

Tongue Taming

by David P. Murray

David P. Murray's sermon emphasizes the destructive power of the tongue and the necessity for self-control and purity in our speech.

Duration: 52:48

Scripture: Exodus 20:16, John 1:14, James 3:1-2, James 3:6-8, James 3:14, James 3:17

Topics: "Tongue"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the power and impact of our words. He uses various illustrations to emphasize how something small, like a bit in a horse's mouth or a rudder on a ship, can have a significant influence. The speaker warns against the destructive potential of the tongue, comparing it to a wild animal or a polluted spring full of deadly poison. He highlights how our words can set ablaze the course of our lives, causing damage to relationships and reputations. The main message is that we need to be mindful of the words we speak and strive to use them for good rather than harm.

Transcript

Let us now hear God's word in the epistle of James. James chapter 3. James chapter 3. My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. For in many things we offend all.

If any man offends not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. Behold, we put bits in the horse's mouths, that they may obey us, and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth. And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity.

So is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature, and it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind. But the tongue can no man tame.

It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God even the Father, and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing.

My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear all of berries, either of vine figs? So can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh. Who is a wise man, and endued with knowledge among you? Let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace. Amen.

May God bless to us that reading of his own holy and infallible word. Let us read again in James chapter 3, James chapter 3 and verse 6. And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. So is the tongue among our members that it defileth the whole body and setteth on fire the course of nature.

And it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts and of birds and of serpents and of things in the sea is tamed and hath been tamed of mankind. But the tongue can no man tame.

I want to look at these verses in connection with Lord's day 43 of the Heideberg Catechism on page 80 of your blue books at the back. What is required in the ninth commandment? Answer that I bear false witness against no man, nor falsify any man's words. That I be no backbiter nor slanderer.

That I do not judge nor join in condemning any man rashly or unheard. But that I avoid all sorts of lies and deceit as the proper works of the devil. Unless I would bring down upon me the heavy wrath of God.

Likewise, that in judgment and all other dealings, I love the truth, speak it uprightly and confess it. Also, that I defend and promote as much as I am able the honor and good character of my neighbor. The Apostle James was writing to a church with a tongue problem.

Is there any church in all history that has not had a tongue problem? There are some of the epistles that maybe for ourselves in our time and place and situation we feel are maybe not quite so relevant. Maybe, for example, we aren't facing controversy over the charismatic use of gifts in the church. Maybe we're not facing the Galatian problem of Judaism.

But when we come to the tongue, there is no church in the whole world that is not facing a tongue problem. You can see this from James' letter, even from the first chapter. Verse 19, he says, Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.

Then in verse 26, But if any man among you seem to be religious, and bridled not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. And then in chapter 2, verse 12, he says, So speak ye, and so do as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty. Chapter 4, verse 11, Speak not evil one of another brethren.

He that speaketh evil of his brother and judgeth his brother speaketh evil of the law, and so on. You see, throughout this letter there's this theme, isn't there? This church, like all churches, has a tongue problem. That's why one of the commandments is devoted completely to the tongue.

And that's why here in James chapter 3, James spends so much time on picturing the tongue in such graphic and vivid terms. Look at the four images that James paints for us here with very bright, even frightening colors as he speaks of this little piece of flesh between our lips. First of all, he calls the tongue a dangerous fire.

He says, for example, in verse 6, And the tongue is a fire. Even in the previous verse, he says, Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth.

James is asking us to view our tongues as a dangerous fire. And he really approaches this from two angles. First of all, he calls the tongue highly inflammable.

Maybe some of you have seen the van that the seminary and bookshop have been given. It's a yellow box van. Some of the children maybe played with a little sign on the side of it.

There's a little section on the back where you can go and you can flip over various plastic images with words on them to describe what's in the van. There's various scary symbols and words to describe whether it's poison or gas or there's one of them, highly flammable. In other words, if there was something in that van, that was likely to catch fire quickly, with a little spark, it had to carry the sign on it.

And James is saying here in this chapter, the tongue is highly flammable. It's very likely and very quickly going to catch fire. You notice at the end of verse 6, it says, It is set on fire of hell.

Here, the tongue's fire is traced to this source. And the source is the very fire of hell. Isn't it interesting in the Catechism, when it's described all sorts of various sins, halfway through, it says that these are the proper works of the devil.

Again, tracing these uses and abuses of the tongue to its devilish source. The word used here for hell is the word Gehenna, which was the garbage dump just outside Jerusalem. It was where the dead bodies and dead animals and the filth of the city really were tossed.

And it was continually smoking. It was continually on fire, just to keep burning up the rubbish. And here, James is saying, this tongue of ours is set on fire of Gehenna.

Where does this, all this sin come from? It comes from the rubbish, from the garbage of hell itself. It's highly flammable. Some of you will know about the great fire of Chicago in 1871.

Nobody really very sure where it started, but it looks like it probably started in a wooden barn. And of course, the city had been built largely of wood. It had been raised up on wood to get it out of the rather swampy ground that it was built on.

Within a few hours, a hundred thousand of Chicago's 300,000 population was homeless. 300 people were dead. 17,500 buildings were in ashes.

\$400 million worth of damage was done just from a little fire. Rumor was that a cow had kicked over a lantern. Nobody's very sure if that's true or not.

But from one little spark, one little flame, this whole city goes up in flames. Paul's asking us to view, James is asking us to view our tongues as highly flammable. As very, it's just like tinder, like dry gunpowder.

Like that city of Chicago at any moment liable to be set on fire of hell and to burn furiously and damagingly. It's highly flammable and it's highly inflammatory. Yes, it's set on fire of hell, but then it goes on, doesn't it, to set other things on fire.

It says here, the tongue is a fire. So is the tongue among our members. It defiles the whole body.

Isn't that interesting? You think we can, many people have thought, well, we'll start a fire and try and contain it. Maybe some of the children have done this before. I certainly remember doing it as a little boy, playing with fire, wrongly of course, and thinking, hey, I can light this piece of paper or light this even in my bedroom at one point I did.

And of course, you can't stop it. You can't contain it. Very quickly, it's out of your control.

And this is what James is telling us here. You let your tongue be set on fire of hell and it sets on fire the whole body. It defiles the whole body.

We can't stop it spreading. It has an impact on our whole persons. He goes on to say here, it sets on fire the course of nature.

And that's really a phrase that's used to describe the whole of life. Really what's being depicted here is somebody who's going along in his life. And if you were to look behind him, he would just see a series of fires, a series of flare-ups, see burnt out areas, burnt out people, burnt out relationships, burnt out reputations.

The whole course of nature, the whole pattern and course of his life, he says, is just set on fire. And one of the great things James is trying to get across here is how a little, little thing can cause so much damage. He uses different illustrations, doesn't he? He says, for example, in verse 3, we put bits in the horse's mouth that they may obey us and we turn about their whole body.

Here's this great stallion, 500 pounds, rippling muscle, and yet you put a tiny little piece of metal in its mouth and you can direct that. Even people can make these horses dance. Little things, great influence.

He looks at the great ships. Verse 4, behold also the ships, which though they be great and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm. Here's this huge tanker and you look at that little rudder in the back of it and that whole ship can be turned left and right, even in the fiercest of storms.

Little thing, great impact. And then he goes to the tongue. Even so, the tongue is a little member and boasteth great things.

Really, the word boasting there is accomplishes. It achieves, it accomplishes, it does great things, both for good and evil. And that's where the catechism is so balanced, isn't it? In the first part of it, there's this little thing, this tiny thing, these few fibers, these few ounces of flesh.

You look what evil they can do. Bear false witness, falsify words, backbite, slander, condemn others rashly and unheard, lie, deceive. A little thing can do all that.

Yes, but also look at what great things it can do positively. Because he goes on to say, I can speak uprightly, I can confess truth, I can defend and promote the honor and good character of my neighbor. You think of Adolf Hitler, that little tongue and the devastation that he caused.

Millions and millions of people killed because of his words. You cross a few countries and you come to Winston Churchill. And again, with that tongue, he was able to mobilize and motivate a nation.

He was able to gather a coalition of nations, including the USA, and to defeat the great evil of Hitler and save many, many more millions of lives. See what a great matter a little thing can do. But on the whole, the impact is negative.

It's a dangerous fire. But a second illustration is this. It's an evil world.

Verse six, the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. He's saying, we have a globe in our mouths. Behind these lips is a world.

Why does he describe the tongue as a world? Well, it's because the world is so vast and it's so varied. So the tongue has a vastness and a variety to its impact and influence. A world of iniquity.

You think of the various countries and continents that this tongue has in it. You can go through the catechism. There's the continent of false witness, the continent of twisting words, the country of backbiting and the country of slandering, the country of rash judging and condemning, of lying and deceiving.

How many continents, how many countries are in this tongue? There's the country of exaggeration. There's a country of anger. There's a country of boasting.

There's a country of slander. There's the country of speaking too much and the country of speaking too little. There are the twin cities of crude and rude.

There's blasphemy. There's flattery. There's innuendo.

It's vast and it's varied, isn't it? And all contained in this little thing. Go home and look at it. Stick it out.

Look in the mirror and believe what the Bible says about it. I'm looking at a world of iniquity, a globe of evil, so called because of its vast and varied wicked abilities. Calvin said a slender portion of flesh contains the whole world of iniquity.

It's really speaking of the cosmic impact of human speech as well. A world, an evil world. But there's a third image he brings before us and it's of a savage beast.

In verse 7 he says, for every kind of beast and of bird and of serpents and of things in the sea is tamed and hath been tamed of mankind, but the tongue can no man tame. He's looking here at the various realms of animals and he's seeing how although our dominion over the creatures has been affected by the fall, on the whole we still have dominion. We're able to take fierce lions and tame them and even make circus acts of them.

People are able to take eagles and buzzards and falcons and other birds of prey and train them to run circles, do tricks and land back on their arms again. Even people are able to take the most poisonous and venomous of snakes and so charm them that they do dances and even are able to kiss them. We even hear of killer whales being tamed and turned into shows and entertainment.

Every kind of beast and of birds and of serpents and things of the sea is tamed and hath been tamed of mankind. It's remarkable isn't it? The most fierce, the most savage, those with the sharpest teeth and the most piercing of claws, those with great might and strength and weight, yet man can take them, control

them, bring order to them, dictate what they do. But, he says, the tongue no man can tame.

No man can tame. You're not accepted here. How many times have we tried it? You know what James is saying? He's saying, you and I would have more hope of going into the jungle, finding a lion and training it to do somersaults and cartwheels than we would have of controlling our tongues.

You and I would have more hope of jumping into the sea and finding a killer whale and bringing it back with us and turning it into a circus act than we would have of getting control of our tongues. You'd have more hope of meeting a shark and training it to close its mouth when it's hungry than you would have of closing your mouth when your tongue is ready to devour. And that's really how our tongue is presented here.

You go through this catechism again and really you see the savagery, don't you? You see the wildness, you see the ferocity of this tongue. A tongue that can bear false witness, that can just tell lies, the drop of a hat, that can twist words most skillfully, frighteningly skillfully. A tongue that bites the backs of those we even love the most, that gossips, that rushes to condemn others when we hear something bad about them without even a pause to say, well, I think I'll hear the other side of the story first.

It's savage, isn't it? We have a savage beast behind these teeth. You look at it and you think, it doesn't look savage. It looks just like floppy, flexible flesh.

What can that do? Well, we cannot control it. We cannot tame it. What would you do if you were told that from tomorrow you've got a wild lion coming to live in your house, or a hungry voracious vulture, or that in the swimming pool you're going to set up this summer, that you're going to have a shark actually swimming there? Well, nothing else would be on your mind, would it? You're going to have to face this.

You're going to have to confront it. You're going to have to handle it. You're going to have to find some way of controlling it and taming it, preventing damage.

James is calling us to similar posture and attitude towards this lion, this shark, this vulture, this snake. The fourth image here is of a polluted spring. We're told at the end of verse 8, it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

Therewith bless we God, even the Father, and therewith curse we men which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

Does a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? He pictures here this spring, this pure spring, and he says it just doesn't happen that one day it's spouting forth pure, clear, healthy water. The next day, poison water. Then the next day, pure water.

Then the next day, poison water. He said it doesn't happen. A fountain does not send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter.

He goes on to add more illustrations to this. He looks at trees and he says, look, if you find a fig tree and it's got bananas on it, you know there's something wrong. There's something gone way wrong in the very nature of this tree.

It says in nature, no fountain can yield both salt water and fresh. And yet he says what cannot happen in nature can awfully happen in our lives. He says we're blessing God, even the Father, one moment.

Then we're cursing men who are made in the image of God and who still bear some of that image. How can we put these two things together? We're going from purity to poison. Purity to poison.

Purity to poison. Blessing to cursing. I think it was James Montgomery Boyce who preached a sermon once.

It was called Ten Minutes After the Sermon. That's the name of his title. Ten Minutes After the Sermon.

And his points were from catechism to criticism. From glorying to gossiping. From praising to polluting.

Ten Minutes After the Sermon. The point is made, isn't it? He's saying, my brethren, these things ought not so to be. He's saying there's something fundamentally wrong.

We read this catechism and again we see these two sides. We've got this positive, this wonderful, upbuilding, constructive, edifying use of the tongue in the second part of it. And then we've got this poisoning and polluting and cursing and lying and slandering.

And these things ought not so to be. They can come together in a catechism, but they ought not to come together in the Christian. Winston Churchill said, the power of man has grown in every sphere except over himself.

What do we do when we hear these words? And who can deny the reality of them? Who can honestly hear these images and pictures and say, not true of me, but what do we do? Where do we go? What now? This catechism and these verses call us, first of all, to self-examination. It's very tempting when we hear these things to point the finger at others with our minds. I'm sure somebody has to look at our minds just now with an x-ray.

They would see that there are fingers pointing everywhere. We can think of him and her and them, but the first call is to point our fingers at ourselves and say, well, where am I in relation to this? James is all about proving faith by works, but also here he brings words into it. He's asking us to examine our faith in the light of our words.

Do our words prove our faith? In James 1.26, he says, if any man among you seem to be religious and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is less than perfect. Does that sound wrong to you? It's because it is wrong. Because the word actually is, this man's religion is vain, empty, void.

There's nothing to it. It's that solemn. It's that serious.

If any man among you seem to be religious, however pious, orthodox, proper, right they appear to be, but bridleth not his tongue, her tongue. Their religion is vain. This is serious.

This is solemn. The second area is warning. It really flows from self-examination.

In one direction from self-examination, there's warning. Because in Matthew 12, we read, Jesus says that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment, for by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned. What's Jesus saying here? He's

saying, I don't need to look at any other part of your life apart from your words.

That's all I need to know. Give me a record of the words. Let me see them written out.

I can tell you exactly if that man is heaven-bound or hell-bound, justified or condemned. It's not that words save us, but the words reflect what is in the heart, isn't it? There's a very solemn warning here. And even in the Catechism, it speaks of, unless we avoid these things, I will bring down upon me the heavy wrath of God.

What is it about us that doesn't see the seriousness of the abuse of the tongue? What is it? We all can think of people. We can think of times in our own lives when everything else is spotless and pure, yet the tongue is just devastating and destroying. It's burning, it's attacking, it's polluting.

We think, no big deal. It's nothing to be worried about. Yet, the Word of God, the Catechism supports it, says we're bringing upon us the heavy wrath of God, maybe in chastisement in this world, but even for the world to come.

There's a serious warning here. This really brings us, does it not, to confession, to confession, to bring this tongue and to put it before the Lord and say, look at it. It's vile, it's hideous, it's a dangerous fire, it's a savage beast, it's a polluted spring, it's a world of evil.

That's my tongue. I can't hide it, I can't deny it. And we are assured that if we confess our sins, even the worst sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

I remember speaking to an old lady, and she was confined to her house for many, many years, and she was a spinster. As far as I could gather, she'd lived a moral, upright life. She wasn't a churchgoer as far as I could tell, but one of those older generations, just been brought up in a more godly culture than today, and had imbibed Christian moral principles.

And as far as we could tell, really there's nothing you could put your finger on and say, there, there, there, there. And I spoke to her one evening and she denied that she had ever sinned. And I said, how can you say that when you look at your life? I mean, think of even your tongue.

Oh, she said, I've never lied. I've never said anything bad about anybody. I've never deceived anyone.

I haven't sworn. Well, let's give the benefit of the doubt. Let's imagine that's possible.

That's, let's try, hard though it may be, let's try to conceive of that possibility. There's this person in the world and they've never sworn, and they've never blasphemed, and they've never told a lie, and they've never deceived, and they've never backbitten, and they've never slandered, they've never gossiped, they've never burned anyone or scarred anyone, they've never attacked anyone, they've never polluted anyone. That tongue has never done anything wrong.

Is she going to heaven? Well, I asked her, have you ever praised God? And she said, no. What was her tongue made for? What was your tongue made for? It was made to glorify God. You mean, you mean God will turn someone away from heaven, even though they've led such a perfect life with their tongue, just because they never praised him, and they never confessed him, and they never spoke of him in admiring and worshipful ways? Why do we think that's such a little sin? You know, it's the Catechism.

It requires things of us. It requires truth speaking and truth loving. Imagine if a married couple came to you, and the woman was complaining about her husband, and she said, my husband never tells me he loves me, never encourages me, never says I've done anything right.

And the husband protests, but I've never argued against you, I've never sworn at you, I've never cursed you, I've never said anything bad about you, I've never called you names. I mean, what more do you want? Well, on a human level, we say, well, that's just ridiculous. What a pathetic response.

No one would excuse that in a man, that this is defensible just because he's never cursed his wife. He's excused from expressing his love to her, and his appreciation of her, and his admiration of her, and encouragement of her with words. No one would accept that.

And yet, we come to this, our relationship with God, and somehow that's okay. The very maker of our tongues, and yet, we will not loosen it to praise him, and pray to him, and call upon him, and tell others about him, and promote him, and live a life that supports our lips. This is something to confess, isn't it? Let's bring our tongues and say, I've burned people, I've scarred people, I've turned people's reputations to ashes, I've savaged, I've torn apart, I've polluted, and I've poisoned, and yet, God can forgive us all these sins.

We look back, and we see this wide swathe of destruction, and pollution. We see the carcasses of people that we've torn apart, and if we confess our sins, God can look at that whole past, and sweep it all away. But only if we confess, only if we see the seriousness of what we have done, and not done, with our tongues.

Confession. It brings us to prayer as well, doesn't it? Prayer that he would tame our tongues. Because notice it says, the tongue no man can tame.

No woman, no boy, no girl, no mere human being can tame. But it leaves open, doesn't it, the possibility of a divine tamer. Somebody who can come and extinguish the fire.

Someone who can come and bring this savage beast under control. Somebody that can come, and turn this world of evil into a world of truth. And who can take this mixed up spring, and turn it into a spring of pure, sweet, clear, refreshing water.

God can take the worst tongue here, and turn it into the most beautiful, the most grace-giving, the most God-glorifying, the most truth-telling tongue in the world. Can he not do that? Give up your own attempts, and bring it to the great tongue tamer. How does he do this? He does it by dealing with the heart.

You notice here in verse 2, if any man offend not in word, the same as a perfect man enable also to bridle the whole body. He's talking about this self-controlled man, and he's saying self-control comes from tongue control. We can control our tongues, we can control anything.

But how do we control our tongues? Tongue control comes from heart control. Isn't it interesting in the Catechism? It speaks of, and all other dealings, let me rewind a bit, likewise that in judgment, and in all other dealings, I love the truth. This is where it must begin, isn't it? In the heart.

Truth in the inward parts will produce truth in the tongue part. God subdues, he brings our hearts under control. He turns this, he extinguishes the fire, he tames the beast, and he purifies the spring.

He can do it. And it brings us lastly to worship. To worship.

Notice in verse 2 it says, in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same as a perfect man. The same as a perfect man.

You wonder who James, the Lord's brother, has in mind here, don't you? Well, wonder no more. He's thinking of the perfect man, isn't he? When you think of his words, he fulfilled this Catechism perfectly. The thou shalt nots, he did not, and the thou shalt, he did.

And far more. This is just a summary, really, of what the ninth commandment requires. Is it any wonder when John thinks of Christ, he says, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Maybe sometimes in our lives that has become exceedingly precious to us. I'm sure many of us here, if we live long enough, we'll live through a time when we experience the negatives of this chapter. We'll have people bear false witness against us.

We'll have people twist our words, bite our backs, slander us, rush to condemn us unheard, lie about us and present us deceitfully. I remember living through a time in our own church's life when there was a terrible division in our denomination, and it was a time where this half of the Catechism was just a daily experience. What a relief to come to the pure and precious words of God, and especially to him who is the word of God.

And just to immerse ourselves in these pure words of truth, these reliable words, these gentle words, these honest words that are totally and utterly trustworthy. And the more you read of Christ and the more you see his words, you see the pure and holy silence at times. You can even worship the silences, can't you? He knew when to be silent.

And then you see this Catechism being fulfilled in his life, don't you? You even think of this, especially at this time of year, don't we? He himself had false witness borne against him. His words were twisted and falsified. They bit not only his back, but his front and every part of him.

They slandered him and slithered all over his reputation. They judged him and rushed to condemn him, lied and deceived. And yet, despite experiencing this ferocious fire, this savage beast, this polluted spring, these worlds of evil ranged against him, coming to this great climax of evil, yet, yet he fulfilled the second part of this commandment perfectly.

Never rendered evil for evil. Never spoke lies. Never tried to tear somebody down with evil words.

Is it any wonder that even enemies said one day, never man speak like this man. It brings us to worship, doesn't it? To adore, to think that a human tongue can spend 30 odd years in this world and fulfill this commandment perfectly, day after day, in the face of relentless assault and provocation. I just want to bow down and praise and adore and marvel and love and embrace, do you not? Is this not worthy of our heartiest worship? You read of others, all bear him witness and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth.

He's the only source of truth in this world. The only one whose words you can perfectly rely on. Come to these words.

Take these words. Believe these words. Lean your whole soul upon these words.

Cast your destiny upon them and no other. Never man speak like this man. Amen.

May God bless to us his word.

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