

***“The Power of the Tongue”***

July 22, 2012

Text: James 3:3-8

**In 1783, the Continental Army, led by George Washington,  
was on the verge of victory the Revolutionary War.**

But right at that moment, Washington’s officers revolted against Congress because they hadn’t been paid them for several years.

The British were still camped in New York.

If they’d known the American army was in disarray, being weakened by dissension/revolt w/i its own ranks, they would certainly have attacked.

At this moment, George Washington gathered his officers and used the power of persuasion, the power of the tongue, to settle their discontent.

This is a quotation from the moving speech he made to them on March 15, 1783=>

“Let me entreat you, Gentlemen, on your part, not to take any measures, which viewed in the calm light of reason, will lessen the dignity, and sully the glory you have hitherto maintained; let me request you to rely on the plighted faith of your Country, and place a full confidence in the purity of the intentions of Congress; that, previous to your dissolution as an Army they will cause all your [accounts] to be fairly liquidated, as directed in their resolutions, which were published to you two days ago, and that they will adopt the most effectual measures in their power, to render ample justice to you, for your faithful and meritorious Services.”

As a result of Washington’s very diplomatic speech, the officers (who had previously planned to march on their own capital) decided instead to merely send a delegation to lobby/petition Congress, for their wages.

The issue was settled peacefully, a crisis was averted, and  
Washington's little army went on to win the war.

**Man is capable of accomplishing amazing things, thru words,  
like those of George Washington.**

That's true when he writes those words, but even more true when  
he uses his voice/mouth to articulate them w/ feeling, as  
Washington did.

**In today's text, James will use the colorful words of analogy  
to teach us about the power of the human tongue.**

Like his half-brother Jesus, James, being a very Jewish writer,  
liked to use commonplace things to illustrate deep truths.  
Here in his epistle, he has dressed up bare theological facts  
by comparing them with waves of the sea, the wind,  
grass, and mirrors.

**In today's text, James will employ analogies pertaining to  
horses/bridles, ships/rudders, fires, & various kinds of  
animals, to teach us 3 lessons about the tongue=>**

- \* Man's Tongue Has Power to Do Great Good (vss 3-5)
- \* Man's Tongue Has Power to Do Great Evil (vss 5-6)
- \* Man Cannot Tame His Own Tongue (vss 7-8).

**\* The Tongue Has Power to Do Great Good**

**We saw that in Washington's speech.**

He chose his words carefully to set just the right tone, appealing  
to their reason, & their commitment to the American cause.  
If he had just vented his own frustration, or angrily  
derided/threatened them, they'd prob. have revolted,

the British soldiers would have attacked, & the  
Revolution would have become a lost cause.

James first compares the power of the tongue, w/ that of a horse.

**[James 3:3]**=> *“Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well.”*

**A team of horses can be a powerful force to accomplish good.**

They can pull a wagon, or pull a plow, w/ great strength  
(literally, with “horsepower”).

If you tied ropes to a small team of horses & had 100 men pulling  
in the opposite direction, the horses would prob. win this  
tug-o-war.

And yet, amazingly, put bits in those horses' mouths w/ which to  
direct their energies in a productive effort, & a single man,  
w/ reins in his hands, can lit. harness their power for good.  
Using bridles, he can direct the horses' heads, & by control  
of their heads, he can control their whole bodies.

The key to this phenomenon is that little implement called the  
“bit,” that is placed in a horse's mouth.

**How does this apply to us spiritually?**

Look back at the verse before this—James 3:2=>

*“If anyone does not stumble in what he **says**, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the **whole body** as well.”*

The touch-point at which the control must be applied to us  
is the same as that of a horse—our mouths.

If we can control our mouths, we can get control of our  
whole bodies/lives, making them useful to God.

This is a very practical lesson for you/me to learn=>

How important it is to get control of what we say.

But just as a horse must submit to the man in control of his  
bridle, we must submit to God, allowing Him to determine  
what we do/do-not say with our mouths.

If we use them to simply vent our feelings, getting them off  
our chests, our mouths are like wild/untamed horses,  
making them useless (or even problematic) to God.

If, on the other hand, we give the H.S. full control over our  
tongues, He will also direct our bodies (our lives) for  
the accomplishment of His eternal purposes.

Our words will be X-exalting & edifying to others.

As we saw last time, David said=> *“I will guard my ways, That I  
may not sin with my **tongue**”* (Psa 39:1).

But as we’ll see today, we cannot tame our own tongues.

So David also prayed: *“Set a guard, **O LORD**, over my  
mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips”* (141:3).

I.e., Lord, I can resolve to rein-in my tongue, but I  
depend on Your power to accomplish it.

Our tongues are trainable—like horses—and the more we submit  
them to the Spirit’s control/direction, the more useful they  
will become to Him, glorifying God’s name.

If we can keep from stumbling in what we say, submitting  
to Him, we’ll learn to bridle our whole bodies as  
well, and that will be life-changing.

Get control of our mouths, & we can control the big things in our lives, for good purposes.

**Now James reinforces this principle w/ a second analogy.**

[Verse 4]=> “*Behold, the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small **rudder**, wherever the inclination of the **pilot** desires.*”

“Behold” here means, if you were impressed by the notion of controlling a horse by a little bit placed in its mouth, think about the reality that a huge ship can be controlled by its small rudder.

The “*rudder*” is that vertical underwater fin/flap at the back of the ship which, when turned one-way/the-other causes the whole ship to turn that way.

The pilot of the ship changes the ship’s direction by turning its great steering wheel, which in turn swings the rudder either to the left or the right, thus redirecting the entire ship.

**1<sup>st</sup> cent. ships were all sailing vessels, driven by the wind.**

“*Strong winds*” tended to drive those ships in whatever direction they were blowing themselves.

But a competent sailor could use the rudder to reorient the ship’s direction toward any destination he chose.

By tacking maneuvers, he could even sail the ship in the opposite direction of the wind, using the power of the rudder to zigzag back/forth against the wind.

If the pilot could control the rudder, he could control the  
direction of an enormous ship, in spite of the wind.  
Again, James is pointing to the disproportionate power of a small  
object (in this case a rudder) to direct a much larger object.  
Ships are just big lumbering bodies, & unlike horses, have  
no will of their own, which must be overcome.  
But their massive size, & their tendency to be blown off  
course by the winds, makes the power of their  
rudders to direct them, even more impressive.  
Horses have some survival instincts, ships have none.  
Left to themselves, they inevitably run aground,  
becoming shipwrecked, & damaging themselves  
and other things that get in their way.  
Only the will of a man, imposed upon a ship, by controlling  
its rudder, can keep it out of trouble.

**Given human direction, a ship too can do great good.**

It can safely transport people, or much needed cargo, across vast  
oceans, conveying them to their intended destination.  
But it must be subject to the “*inclination* [lit. the push] of  
*the pilot*,” as he uses his frail/limited human strength  
to control the rudder, and thus guide this massive  
object whose bulk is measured in tonnage, wherever  
he chooses.

“*Pilot*” lit. means “the one who causes to go straight.”

**In the same way, a human tongue that is submitted to the power/direction of the H.S. can do enormous good.**

E.g. it can give comfort/counsel to someone whose life is a wreck.

That's James' point in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of verse 5=>

**[Verse 5a]**=> *“So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.”*

**A tongue boasts of great things because it can do great things.**

It can communicate & have an impact on other people as no other part of the body can, even changing the environment around it.

- \* It can, w/ a few gracious words, completely change the tone & the moral atmosphere w/i a room.
- \* It can edify, bring blessing, ban cursing, give encouragement, and glorify God.
- \* It can elevate the spiritual level of a conversation w/ words that are humble/peaceful/faithful/grateful/holy/wise.
- \* It can focus people's attention on the eternal, and on the God of eternity, rather than the passing things of the world.
- \* It can transform a mood of hopelessness into excited anticipation.

**By controlling our tongues, we can even change our selves.**

What we say creates an idea of who we are, in other's people's minds.

Most people feel a need to maintain consistency with that image they have created of themselves.

It becomes comfortably habitual, so they do/say things that will reinforce that image, as a friendly person, or an intelligent, or dignified, or fun-loving person.

E.g. if people know we are Xns, and we say in the middle of a conversation, "Thank the Lord for that...", it doesn't surprise them that we would say such a thing.

But if we haven't let them know we're Xns, and we suddenly say, "Praise the Lord," we are altering their expectations & their image of us, & that can be uncomfortable.

We can see it in their eyes that they are trying to deal with their new understanding of who we are.

They may be trying to remember what they have said that might sound un-Xn, & that we might take offense at.

Once we've let them know we are Xns, we then feel a need to live up to their good expectations of us, or live down any bad impression of Xns, others may have left on them in the past.



Again, this puts pressure on us to conform to the image in their minds, which we ourselves have created of ourselves.

And that can become a force for good change w/i our own lives, through a self-imposed sense of accountability.

Thus the tongue has the power to do some very good things.

We can use it not only to communicate who we are;

But to actually reshape who we are, becoming who/what we say.

### **\* The Tongue Has Power to Do Great Evil**

In his study guide for the book of James, writer Curtis Vaughan makes this eloquent observation about the tongue=>

“It can sway men to violence, or it can move them to the noblest actions. It can instruct the ignorant, encourage the dejected, comfort the sorrowing, & soothe the dying. Or, it can crush the human spirit, destroy reputations, spread distrust and hate, and bring nations to the brink of war.”

**James is going to use the imagery of fire as a powerful analogy of the tongue’s destructive power.**

[Verse 5b]=> “**Behold** [again, if you think a horse/ship are large things controlled by small objects, consider this], *how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!*”

We here in the west have seen many incidents in which a spark from a match, a welder’s torch, a metal object being dragged on pavement, has set forests ablaze.

The point James wants to make, is that one little word from an angry or careless tongue can destroy relationships just as readily/tragically.

**If you have ever watched the TV program *COPS*, you've seen police officers going into homes where an ongoing conflict has gotten so violent, they've had to intervene.**

It starts with a harsh/angry word or two, & a husband/wife's defensive reaction, with bitter words of his/her own, in return.

Even though feelings may subside, the door has been opened for more angry words, in subsequent altercations.

Pretty soon, an habitual pattern develops, & the automatic response to anger/disappointment is loud angry words.

Ultimately, the battle escalates, & acts of violence follow, and the police are called.

The tongue can be like a fire that starts with a little spark, quickly gets out of control, and ends up a raging inferno.

**That's how Scripture repeatedly describes it—like fire.**

Prov 16=> *"A worthless man digs up evil, While his **words** are as a scorching **fire**"* (Prov 16:27).

Have you ever been scorched by someone's tongue?

Have you ever scorched anyone yourself?

I've been on both ends of that problem.

Prov 26=> *"Like charcoal to hot embers and wood to **fire**, so is a contentious man to **kindle** strife"* (26:21).

Psa 57:4 (David)=> *"I must lie among those who breathe forth **fire**. Even the sons of men, whose teeth are*

*spears and arrows, And their **tongue** a sharp sword.”*

The Bible says that words are not harmless, but can burn like fire  
& wound like spears/arrows/swords.

**James expands on this imagery of fire to describe the tongue  
in verse 6.**

[Verse 6]=> *“And the tongue is a **fire**, the very world of iniquity;  
the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles  
the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and  
is set on fire by hell.”*

**“And” at the beginning of this verse connects it back to  
verse five=>**

*“How great a **forest** is set aflame by such a small **fire**! /  
And the **tongue is a fire**”* (as destructive on a moral &  
spiritual level, as a literal fire is in a dry forest).

The tongue can become a destroyer, just looking for someone or  
something to destroy thru gossip, slander, filthy  
communication, false accusations, false teaching, or  
abusive speech.

**Now, having stated the overall principle that the tongue can  
destroy like a fire, James will expand on this thought w/  
4 fire-related observations about the tongue=>**

1<sup>st</sup>, the tongue is a whole world of iniquity.

In a firestorm, a burning forest becomes a unique world, w/ its  
own weather patterns, and its own unique ecology,  
characterized by rapid/radical changes in both animal/plant  
life.

Likewise, the mouth is part of a unique spiritual world (a moral system/universe) that's the moral equivalent of a firestorm.

It is the vent hole between the private depravity w/i man and the public world outside himself.

It's the mouth of the volcano through which a caldera of his pent-up feelings deep inside, is released.

As John MacArthur says, it is a tattletale, that reveals the true condition of our secret hearts.

Jesus said it like this=> "*The **mouth** speaks out of that which **fills the heart***" (Mt 12:34).

So, what is man hiding in his heart that bursts-out/slips-out through his mouth?

First, Jer 17:9=> "*The heart is more **deceitful** than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?*"

As the heart expresses its own sick/sinful/deceptive nature, it so corrupts the mouth that Isaiah described his own lips, a/w/a those of the people among whom he lived, as "*unclean.*"

Secondly, listen to Paul's moral description of man's mouth, due to the corruptions he is hiding in his heart=>

*"THEIR **THROAT** IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR **TONGUES** THEY KEEP DECEIVING, THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR **LIPS**; / WHOSE **MOUTH** IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS"* (Rom 3:13-14).

- \* When we speak bitter words about someone, we are revealing the bitterness hidden away w/i our hearts.
- \* When we say something nice about someone to cover up our true feelings, we reveal the hypocrisy w/i our hearts.
- \* When we lie about someone, the deceitfulness of the heart that Jeremiah talked about, slips out and becomes obvious.
- \* When we say nothing, withholding an apology we owe, we are silently revealing our heart's stubborn/sinful pride.

The tongue is a whole world of iniquity.

2<sup>nd</sup>, the tongue is set among our members as a defiler.

Jesus said=> *“Not what enters into the **mouth** defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the **mouth**, this **defiles** the man”*  
(Mt 15:11).

In the parallel passage in Mk 7, Jesus went on to explain what He meant=> *“For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, / deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. / All these evil things proceed from **within** and **defile** the man”*  
(Mk 7:21-23).

It's bad enough to merely think about such evil things in our hearts.

But our mouth talking about them, serves as a ratification & reinforcement, defiling/infecting our whole

personality/being w/ wickedness, that before then,  
was contained-w/i and confined-to our heart alone.  
When sinful thoughts come from our hearts, out into the open,  
through our words, it's not just others who are defiled—  
we defile ourselves also.

3<sup>rd</sup>, the tongue sets on fire the course of life.

This is the fire/defilement of sin affecting not only our character  
and personality, but our outward actions as well.

And beyond that, our relationships w/ other people.

“*Course of life*” is more lit. translated “circle of existence.”

At this point, a recycling process comes into play, by which  
particular sins become habitual, self-reinforcing, and  
self-perpetuating.

\* It is open slavery to sin that seeks fellowship with others  
who are also enslaved to the same sins.

\* It's also endless rounds of sinner's bitter words  
back/forth to one another, & cycle after cycle of  
vengeful recrimination.

4<sup>th</sup>, the tongue is set on fire by hell.

“*Hell*” translates “*gehenna*,” the eternal lake of fire, where “*the  
worm does not die, & the fire is not quenched*” (Mk 9:48).

It is the place created by God for the eternal punishment of  
Satan & his demons.

So here, James intends it to represent Satan's abode—and  
beyond that, Satan himself.

James is saying that an uncontrolled tongue is an outlet for Satan to do his work in/among men, as they gratify the sinful yearnings of their flesh w/ evil words.

This is why the rich man in hell we read about last week in Lk 16 wanted Lazarus to place a drop of water on his tongue, to cool it off, because it was there he experienced in the most painful/immediate sense, the fire of hell (Lk 16:24).

Wicked tongues are Satan's tools to spread hell's fiery fury, destroying lives/families/churches/communities.

On the last night of His life, Jesus told Peter=> *"Pray that you may not enter into temptation,"* warning him *"Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat"* (Lk 22:40,31).

Peter didn't pray, Satan did sift him, and his mouth ended up cursing, & denying that he even knew Jesus, giving Satan permission to use his tongue to repudiate/defy his Savior/Lord.

### **\* Man Cannot Tame His Own Tongue**

[Verses 7-8]=> *"For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race. / But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison."*

**In the Garden of Eden, God enabled man to subdue animals.**

Man can tame even the wildest/fastest/most-powerful of animals.

**But man cannot tame his own tongue, because it is subject-to and driven-by such powerful forces (as we've just seen).**

These include the forces w/i man himself (his fallen nature & his flesh), and those outside of man (Satan & his demons).

Although for Xns, the old man has passed away, we still succumb at times to our unredeemed flesh, so we must say w/ Paul=> *“The good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish”*  
(Rom 7:15).

James says the tongue is untamable, because it is a *“restless evil.”*

It's restless like fire, never becoming fully satisfied, and never remaining static/still/placid.

You can't feed it enough wickedness to gratify its cravings for more wickedness.

The more you feed it, the more it wants.

The more you scratch it, the more it itches.

It is part of that whole Satanic world/system of iniquity, which can never rest until God has been defeated/dethroned.

And since evil will never overcome Him, nothing that's part of that system can ever find rest.

Do Isa 48 says=> *“There is no peace for the wicked”*  
(48:22).

A man can become taciturn, saying as little as possible, thus reducing the likelihood that he will sin with his tongue.

And that's a good thing to do, because Prov 10:19 says=>

*“When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, But he who restrains his lips is wise.”*



Controlling one's tongue is as easy as closing one's mouth,  
which is why Job said=> *"I lay my hand on my  
mouth"* (Job 40:4).

But even a man of few words will have said enough for X  
to judge him on the basis of those words.

Mt 12:37=> *"For by your words you shall be  
justified, and by your words you shall be  
condemned."*

**The good news is this=> Although no man can tame the  
tongue, God can, because He can change he heart.**

In Job 41, God asks Job=> *"Can you draw out **Leviathan** [some  
sort of enormous/powerful sea creature] with a fishhook?  
Or press down his tongue with a cord?"* (Job 41:1).

The correct answer to Gods' question was, "No, Lord, but I  
know that You can handle Leviathan & his tongue."

If God can deal w/ Leviathan's tongue, He can certainly control  
ours.

He does so by changing our hearts, so that Jesus said (Lk 6:45)=>

*"The **good man** out of the good treasure of his **heart** brings  
forth what is **good**; and the evil man out of the evil treasure  
brings forth what is evil; for his **mouth** speaks from that  
which fills his **heart**."*

God changes our hearts and makes us "good" by imputing  
His own goodness to us.

That happens as we pray to Jesus, asking Him to  
forgive/cleanse us from sin, and to give us new life  
(eternal life).

Once God changes our hearts, we can do great things for Him, as we submit to Him like a ship guided by its pilot, or a horse directed by its rider.

Someone: Yes, but what about the problem described in Romans 7—doing the evil we hate, because of the influence of our unredeemed flesh on our behavior/words? That's a problem even for born-again believers.

We can win that battle too, & Paul told us how in Gal 5=>

*“But I say, **walk by the Spirit**, and you will not carry out the desire of the **flesh**” (Gal 5:16).*

If you/I will walk by the Spirit, by filling our minds and our thoughts with God's Word, and then living in obedience with what it teaches us, we will become Spirit-filled.

Spirit filled Xns are empowered by God's grace to overcome the sins of the flesh, including those of the tongue.

They can sincerely/confidently pray=>

Take my voice and let it sing  
Always, only for my King;

Take my lips and let them be  
Filled with messages from Thee

## ***“The Power of the Tongue”***

July 22, 2012

Text: James 3:3-8

1. Man is capable of accomplishing amazing things through [12 words].

**In today’s text James will employ analogies pertaining to horses and bridles, ships and rudders, fires, and various kinds of animals to teach us three lessons about the tongue...**

### **\* The Tongue Has Power to Do Great Good**

#### **[James 3:3]**

2. A team of horses can be a powerful force to accomplish [10 good].

Jms 3:2; Psa 39:1; 141:3

3. Our tongues are trainable (like horses), and the more we submit them to the Spirit’s control and direction, the more [14 useful] they will become to Him.

#### **[Verse 4]**

4. Given human direction, a [10 ship] too can do great good.
5. In the same way, a human tongue that is submitted to the power and [20 direction] of the Holy Spirit can do enormous good.

#### **[Verse 5a]**

6. Thus the tongue has the power to do some very good things; not only to communicate who we are, but to actually [26 reshape] who we are.

### **\* The Tongue Has Power to Do Great Evil**

#### **[Verse 5b]**

7. The tongue can be like a fire that starts with a little spark, quickly gets out of control, and ends up a [14 raging] inferno.

Prov 16:27; 26:21; Psa 57:4

#### **[Verse 6]**

**Now James will expand on this thought with four descriptions of such a moral firestorm...**

\*8. The tongue is a whole [12 world] of iniquity.

Mt 12:34; Jer 17:9; Rom 3:13-14

\*9. The tongue is set among our members as a [16 defiler].

Mt 15:11; Mk 7:21-23

\*10. The tongue sets on fire the [14 course] of life.

\*11. The tongue is set on fire by [10 hell].

Mk 9:48; Lk 16:24; 22:40, 31

**\* Man Cannot Tame His Own Tongue**

**[Verses 7-8]**

12. Man can tame even the wildest, fastest, most powerful of animals; but he cannot tame his own [14 tongue], because it is subject to such powerful forces.

Rom 7:15; Isa 48:22; Prov 10:19; Mt 12:37

13. The good news is this: Although no man can tame the tongue, [8 God] can because He can change the heart.

Job 41:1; Lk 6:45; Gal 5:16

14. Spirit filled Christians are empowered by God's grace to overcome the sins of the flesh including those of the [14 tongue].