called to love everybody but

especially our fellow believers so if somebody ever says something that hits you the wrong way or maybe you misheard or maybe it could be read a certain way that's not so loving or positive rather than jumping to anger and assumption assume the best about that brother and address them over it seek clarification or even better just let it go right don't worry about what

James is saying is true that means when we're out in the hallway talking with each other there's fire all over the place intentional unintentional we need to be careful there's going to be things you hear that offend you that weren't meant to offend you you will be miserable your whole life if you let everything said and done that offends you occupy your thoughts your energy and your time in fact let me make this simple for everyone the world already hates you because you're a Christ follower so you don't have to worry about whether or not they want to offend you they'll do it you don't have to question it so you can just well you know as the old saying goes get over it but you know but you can get past it you don't have to let these things define you occupy your space you don't need to worry and boil over it and again proverbs speaks to this proverbs 10 or excuse me 19 11 solomon writes good sense all right good sense i like to use the term common sense right good sense makes one slow to anger and it is glory it is his glory to overlook an offense it's to your glory that you overlook an offense besides it is usually about you and not about!

[34 : 23] God when you're offended if we're all being honest you want people to worship you the way you do that's usually why you're offended it's not because he just offended an image bearer it's no it's he offended me because I'm 5'8 or whatever throw it in there that's not something to boil over about the difference is when it is about God it leads you to concern for the person rather than anger directed at that person when you really recognize wow this person saying hateful things to me because they are currently separated from Christ that doesn't lead you to be angry and curse them that leads you to pray for them and again that leads us to our fourth and final application pray that God would guard your mouth David prayed this because he understood just as our text has taught us that there is nothing in him that can teach him or enable him to restrain his tongue God alone can sanctify us in that way he prays in

Psalms 141 verse 3 David cries out to God set a guard oh Lord over my mouth keep watch over the door of my lips which is a way of saying keep it shut we are entirely at the mercy of God for his work in our life that our lips would be restrained it's impossible for us to restrain them in and of ourselves unless evil speech and thoughtless speech should not be named among us it ought not be so but we can pray to a loving merciful and sanctifying God whose will is for us to restrain our lips so therefore we can go with confidence to him knowing that he will answer this prayer because it is his will so let's let's go to him now closing in prayer