

James
Watch Your Mouth! (Part 2)
James 3:1-12
April 2, 2006
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Well I invite you to turn with me again to the letter of James, to the twelve tribes that are scattered, were scattered abroad. It's been a wonderful study, except for this passage, which is very painful. We're studying what James has to say, though the Holy Spirit, about the tongue. I was reminded this week that every day, we live, as it were, surrounded by an ocean of waves of sound. Perhaps you remember a little bit from high school or college about the principles of sound. Sound waves are generated by vibration.

For example, this morning as our musicians beautifully pulled their bows across the string on their violins, that string vibrated. And the string's movement in one direction pushed the molecules of air before it, crowding them together in its path. Those molecules then transmitted some of their energy of motion into adjoining molecules, still part of their own, and then those original molecules returned to the open space that had been created by the string vibrating in the opposite direction. The resulting wave that's created continues to displace molecules before it much like a falling row of dominos, or perhaps better, like the ripples in a pond, caused by dropping a pebble. The sound waves continue to move out away from the source of the vibration. The velocity or speed of sound varies, but on average, in normal temperatures, sound travels through the air at about 1100 feet per second. Those waves move out from the originating source.

You know, when I think about sound waves, it fascinates me, but it also terrifies me. The frightening thing about sound waves is that scientists believe that just like the energy in ocean waves continues as long as there is ocean, that once sound waves have begun, they continue, as it were, to ripple across the pond of the universe, unabated, always continuing. Every time you and I speak we generate waves of sound. And once those words are formed and leave our mouths, they sweep across our own lives, the lives of everyone around us, and they literally ripple across the universe. What a graphic picture of the power of words.

While James may not have understood the scientific principle behind sound waves, he certainly captures in profound images, the power of the tongue. Let me read it for you, this passage in James 3:1 - 12. You follow along as I read.

Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such, we will incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body, as well. Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths, so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at 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. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and *yet* it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! 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. 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. With it we bless *our* Lord and Father. And with it we curse men, who've been made in the [image and] likeness of God; from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening *both* fresh and bitter *water*? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor *can* salt water produce fresh.

Our Lord is obviously deeply concerned about what we say. And James, here, of course, personifies our problem with our speech, referring to it primarily by the physical instrument that is used to form the words that we speak: the human tongue. James' point in this entire passage is that a renewed heart, a person who has come to genuine faith (as he touched the end of chapter 2), that renewed heart will be accompanied by a renewed tongue. Where there is a change in the heart, there will also be a change in the speech. But yet, we are not removed from the responsibility of working hard at controlling our tongues, in the energy of the Holy Spirit. And James wants us to understand just how important it is that we work at this; that we work at controlling our mouths. And so, in this third chapter, James gives us five reasons that you and I must learn to control our tongues. This passage is primarily motivational to say, "Watch your mouth!" And here's why.

The first reason he gives us, and we looked at last time, found in verse 1 and the first part of verse 2: It is because our tongues condemn us. James introduces his discussion about the tongue by beginning with those in the church who use words the most: teachers. He says, “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.” You see, at the Judgment Seat of Christ, while teachers will not be judged for their sin, our reward, or our lack of reward will not only relate to what we did and to our motives as to why; but James tells us even as to the very words that we spoke. Did we guard the treasure of sound doctrine? Did we teach it faithfully? Did we pass it on to others? Did we practice what we taught?

But James is not talking here only to teachers, which becomes quickly obvious. His point is much larger. It’s for all of us. Whether you’re a teacher or not, when you understand that your words are really important, and, in fact, that your words invite a stricter judgment from God, you begin to understand how important it is that you control your mouth. Our tongues condemn us.

Last week we learned a second reason to control our words. And that’s because our tongues control us. In the rest of verse 2 down through the first part of verse 5, we learn that at the same time that we are commanded to control our tongues, James says there is a sense in which our tongues control us. And he gives two illustrations here (in verse 3, of the horses’ bit; and verse 4, of the ship’s rudder), to show how something small can control the direction of something much larger. In both illustrations he uses the same key word. In verse 3 you’ll see it: “direct;” and in verse 4: “directed.” It literally means “to guide in another direction, to lead to another place.” That’s what a bit does to a horse, and that’s what a rudder does to a ship. In verse 5 he applies it.

He says, “So also the tongue, even though it’s a small part of the body, it can legitimately boast of great things. Just like that small bit can boast of controlling and directing a huge powerful animal; and just like that tiny rudder can boast of controlling and directing a ship, even when driven with wind; even so, the tongue, though it’s a small part of the body, can legitimately boast of controlling and directing the entire body. As we saw at length last time, James tells us that if we will get control of our mouths, the rest of our lives will follow.

Now that brings us to where we left off last time, and to the third reason that we must get control of our tongues. Our tongues corrupt us. The second half of verse 5: “See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire.” A proverb, of course, that he’s going to apply to us. Those reading this letter for the first time, those who’d been scattered because of the persecution,

James, originally their pastor, writes to them. They would've known all about fire, because the terrain and weather patterns in Israel are much like the ones that Sheila and I lived in, in southern California for years. For much of the year there's little to no rain. And the scrub and small trees on the hills of Palestine during that part of the year are absolutely like tinder. And to misuse a song I grew up hearing, "It only takes a spark to get a fire going." During my years in California, Sheila and I experienced some awesome wildfires. One came within a quarter mile of our house. It scorched 24,000 acres. And it started from a stray spark from a welder's tool. A hundred foot wave of flames swept through the canyons around us. You know, for many people it's hard to imagine anything more frightening than that kind of fire.

But according to James here, it happens all the time, from a spark created by our fallen tongues enflamed by human depravity. In verse 6, he makes the application. He explains the proverb of verse 5. He gets right to the point. And in using a metaphor, he says, "The tongue is a fire." Perhaps pulling from Proverbs 16:27, which says, "A worthless man's words are like scorching fire." Now what is the point of similarity between the tongue and a fire? What do they have in common? Well, both of them spread and destroy everything in their path. It's impossible to imagine a more devastating image of the destructive power of our words than that. From the smallest spark, a fire can rage out of control and destroy thousands of acres.

And James says, "Your small tongue, and mine, as well, can unleash a raging inferno of destruction. The rest of verse 6 is one of the most difficult verses in all of James, translating into English. James, in sort of a staccato fashion, gives us five nouns and one verb. The most likely translation is something like this: "The tongue is a fire. The tongue is set among our members as the world of iniquity, defiling the entire body, setting on fire the course of our life, and being set on fire by hell." That sentence contains some of the strongest words ever written or spoken about the tongue. It described the spread of destruction our mouths can create. "The tongue is set among our members as the very world of iniquity." By the way, the word "set," the same form of that Greek word is used by James in one other place: in 4:4, where it's translated "makes oneself." So, it's probably best to translate this here, not as set by God or by somebody else, but the tongue appoints itself as a rebel against God, as the world of iniquity.

What does that mean? Well, James Hebert puts it this way: "No other member of our body has comparable power and range of influence for evil. It can give utterance to every evil thought and motive and put every evil deed into words. Ever thought about the fact that it's the one member of the body that can have a part in every known sin? It is the full range of iniquity. Verse 6 ends by giving us three parallel in, in the Greek text three parallel participles that trace the sort of

growing path of destruction, builds on itself to show us exactly how destructive the tongue can be. He says, “The tongue corrupts our entire person. It’s that which defiles the entire body.” “To defile” means “to stain, or to corrupt”. And here, “body” refers to the entire person. Our tongues aren’t merely defiled by our hearts. But what we say defiles us! It’s ironic that James had taught us in 1:26, that we’re to keep ourselves unstained by the world. But we have a greater problem than even the world outside of us. Our tongues stain and corrupt us. You see, sinful talk, even as we learned last time, sinful talk will spread to sinful attitudes and sinful acts. Like a fire, it just spreads across our beings and destroys everything in its path.

In the words of Matthew 15:11, our Lord says, “It is not what enters into the mouth (that is, what you eat) that defiles the man.” He’s talking about the ceremonial laws. And the Pharisees were upset because they hadn’t washed their hands and, therefore, putting food in their mouths with unwashed hands. He says, “It’s not what you eat that defiles you; but what proceeds out of the mouth. This defiles the man.” Our immoral, vulgar speech, our sinful speech defiles us before God. That’s what James is saying here, as well.

As the path of destruction continues, not only does it infiltrate and corrupt our entire person; but the tongue corrupts the entire course of our lives. Notice the next phrase there: “It sets on fire the course of our life.” “The course of our life” is literally the “wheel of existence.” It’s an ancient figure of speech. The NIV, I think, captures it fairly well here: “The whole course of life.” You see, our tongue doesn’t just corrupt our entire person; but it wreaks havoc throughout the entire life! There’s no aspect of life that’s untouched. The tongue destroys in the family, at work, with acquaintances, and even the relationship with strangers. And there’s no period of life left untouched. From the first words we speak to our last words, our tongues cut this sort of wide swath of destruction in their path.

Now what is the source of all of this corrupting, destroying influence? James says, “It’s hell itself.” Notice what he says at the end of verse 6. He finishes with the third participle in the Greek: “It is being set on fire by hell.” The Greek word that’s translated “hell,” here is “gehenna. Gehenna is actually the translation of a Hebrew expression that means the Valley of Hinnom, which is an actual valley just outside the southern wall of the city of Jerusalem. It was there, you remember, in the Old Testament that Ahaz and Manasseh offered child sacrifices to idols, to Moloch. Later Josiah desecrated the place. And it eventually became a dump for the city. By the time of Christ, not only was it a dump, but fires constantly burned there to destroy the rubbish of the city of Jerusalem. So, the Valley of Hinnom, with all of its trash, and with all of its corruption, and with its constant fire became a visual of an awful reality: a place that Jesus

said God has prepared for the devil and his angels, and to which every person who refuses to follow him will be sent eternally. It's merely a picture (the Valley of Hinnom) of a much darker and more terrifying reality. Now by saying that hell is the ultimate source of every destructive word, James wants us to understand that, when we speak like that, we are speaking like Satan, himself. Every time we sin with our mouths, we are merely mimicking Satan.

Douglas Mugh says, "The power of Satan himself gives to the tongue its great destructive potential. James' key point in verse 6 is the devastating effects of an uncontrolled tongue on the one who speaks. Listen carefully. He isn't yet talking about, primarily, the destruction that wreaks outside of you. He's simply talking about the reality that your words will corrupt and destroy you!

But it's equally true that the words that speed out of our mouths at 1100 feet per second will also spread and destroy others as well. You see, in a forest fire, (think about it) it's not just the match that started the fire that burns. The devastation spreads from there. This picture of words, not only destroying our own life, but destroying the lives of others, is one of the most common images in all of Scripture. I went through the text of Scripture this week. And I just compiled a very brief list of the images that Scripture uses of destructive words. Listen to the images. The Bible describes sinful words as an ambush, a deadly arrow, a sword, a serpent, the poison of a viper, a scorching fire, drawn swords, spears, and a sharp sword. Those are just a few of the images that Scripture uses to give us a picture of the damage that our tongues can wreak in the lives of others.

Turn to Proverbs for a moment. Proverbs has so much to say on the tongue. And in fact, I would strongly encourage you to embark on a study of what the Proverbs have to say about the tongue. And you'll discover, if you'll get one of the books that arranges the Proverbs topically, that it has much to say about what we say and how we speak. It'd be a great deal of personal help. I just want to show you Proverbs 26, a section that focuses on our words. Just listen to the damage that sinful words of different kinds, here, can have. Verse 18 of Proverbs 26:

Like a madman who throws Firebrands, arrows and death, So is the man who uses deceitful words, deceives his neighbor And [then] says, ... [Ah! It was just a joke. I didn't really mean anything by it.] For lack of wood, the fire goes out. and where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down. [The person who's always stirring things up, who's using their mouth, using his mouth or her mouth, to just keep things stirred and to create strife and contention. Did you hear what

he said? Did you hear what she said? What do you think about that? I can't believe that....] *Like* charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, So is a contentious man to kindle strife. [Here's a person who knows how to push other people's buttons; knows exactly what to say to get at somebody else.] The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels.... [Hey, let me tell you what I heard.] And they go down [in] ... the innermost parts of the body. [They penetrate and have an effect that you could never imagine.] *Like* an earthen vessel overlaid with silver dross, [in other words like a clay pot overlaid with cheap silver to make it look like it's the real thing] Are burning lips and a wicked heart. He who hates disguises *it* with his lips. [Here's a person who's just dishonest, who struggles with hatred and anger in his heart, but who hides it.] ... he lays up deceit in his heart. When he speaks graciously, do not believe him; For there are seven abominations in his heart. *Though his* hatred covers itself with guile, [here it is:] His wickedness will be revealed before the assembly. [Listen: your tongue will eventually show up who you are. You can only hide it for so long. You may hide it when you talk to me. You may hide it when you talk to people in the church. But eventually your tongue will give you up.] He who digs a pit will fall into it, And he who rolls a stone, it will come back on him. [You can try to harm others. You can try to hurt them. But eventually you will fall in the pit you dig.] Verse 28, A lying tongue hates those it crushes. And a flattering mouth works ruin.

And then there's the boasting mouth, verse 1 of 27:

Do not boast about tomorrow; for you do not know what a day may bring forth.
[And] Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; A stranger, and not your own lips.

There is just one small section of what Scripture has to say about the power and destructive nature of words, both to your own person and to others. And that could be multiplied hundreds of times throughout the Scripture. God cares what we say. We must learn to control our tongues, because:

Number 1, Our tongues condemn us.

Number 2, Our tongues control us.

Number 3, Our tongues corrupt us (and everyone else, I might add).

The fourth reason that James gives us that we must control our tongues is because our tongues confront us. Look at verses 7 and 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.” James, by the way, here uses the same four categories for all of creation that are used in the creation story, the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2. It’s all inclusive. He says, “All of these different kinds of animals have been tamed. The Greek word for “tamed” is also used in Mark 5:4, of the demon-possessed man, who, we’re told could not be “subdued.” That’s the word “tamed,” “subdue.” You see, James says every species of quadrupeds (that’s the word beasts), of birds, of reptiles, of creatures of the sea is being subdued; and in the past has been subdued by man. Now I thought about using an illustration of pets as an example. But as I thought about it, that may not be the best illustration, since some of them have still not been subdued or tamed. It’s hilarious to watch some of our neighbors being walked by their dogs.

But I thought I would use, instead, some of you drove past the church near here, over the last few days, and you saw that, on the corner, adjoining us, on the lot next to the church, there were some circus tents set up. Let me once for all dispel the rumor that that’s the new youth building. It was, instead, a small “mom and pop” circus. And there were several different kinds of animals. As I drove past, I saw an elephant out there; several elephants, I think. And it was interesting to watch this small wife of a woman lead this huge elephant around. And I was reminded of this text. Mankind was put in charge by God at creation. And he still has the capacity to subdue even the largest of animals.

Verse 8: Here’s his point. “But no one of men” (This is a universal negative. There are no exceptions.) “No one of men can....” The Greek word for “can,” like its English counterpart, speaks of ability or power. “No one has the ability. No one has the power to subdue his tongue.” We’re like the epitaph found on a tombstone in England in a churchyard there. It reads, “Beneath this stone a lump of clay lies Aribella Young, who on the 24th of May began to hold her tongue.” You see, only at death will we truly be able to master our tongues. (Men, I would suggest that you not put that on the tombstones of your wives.) It is impossible, (This is James’ point): It is impossible to fully tame the tongue.

But that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t try, and that, as believers in Christ, we cannot make progress. Because Scripture absolutely commands that we control our tongue, and that we work at it. In fact, back in James 1:26, James tells us that, if we’re not bridling our tongue, it shows

that our faith isn't genuine, that we're deceiving ourselves. So 3:6 is not an excuse, nor verse 8. Neither of those are excuses to say whatever we want, since we can't really tame the tongue anyway. No, this is simply a warning from James. What it means is that, just as with a wild animal, you have to always be watching; you have to always be alert. Never turn your back. So it is with our tongues. You've got to stay ever vigilant. It can't be domesticated. Don't ever imagine for a second that you have succeeded where every other person has failed, and that you have permanently domesticated your tongue. That's what James is saying. You've got to be alert. You've got to always be on guard.

And to drive this home in staccato fashion, James adds two other descriptions here. He says in James 3:8, "a restless evil." "Restless" is the same Greek word translated "unstable" in James 1:8. The picture is of the tongue, like a wild animal that can't really be tamed. It's been caged, but it's pacing back and forth, waiting for just that opportunity to spring free and to pounce. That's how we're to think of our tongues. Don't ever turn your back on it. Don't ever think you've conquered it. Don't ever think you've domesticated it. It's always a risk. It will always be a threat till the day you die.

He adds another illustration. He says it's full of deadly poison. Here he speaks of the tongue like an untamed snake, ready to strike and release its poison into anybody that gets in its way. James borrows this picture of the serpent from the Old Testament, from Psalm 140:3. There we're told that evil people "sharpen their tongues as a serpent; [the] Poison of a viper is under their lips." Paul quotes that same passage, by the way, in Romans 3:13, as he drives home the reality of human depravity. He uses the tongue to illustrate the depths of human depravity. James says, "You and I must never forget that all of our lives, our tongues are ready to confront us, to resist us, and to resist every effort to subdue them." Don't ever turn your back. Don't ever think you've conquered it. It cannot be domesticated. When it comes to our mouths, we must treat them as wild animals and as deadly snakes.

David put it this way in Psalm 39:1: "I will guard my ways That I may not sin with my tongue; I will guard my mouth as with a muzzle...." "Muzzle it!" That's what David says. Our tongues are like a vicious animal, whose mouth can't be trusted. Put a muzzle on it. If you really come to grips with that reality, then you understand why you must control your tongue.

There's one last reason that we must control our tongues. It's because, James tells us in verses 9 to 12, our tongues characterize us. You see, ultimately, our tongues reveal exactly who we are. Notice what he says in verse 9. He says, "With it, (that is, with the tongue, or with the mouth)

we bless our Lord and Father.” This is the highest use of the mouth, to bless or praise God. This morning we have used our tongues to do that. We have sung to our God. But here’s the problem: It’s the other use of our mouths. Notice he says, “And with the same tongue we curse men.” Technically, to curse someone meant to call on God to cut a person off from all blessing and to consign them to eternal hell. “God, give ‘em nothing, and send ‘em to hell!” You still hear that expression, or an expression very similar in our culture. But by extension, he’s not just talking about that. He includes all forms of abusive speech. He says, “Don’t curse men who have been made in the likeness of God.

Scripture, of course, makes that clear back in Genesis 1, the original creation account, that God made us in His image. And we talked about that at length, back when we were studying the nature of man on Sunday nights. We’re made in the image of God. That argument, by the way, that truth, I should say, is used as an argument in Genesis 9, for why murder is unacceptable, and why those who commit murder have to be put to death by capital punishment: because man is made in the image of God. And to strike at the image is to strike at God, Himself. And here, James uses the same argument for why we must not attack other people with our mouths: because they are made in the image of God.

Think about the inconsistency of this. What sense does it make to praise God as we did this morning with our lips, and then to turn around and strike at His picture? You’ve heard me use the illustration before of the seminary professor I had who, illustrating this point, took out a picture of his wife from his wallet. And he said, “What would you think of me, if you saw me up here at the front of the classroom taking a pencil and pen and cutting and hitting and scraping at that picture, and then I took out a pair of scissors, and I cut up the picture? What would you think of my perspective of my wife?” Well, the answer’s obvious. Same thing is true when we cut and strike at those made in the image of God.

Man is made in God’s image. And even though that image has been marred because of the fall, there is still a residual image of God. And, therefore, we must treat all men with dignity. By the way, parents, this applies to those little ones. It’s so easy for us to lose the sense that they, too, are made in God’s image. And while they must obey us, we still must respect them as people made in the image of God. Notice verse 10. James goes on to make his point. He says, “From the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.” His point is: It’s utterly inconsistent to bless God with your mouth, and then to turn and immediately curse those made in his image. It’s unacceptable for those who are followers of Jesus Christ.” That’s what he’s saying.

George Stulak, in his commentary on this passage, writes, “Consider the habitual, verbal abuse that occurs in our churches. How commonplace is it for us to speak of others with ridicule, or with cutting remarks. How quickly we accuse others of evil motives when they do things we don’t like. And how easily we can have angry fights in our churches. Where is our biblical sense of shock at all this?”

Do you use your mouth to praise God and then to curse people around you? Think about your spouse. Think about how you treat your spouse, your children, your parents your family, your friends. This morning you praised God with the rest of us. This week did you ridicule people? Did you hurl verbal abuse at those nearest and closest to you? Did you call them derogatory names? Did you sin against others with your tongue? James says it is unacceptable for a follower of Jesus Christ. And to help us grasp just how wrong this inconsistency is, he asks us to consider three illustrations from the natural world.

Verse 11 he says, (Think about a fountain for a moment.) “Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?” Now, “of course not,” is the answer. There are some fountains that are brackish, that at the same time have a mix of fresh and salt water. But there’s no such thing as a fountain that one hour pours out salt water and the next hour pours out fresh water. Doesn’t exist! Says it’s ridiculous! Or he says, (Think about plants), verse 12: “Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives? Or can a grapevine produce figs?” Figs, olives, and grapes were the primary agricultural products of Israel. So, these people knew this very well. All of those fruits produce, or all of those vines, or plants, I should say, produce fruit according to the nature of the plant. In verse 12 he finishes with a statement. He says, “The same thing is true with a salt spring. Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.” You see, near the Dead Sea in Israel, there are some saltwater springs. And those, however hard they try, will never produce fresh water.

Now, what’s James’ point? Don’t miss his main point. This is crucial. In each of those illustrations, you can tell the nature of the source by the fruit produced. And nothing can produce what is contrary to its own nature. Each produces after its kind. In other words, if you could step back and take an honest look at what comes out of your mouth, over a period of time, your words will truly, and really, reveal who you are. Jesus said the same thing. Turn back to Matthew 12. In Matthew 12:33 Jesus, 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 can know what kind of tree it is by the fruit it produces. “You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good?” He didn’t mean, in a moment of time. He meant as a pattern of life. If you take all the

speech of a person, an evil person cannot consistently speak good. Verse 3, “The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good.” In other words, what comes out of the mouth shows what’s in the heart. And the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil.”

To use James’ images: If your mouth spews out salt water, then your heart can’t be a fresh fountain! If the fruit of your mouth is rotten, then your heart is rotten! If your heart is like bitter saltwater, your mouth cannot consistently produce pure, clean, productive, healing words. It can’t happen. It’s against nature. In the end, your mouth and mine is an unerring gauge of our spiritual life. Listen to what comes out of your mouth, and it will tell you exactly who you really are. ‘Cause the garbage that comes pouring out comes out of the heart. And if you have a cesspool for a heart, you’ll have a dirty, vulgar, hateful mouth.

George Stulak writes these penetrating words. He says, “To the person who speaks praise to God in the worship service and then abuses people verbally at home or at work, James commands, “Purify your speech throughout the week.” To the person who says, “Aw, I know I talk too much,” and laughs it off, James is not amused. Of the person who boasts, “I’ll always speak my mind, no matter who gets hurt,” James is not impressed. He commands, “Discipline your speaking.” Of the person who says, “Well, I know I gossip too much, but I just can’t help it,” James still requires, “Control your tongue.” Of the person who is in the habit of speaking with insults, ridicule, sarcasm, James demands, “Change your speech.” He expects discipline to be happening in the life of a Christian. There is no justification for corrupt habits of speech. We must simply repent.” Exactly right. That’s what James is saying.

Understand why it’s important to control your words, because ultimately, it tells exactly who you really are. And if you can’t control your words, that also tells you that you lack the power of the Spirit in your life.

Although James’ message to us, here, is about warning, it’s also true that a tongue cleansed by God, yielded to God, empowered by God, is a powerful tool for good. How can you get from where you are to where you ought to be?

Turn briefly with me to Isaiah 6. We have in the life of Isaiah an illustration of exactly how change begins. This is a passage we read often to describe God. And God is here described in lofty and majestic terms. But it also deals with the sinner and sinful words. Verse 1,

In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another, and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory." And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. [What happened when Isaiah saw God for who He really is?] Verse 5: Then I said, "Woe is me, For I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips." [You know the sin that first came to Isaiah's mind when he saw the holiness of God? It was the sin of speech. He says, "I have a dirty mouth. Speech that I use, is not the kind of speech that honors this great and holy and awesome Being in whose Presence I am.] "And I live among a people of unclean lips...."

Isaiah isn't necessarily saying that he cursed. He's saying that the sins of speech were a part of his life, and they were a part of the culture around him, and that he'd taken it lightly, until he stood in the presence of God. And then that was the very first thing that came to mind.

"For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." Then one of the seraphims flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth *with it* and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven."

Before Isaiah could use his mouth for good, before he could use it to speak the words of God, before he could speak healing and confrontation and all of those things that Scripture commands us to do with our tongue, he first had to be cleansed. It had to start with repentance. He acknowledged his sin before God. And if you want to change, this is where you have to begin, as well. You've got to get a view for who God is, and what his expectations are of you and how you use your mouth, so that, you cry out with Isaiah, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips. I finally understand who God is and what He expects; that this is not a light and frivolous thing to Him." And then, you can enjoy, as Isaiah did in this majestic picture here, true cleansing. Because even the sins of speech are covered by the blood of Jesus Christ!

You want to begin on the right path to control your tongue: it begins with acknowledging sin before God and asking his cleansing power to permeate your life, to give you the strength to control that tongue. This is the work of the Spirit. Remember the last label in the list of the fruit

of the Spirit? The last virtue that's listed there? Self-control! Ask the Spirit of God that dwells within you to give you the power to muzzle your mouth.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we do cry out with Isaiah, "Woe is us!" We have taken the sins of our mouth so lightly. We have been smug in our self-righteousness, thinking that because we don't do certain overt outward sins, that that means we're all that we ought to be before You. And yet, Father, through Your Holy Spirit, and Your servant, James, you have put a finger on a serious issue in our lives.

Father, I pray for Your forgiveness, for Your cleansing. Help us today, and the days that follow to do serious business with You about the sins of the tongue. Father, I pray that You would cleanse us, and that by the working of Your Spirit, You would give us self-control.

Lord, help us to study this issue in Your Word. Help us to learn the virtues that are to be put on in the place of our sinful speech. Lord, help us, then, to have our minds renewed with Your Word, and to discipline ourselves to pursue those virtues. And we pray that as You, as we do, You would change us. Father, thank You for this truth. It's a hard truth. And yet it's so revealing. I pray that all of us who're in Christ would be confronted and rebuked, and would deal with our sin.

And Lord, as always, I pray for the person here today who has to admit that what comes out of their mouths shows who they really are, and that they are unchanged by the power of Your Spirit. They still lie in the lap of the wicked one, completely under his control. Lord, I pray that today would be the day when they would cry out to You for true forgiveness; that You would give them repentance; You would give them faith, as a gift; and that they would respond to You, and be truly changed from the inside out.

I pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.