

The Tongue, the Bridle, and the Blessing- an Exposition of James 3-1-12

by Sinclair Ferguson

The tongue is a powerful instrument that can be used for good or evil, and mastering it is a hallmark of spiritual maturity.

Duration: 1:07:09

Scripture: Isaiah 50:4

Topics: "Taming The Tongue", "Spiritual Maturity"

Description

This sermon delves into James chapter 3, emphasizing the challenge of taming the tongue and the immense power it holds for both good and destruction. It highlights the need for believers to master their tongues, reflecting Christ-likeness in speech. The sermon connects the teachings on the tongue to the broader context of James' call for spiritual maturity and the transformative power of the gospel in sanctifying our speech.

Transcript

We're going to read the first 12 verses of James chapter 3. And as you're turning there, let me thank John Piper for his welcome, and for the privilege that he's given to me of opening the Holy Word of God for the beginning of this conference. I hope as many of you have come a distance and must be tired at the end of the week that you'll still be able to gird up the loins of your minds and be ready for the stretch of this particular portion of Scripture. I've noticed in the invitations John Piper has given to me over the years that he never asks you to do anything easy.

And this is an enormous challenge, this passage, to anyone who is called by God to use his tongue. Let's read it together, James chapter 3 from verse 1. I'm reading from the English Standard Version. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also.

Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs them. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.

The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird and reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

Does a spring pour forth from the same opening, both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. This is obviously a passage in Scripture that preeminently illustrates the great principle of the Apostle Paul when he speaks about Scripture, the end of 2 Timothy chapter 3 and into the beginning of 2 Timothy chapter 4. Every Scripture is given to us for teaching doctrine, for reproving us, for correcting us, and for training us in righteousness, that the man of God may be thoroughly furnished, that he may be matured and equipped for every good work. That is to say, the practical purpose of Scripture is to make us spiritually mature.

And in order to do that, it unfolds truth for our darkened minds, it touches our consciences in the power of the Holy Spirit and convicts us of our sin right through to the very end of our Christian lives. And yet, even as it does so, it corrects us or heals us and transforms us and builds us up and equips us to be mature Christian people. And it's one of the burdens of James, whom I take to be the half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's one of the burdens of this whole little book of James that these Christians to whom he's speaking should be brought to a striking spiritual maturity. In the opening chapter, he speaks about this in terms of the way in which the Christian responds to suffering. Suffering, among other things, is intended to make us mature, rounded, balanced, stable Christians.

And then he goes on to speak about the way in which the Word of God and our response to the Word of God builds us up, transforms us, and makes us mature. Now, picking up that same theme as he does here in chapter 3 from verse 1 following, particularly you notice in verse 2 when he says that the man who is able to control his tongue is a perfect man, a man who has become mature in his Christian life. He is sharing that great passion of the Apostle Paul to present every man mature in Christ before the judgment seat of God.

And as he does this, he draws, as you know I'm sure from studying the book of James, he draws on a wide variety of Old Testament teaching, metaphor, picture, proverb, and he weaves particularly into this passage so many ideas that I suppose it would be possible to have a whole conference on these particular verses. Because he is so profoundly concerned that these Christians who have been scattered, perhaps from earlier privileges of sitting under his ministry, should grow to be like Jesus Christ, to be like his half-brother, the Lord Jesus. And as perhaps he has in his mind's eye the character, the language, the way in which the Lord Jesus was someone who spoke constantly with such grace and yet at the same time was able to speak with such a dramatic cutting edge, he has that picture in mind of the mature Christian believer growing in that kind of Christ-likeness until he is fully formed into the image of Jesus even in the words that come from his lips.

And I want us to try this evening as we begin this conference to get our arms round what James is saying by doing three major things. First of all, by walking through these first twelve verses of chapter 3 in order to see what he very pointedly has to say about the use of the tongue. Secondly, to stand back from that and put this teaching in the context of the whole book of James to help us see the practical counsel he gives to believers that they may use their tongues well.

And then to stand in a sense even further back and see how James sets this teaching on the tongue in the context of the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I imagine on the first of these three things we will have to spend most of our time. The specific teaching then, first of all, of James on the tongue in chapter 3, verses 1 through 12.

And as we walk through these verses, we notice that James is essentially drawing out four specific threads of teaching about the tongue and the life of the Christian believer. The first is this, and it is a searing truth, the difficulty of taming the tongue. He is of course speaking in the first instance here to those who would teach, those who would as a gift of the Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of God's people employ their tongues to an extraordinary degree.

And he advises us that not many of us should be teachers, because by our words we will be more strictly judged. But of course as he speaks to those who aspire to be teachers, he's bringing to bear on their lives generic gospel principles. And the first generic gospel principle he brings to bear upon our lives is the difficulty of taming the tongue.

You notice that he begins with what looks like a rather personal confession. We all stumble in many ways. Perhaps he's reflecting on occasions in his own life, those first 30 years.

Imagine at those first 30 years of our blessed Master's life when James had this proximate view to everything that Jesus was growing into as he grew to maturity, and how perhaps from early childhood he had seen this Lord Jesus Christ grow in physical stature and in wisdom, in the ability to use his tongue growing from holiness to holiness as his life matured through his teenage years and into his full maturity. And by that mark, and perhaps as he reflected on some of the very specific things he'd said to the Lord Jesus when he was yet an unbeliever, some of those snide comments that he had made, we get echoes of them, don't we, in John's gospel. Those snide comments to the Master.

And as he looks back, he recognizes that he and we all stumble in many ways. And to be a perfect man, to be a mature Christian, you have to learn to be able to bridle your tongue. Fascinating, isn't it, just in passing that little reference that the Apostle Paul makes to James in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 7, on the resurrection.

It kind of stands out as a strange little incident in the incidents that we expect to take place after the resurrection of Jesus. He appears to Peter, of course he appears to Peter. He appears to the Twelve, of course he appears to the Twelve.

He appears to 500 all at once, and then he appears to James. Perhaps to bring him a reassurance of pardon and a promise of power that he who had had an untamed tongue might by the power of Christ's grace grow to become a man whose tongue was so beautifully tamed that these words that sear our consciences with their power also come to us with all the grace and hope of forgiveness and restoration and growth to maturity that he had seen first in the words of his now dear Lord Jesus Christ. And this passage is Dr. James' pathology lab.

As he looks at our tongue and sees it in all the subtleness of its twistedness and all the language that comes from it, and he wants to show us how difficult it is in the first place to master the tongue. The man who has learned to master the tongue is a mature man. People will take notice of him.

In a sense, James is saying that the thing that will make most impression on your fellow Christians, on the people with whom you work, on your home and family is not the great big things that you do, not how you appear, as it were, on the public stage or arena, but the very simple question of whether or not you have mastered your tongue. And he engages in this rigorous analysis, as I say. And he speaks, you'll notice, he uses the very first piece of imagery he uses is that the perfect man, the mature Christian, is the person who is able to bridle his tongue in order to bridle his body.

The man who can control his tongue can control himself. And when the great masters of the Christian life have reflected on this, they've always reflected on this in a very striking way. Not first of all by speech, but by lack of speech.

By saying the man who has bridled his tongue is not only the man who has learned to be able to use his tongue, but the man who has also learned to be able to remain silent. And correspondingly, the person who has managed to bridle his tongue and thus control, become master of his whole body is the person who is able to go beyond silence to speech. It seems to me in so many ways that Christians tend to be divided into these two categories.

Those who find it easy to use their tongues and whose temptation therefore is to use their tongues too frequently. And those who, and I certainly place myself in this category, who actually find it constitutionally difficult by upbringing or education, constitutionally difficult, more difficult to speak. To have that mastery of the tongue because that mastery of self that enables those who would remain silent to speak and those who would over speak to remain silent.

And so when James speaks about the mastery of the tongue, he isn't simply speaking about the words that we use. He's speaking about our ability to have that sensitivity to use the words that are necessary, gracious, convicting and saving and to remain silent in sensitivity when such silence is necessary. And for those of us whose whole instinct is to remain silent, for the gospel to break words through our native barrier to speech so that we may speak words that are seasoned with salt and full of grace.

And it's interesting, it's not the first time that he's mentioned the tongue. You notice what he says back in chapter 1 verse 26 when he, as it were, was simply throwing out the overture of the symphony of his teaching when he says if anyone thinks he's religious and does not bridle his tongue, isn't able to control his tongue, he deceives his heart. And I think that's very searching, brothers and sisters.

That my inability to speak may actually be an expression of my failure to bridle my tongue and my inability to cease speaking is likewise going to be a failure to bridle my tongue so that the ability by God's grace to say the right thing at the right time to the right person in the power of the Holy Spirit and in faith is a most magnificent grace in the life of the believer. James is saying it is one of the most difficult graces to experience because it requires the mastery of the tongue and it's a hallmark of spiritual maturity. Indeed, he says nobody, of course he means nobody, but Jesus has ever mastered the tongue fully and finally.

It's a day-by-day, hour-by-hour, moment-by-moment battle in the heart for a sanctification that is so whole-personed, whole-bodied that even the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is manifested through our tongues. This, my friends, for most of us is the long-running battle of the heart. As we come together for

this conference, we ought at least to ask ourselves near to the beginning, are you still fighting it? Is that a battle you've never known but need to know, a battle you've lost so frequently and need to know how to win? James speaks first of all about the difficulty of taming the tongue.

Second, he speaks, and now in verses 3 to 5, about the disproportionate power of the tongue and he uses these amazing images. The image of the bit in the mouth of the horse in verse 3 and the rudder at the back of the ship in verse 4. And he says these two things, the little bit in the horse's mouth that enables the rider, think about, for example, some of those scenes. I've never seen the movie Ben-Hur, but I've seen the great chariot scene in Ben-Hur.

These powerful animals being controlled. How are they being controlled? Because of this tiny thing that's in the mouth of the horse. Remember when I was a late teenager being taken onto Queen Elizabeth II, I mean the great ocean liner while it was being made.

Absolutely mammoth ship. Thousands of miles of electric cable still visible. This great ocean going vessel.

And then you're taken to see what comparatively speaking is this tiny rudder at the back of the ship that guides it every which way it goes. And James is saying this is what the tongue is like. It is so small.

It has no bone. And yet it is so powerful both to build up and to destroy. Now why does it do that? Because it carries the breath of our souls into the world in which you live.

When I was coming down on the elevator this evening, there were several people in the elevator. Somebody came into the elevator. It was immediately obvious that they'd been smoking.

The whole little elevator, small constricted space, every time this person opened the mouth, the room seemed to become more and more kind of polluted really. Why? Because the person could not but breathe out what was within. And James is saying this is true of the tongue.

Of course, like smokers, we never notice the atmosphere that we are breathing out. But James is saying that every time we open our mouths, we give ourselves away in the old-fashioned language of the King James Version. Our speech betrays us.

I find that just as a human being, one of the burdens of my life living in the United States of America is that people keep telling me I've got an accent. And I keep telling them, no, you're the people who have the accent. But I can't open my mouth just as you can't open your mouth without, as it were, betraying your identity.

And it's the apparent disproportion between this tiny little instrument and the connectedness it has to the whole of my being, to the atmosphere of my life, that I cannot open my mouth without displaying whether or not I am able to do the spiritual thing naturally and the natural thing spiritually, whether I simply give myself away as somebody who, out of the depravity of my heart, breathes depravity into the room. Thank God, thank God for those many verses in the Scriptures that give us encouragement to believe that our tongues may speak forth the praise of Jesus Christ, that our tongues may bring comfort, that all unknown to us, years after we've spoken a statement, a little sentence, a throwaway line here and there in a conversation, our words have been bound to a troubled soul. Whether for good or ill, James is saying not only that there is difficulty in taming the tongue, but there is such a disproportionate power to the use of the tongue that it permeates absolutely everything that we do.

And because his concern here in part is to bring us a deep-seated conviction of sin, to scratch away our superficialities, to get under our sense of adequacy and to show us our need of the grace and mercy of God, he moves on to a third thing that you'll notice. The difficulty of taming the tongue, the disproportionate power of the tongue, the destruction caused by the tongue. And you'll notice now the picture simply roll out of him.

The tongue, he says, verse 5, is a small number, yet it boasts of great things. It's a fire, and it sets on fire, and it's set on fire, he says, by hell itself, Gehenna, perhaps the very place. It was originally the Valley of Hinnom, you remember, that became the rubbish dump of Jerusalem.

That's why the fires were so often there. Perhaps the very place, though not in the promises of God and the providence of God in Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, the very place where the body of his beloved brother would have been thrown out after his crucifixion. And he says that happens to the tongue, set on fire by hell and giving off sparks.

He says it's a world. Notice the language. He says it's an entire course of life.

I remember being on a plane somewhere, just leaping my way through the in-flight magazine as the plane was taxiing, and noticing in the quiz section of the in-flight magazine that there was this extraordinary picture of the moon. And, of course, you were to guess what it was. And so I, of course, knew the answer was in the back of the book and confidently turned to the back of the book, confident it was a picture of the moon, to discover it was a picture of the tongue, a world.

Almost as though James has this sense that the very physical appearance of the tongue with all its tiny little craters, it's a world in which iniquity can lie and from which iniquity can come. And it's a stain. It's a tiny instrument that stains and ruins everything like a stain on a dress.

The misuse of the tongue can apparently render all other graces in my life impotent. And you and I know that one single wrong word and all the words we've ever spoken crumble into so much hypocrisy in the eyes and ears of those who listen to us. And it's a beast that demands to be heard.

You know that beast in conversation, listen to me, listen to me, listen to me, listen to me. And it's a restless evil and it's a deadly poison. I think actually at least in those last three pictures that he's using, he has Genesis 3 at the back of his mind, the poison under the tongue of the serpent who is the ultimately restless one, restless in his disobedience against God.

Where have you come from, Satan says, God, at the beginning of the book of Job, from wandering around to and fro in the face of the earth? He goes about like a restless roaring lion seeking somebody to devour. And he produces restlessness in the heart that creates restlessness in the tongue and deadly poison that either quickly or slowly eats away all that is beautiful life. He is a beast.

And one of his chief instruments is this tiny little instrument God has given to us in order that we might praise his name. And James, of course, knows from the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ that this tongue can cause endless destruction. You can destroy a person's reputation by your tongue as easily, more easily than you can destroy their life by the song of it.

Indeed, I think one of the most helpful spiritual exercises one can possibly do in relationship to the tongue is just quietly to meditate on all of the Ten Commandments of God and think of the way in which the tongue has the capability to breach these commandments. And you and I hardly move an inch. Tongues

that were given us to praise him that express far more excitement in idolatry than in doxology.

Tongues that were given to praise him that remain silent in worship or are deadened in praise on the Lord's day. Tongues that were given to speak words of love that then speak words of flattery and lust and adultery. Tongues given to speak the truth that tell fabrications just a little less than the truth.

Tongues that were meant to give, give, give, give, give, give, give, give, but take, take, take, take. You know, sometimes I wonder if the misuse of the tongue is actually a peculiarly evangelical sin. How many occasions I've been with brothers and if somebody's name has been mentioned, the first lash of the tongue is to destroy that brother.

Yes, he may not be perfect. Yes, he may have many peculiarities, foibles. Not yet fully formed, but how dare I destroy with a word a brother for whom Christ has died within the context of the fellowship of God's people.

You see, careless with fire. I reflected in another context this week on some of Jonathan Edwards' resolutions. Here are some evangelical resolutions about the tongue.

Number 31, resolve never to say anything at all against anybody, but when it is perfectly agreeable to the highest degree of Christian honor and of love to mankind and to the lowest humility and to the sense of my own thoughts and feelings and agreeable to the golden rule. Often when I have said anything against anyone, to bring it to and try it strictly by this resolution. You probably need to be Jonathan Edwards to hold all that in your mind, but you get the point, don't you? Resolve, this is number 34, in narrations, in telling stories, in speaking about incidents that have happened, never to speak anything but pure and simple verity.

Number 36, resolve never to speak evil of any except of some particular good call for it. 70, let there be something of benevolence in all that I speak. You see, you discovered the great secret that the Apostle Paul moves towards, doesn't he, in the opening chapters of the book of Romans when he brings us all to the position where our mouths are shut and we're conscious of our sin and guilt and shame.

And it's only then, nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling, naked come to thee for dress, helpless look to thee for grace. Foul I to the fountain fly, wash me, Savior, or I die. It's then out of the silence before the judgment seat of God and the reception of the overflowing grace of God to such a sinner as I am that I want with all my heart to speak the truth, to speak grace, to speak love.

But James isn't finished yet. The difficulty of taming the tongue, the disproportionate power of the tongue, the destruction caused by the tongue. Now, I'm slightly allergic to art alliterations, artful aid, but it did strike me that James was saying things in 4D in this passage.

Do you notice that? The difficulty of taming the tongue, the disproportionate power of the tongue, the destruction caused by the tongue, and now the deadly inconsistency that plagues the tongue. That's what we saw on the DVD, wasn't it? We bless God, but we curse His image. And, you know, we should never minimize these words.

I would, we all understood that the words bless and curse in the Scriptures are not minified words with little significance, the kind of thing we say to one another when we sneeze, bless you. These are words that describe the serious, covenantal, determined operations of God, either to bring judgment that will lead to hell or to bring grace that will lead to heaven. And he's saying, there we are, standing, praising God, and in

the next moment we find ourselves cursing men and women who have been made in His image.

My parents used to take me to movies when I was a very small boy. These were the days of John Wayne and other great American heroes, and they were usually cowboys and Indians in those days. And the thing that I remember from my childhood years of seeing many a John Wayne movie is that the only words of English that those Indians seemed to know were, white man speak with forked tongue.

But what a tragedy when that white man is a Christian believer. What's this a sign of? Well, it's really back to what he set up in James 1, verse 18. He's saying there of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures, because by nature our problem is, as he's been saying, that we are double-minded men and we are unstable in all our ways.

And so as he continues just to throw out these pictures, he says we're like a spring that gives forth two kinds of water, like a tree that grows two kinds of fruit, like a saltwater pond that cannot yield fresh water. And he's back here in Genesis in the way he's thinking. Do you notice that? He's now beyond Genesis chapter 3 into Genesis chapter 1. Man and woman made as the image of God in order to have dominion, not only over the external order, but over the internal order.

What a thing the Garden of Eden must have been when the man and the woman had perfect dominion to be increasingly exercised over the ways in which they spoke to one another so that as they blessed God in heaven for the beauty and marvel and provision of his creation, they would speak words of blessing and grace to one another. But now we've not only lost dominion over the earth so that we end up as the dust we were meant to have dominion over, but it's almost as though this little instrument begins to control us instead of us controlling it. And we curse the image of God.

Now, having said these four things, speaking in these ways about the awful difficulty of taming the tongue, the disproportionate power of the tongue, the destruction caused by the tongue, the deadly inconsistency that plagues the tongue, we might well find ourselves saying to James, Oh, James. So I sometimes say, James, do I have to go to the local Christian bookstore to get some practical counsel about how to do this? And I want us to stand back just a little from this chapter 3, verses 1 to 12 to set it in the context of the whole book in order that we may see how James, who breaks open our consciences and makes us cry out to God, Be merciful to me, the sinner. It's also the James who brings to bear upon this teaching, surrounds this teaching, undergirds this teaching with the most amazing practical counsel about how I can go about growing to maturity and becoming stable and using my tongue well.

Actually, it's a great general lesson, it seems to me, when we study the Scriptures. It seems at first sight that the Scriptures say very little about the how-tos. Have you ever noticed that? Paul doesn't stop and say, Now, here are five things you need to do.

The how-tos. My daughter, when she was very young, told me one Sunday night after church, Dad, I can teach you to get people to take notes of your sermons. And I said, I'm not particularly interested in people taking notes of my sermons, but I love my daughter, and I was intrigued to know what my Ruth's homiletical method was that would transform me into a preacher whose sermons were worthy of taking notes.

She said, It's very simple, Dad. Every time you raise your finger and say, Now, there are three things here you need to know, or two things here you need to do, the women are in their handbags and the men are looking for a pen and they want to take it down. Now, James was a good deal more savvy than that.

What James is teaching us is that just like Job understood that he needed to make a covenant with his eyes, that is not the whole of the biblical principle, but the application of a biblical principle to a particular member of the body. It's not just the eyes that we need to make covenants with God about so that we may not look lustfully at women. It's with the ears and with the lips.

It seems to me to be very evident that James had done this. And so I want to walk you through the whole of the book of James just in a few minutes. It will just take a few minutes to do this.

And since this is a Desiring God conference, I want to try and do it in the form of some Jonathan Edwards resolutions, only penned by James, the half-brother of our Lord Jesus. Because amazingly, quite outside of this passage, the book of James has at least, and I'll limit it to this, has at least 20 resolutions that need to be part of the Christian's covenant with God about how the believer is going to employ his tongue, his lips, master his or her heart in such a way that the beauty of Jesus and the holiness of Jesus is expressed out of our mouths. Well, here they are.

Chapter 1, verse 5. I resolve to ask God for wisdom to speak out of a single-minded devotion to Him. Number 2, chapter 1, verses 9 to 10. I resolve to boast only in the exaltation I receive in Jesus Christ and also in the humiliation I receive for Jesus Christ.

Number 3, chapter 1, verse 13. I resolve to set a watch over my mouth. Number 4, chapter 1, verse 19.

I resolve to be constantly quick to hear and slow to speak. Just let me pause there a moment. Isn't that an amazing thing? To be quick to hear and slow to speak.

Number 5, chapter 2, verses 1 to 4. I resolve to learn the gospel way of speaking to both rich and poor. Number 6, chapter 2, verse 12. I resolve to speak in the present consciousness of my final judgment.

Number 7, chapter 2, verse 16. I resolve never to stand on anyone's face with the words I employ. Number 8, chapter 3, verse 14.

I resolve never to claim as reality in my life what I do not truly experience. Number 9, chapter 4, verse 1. I resolve to resist quarrelsome words as evidences of a bad heart that needs to be mortified. Number 10, chapter 4, verse 11.

I resolve never to speak decided evil of another out of a heart of antagonism. Number 11, chapter 4, verse 13. I resolve never to boast in anything that I will accomplish.

Number 12, chapter 4, verse 15. I resolve always to speak as one who is subject to the providences of God. Number 13, chapter 5, verse 9. I resolve never to grumble because I know that the judge is listening at the door.

Number 14, chapter 5, verse 12. I resolve never to allow anything but total integrity in everything I say. Number 15, chapter 5, verse 13.

I resolve to speak to God in prayer whenever I suffer. Chapter 5, verse 14. Number 16.

I resolve to sing praises to God whenever I am cheerful. Number 17, chapter 5, verse 14. I resolve to ask for the prayers of others when I am in need.

Number 18, chapter 5, verse 15. I resolve to confess it whenever I have failed. Number 19, chapter 5, verse 15.

I resolve to pray with others for one another whenever I am together with them. And number 20, chapter 5, verse 19. I resolve to speak words of restoration when I see another wonder.

I think I need to email my daughter and say, Ruth, I tried that. Twenty things you need to do. Are you looking for guidelines in the gospel? Here your whole life is suffused with these marvelously gracious, helpful indications of how God will train you, give you this child training from His Word that will transform your life and most particularly transform the way in which you speak.

And we need to resolve things like that, dear friends, with our words. Whether we use words in company, whether we use words with American Sign Language, whether we use words by email, whether we use words on blog sites. Oh, what a wonderful thing it would be if such resolutions were fixed into our hearts.

But then, big number three and lastly. We've walked our way through James chapter 3, verses 1 to 12. We've tried to set James chapter 3, 1 to 12 in the context of the whole book.

And now just for a few minutes I want to conclude by setting James chapter 3, verses 1 to 12 in the context of the gospel. How does all this teaching fit into the gospel? What is James seeking to do as a gospeler to us as we read his little book? Well, obviously, first of all, he's bringing us to see the depth of our sin and our need and our pollution that so easily flows from our lips. I often think, don't you, of those words of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 5 and in chapter 6. In chapter 5 of Isaiah, it's a very striking thing.

Isaiah has been speaking powerfully against the nations and against sinners. And he goes through woe, woe, woe, woe, woe unto you. And, you know, if you have any sense of the fabric of the Hebrew mind, just in reading that, you would sense it's not finished yet.

And you remember where it finishes, when he's seeing the Lord of hosts high and lifted up, seeing perfectly holy creatures veil their faces and cover their feet because, apparently, the intensity of uncreated holiness is just overwhelming for them. And the thing, and this is the thing you see, this is the thing that pulls me down to size, not least as a preacher of the gospel. The thing about Isaiah is that he cries out, Oh, God, I live in the midst of a people of unclean lips, but I am a man of unclean lips.

Woe to me. His words of judgment against sinners are turned back upon himself. Woe to me.

I am the sinner. I am undone. What a word that is to those of us who teach and preach that it's the very instrument that God is pleased to use into which the sin of our hearts becomes twisted and out of which that sin comes to expression.

It makes you cry out, Oh, God, be merciful to me, the sinner. Woe to me. I wonder if your misuse of the tongue has ever brought you to that.

I wonder if you don't use your tongue for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, whether you've been brought to the place where you pronounce a woe upon yourself because you have not used your tongue to the glory of God and you have prided yourself in the fact that you are not like other Christians who overuse their tongue, or whether you have such ability in the use of your tongue that you've prided yourself in the fact that while there is sin in all other kinds of areas of your life, at least this one place is secure. No, that's the very place into which sin has woven itself. So James, in all that he says, is not only a teacher of

wisdom, he's a prophet of God bringing us, humbling us under the mighty Word of God, bringing us to cry out, Oh, God, be merciful to me, the sinner and the tongue-using sinner.

But then there's a second thing that he says, really right at the beginning of his argument in James 1, verse 18, where he says this. He says you need to recognize if it's true that by God's grace you become a new creation in Christ Jesus. You see, the tactic of the evil one is to come to us, first of all, to say it doesn't matter very much whether you abuse and misuse your tongue, and then when we have abused it and misused it, he comes, as it were, around the back door and says to us, you are damned to hell by this failure.

And so James introduces this great Word of the Gospel in chapter 1, verse 18. By his own will, he brought us forth to be a kind of first fruits of his creation. That glorious sense of hopefulness, no matter how much I've failed, no matter how much as I go on in the Christian life, it seems as though layers of sin and failure keep being unfolded before my eyes by the Holy Spirit.

I may not be that mature man I long to be, that mature woman I long to be, but thank God I am no longer that old man or old woman I once was. And he has brought me forth as a kind of first fruits of his new creation. And that's what he's doing.

What a great way this is to think about your simple, ordinary, daily Christian life, that here you live in this old creation that's been marred by the fall and marred by sin, and what God is doing is, as it were, as so many small explosions and incursions into the world in which we live, he's bringing aspects of the glorious new creation that one day will be consummated when Christ returns, and every tongue at last will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And that's a word of great hope. And the third thing that he wants to emphasize is because he has brought us forth through the word of truth, that is to say, as God brings us regeneration, he doesn't ordinarily do that in a vacuum.

He does it in the context of the truth of the gospel illumining our minds. When Jesus says to Nicodemus, you need to be born from above, Nicodemus, he doesn't say that in a vacuum. That's why John won't allow that statement to stand in John chapter 3 without saying that it's through faith in Christ revealed as the Son of Man who's come down from heaven and born the judgment of God to be our Savior.

But you see, if that's how the Christian life begins, that's how the Christian life continues, and that's how the use of the tongue is to be transformed. The tongue has no ears. It's the heart that has ears.

And as the heart hears with open ears the word of God again and again and again and again, the transformed heart begins to produce a transformed tongue. John Piper, right at the beginning this evening, quoted some exquisite words from these four songs or poems that we find in the second half of the prophecy of Isaiah. And one of them is so beautiful.

It speaks about the fact that Jesus does not cry aloud or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street. He doesn't break a bruised reed. He doesn't quench a dimly burning wick.

He doesn't grow faint or discouraged in this ministry. And if we ask how that was true in his life, then the answer is two servant songs further along. Listen to these words that we can so readily put into the lips of our Lord Jesus.

The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens. He awakens my ear to hear as those who have

been taught.

The most important single aid to my ability to use my tongue for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ is allowing the Word of God to dwell in me so richly that I cannot speak with any other accent. And dear brothers and sisters, that's why it's so important for you at the practical level to be under a ministry of the Word where the Word of God is really preached and preached in the grace and truth of the Holy Spirit. And that's why it's so important for you to get under that Word as often as you possibly can in private and in public in all kinds of vehicles available to us to do that so that the Word of God begins to do its own Spirit-given work in us.

See, we live in a time where the assumption is that God justifies us and we do the rest. And we need to get back to learning this, that God's Word sanctifies. And the more the Word of God is poured into me by faithful feeders of God's Word, the more morning by morning like the Lord Jesus I waken to of my ear listening to the voice of God in the Scriptures, the more Christ Himself will do the sanctifying work.

And all my vain efforts to train my tongue will be left, as it were, in the past as He trains my tongue and as His Word molds me and shapes me. And in that, our blessed Savior is our exemplar. But one last thing, He's not only our exemplar.

In order to be our exemplar, He must first of all be our Savior. That's why this passage in Isaiah 50 about Jesus having the tongue of those who are taught goes on to say, The Lord God has opened my ear and I was not rebellious. I turned not backward.

I gave my back to those who strike and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard. I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. And why Isaiah 53, the great suffering servant passage, tells us that He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth.

Like a lamb that's led to the slaughter, like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. Why was He silent? My friends, He was silent because of every word by nature that's proceeded from your lips. That in and of itself would be adequate reason for God to damn you to hell for all eternity because you have cursed Him and because you've cursed His image.

And our blessed Savior, the half-brother of James, the author of this book, has come into the world in order to bear the judgment of God against the sins of the tongue. And when He stood before the judgment seat of Pontius Pilate and when He stood before the judgment seat of the high priest, He accepted the charge, remained silent, bore in His own body to the tree the sins of my lips, my mouth, my tongue. And it's possible, I imagine, that some of us have come to this conference just because somebody got excited about a Desiring God conference and you came thinking, well, that's an interesting title.

It would be interesting to go along. I like these people, actually love these people, something about these people. And you do wish that you could control your tongue better.

And perhaps you've even said, I need to follow the example of Jesus. Maybe following the example of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount, maybe that will do it. No, you need to understand that He's Savior first and then He's example.

And what you've seen in these other Christians who, as it were, in this message this evening share the fact that they too struggle. They are not yet glorified saints in heaven. They too struggle.

But you've seen language coming from their lips, heard words of grace coming from their lips that you see nowhere else in the universe because there's something heavenly about it. And maybe as many do, you've tried to imitate it and you've stumbled and fallen. You need to get it the right way around.

You come to Him, first of all, conscious of the sins of your lips and you say, God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Thank you that the Lord Jesus, whose words were so full of grace in order to take your judgment against my sin, was silent in order that He might bear the penalty of all my misuse of my tongue. And knowing that He has done that, you come to Him and you begin to say to Him, Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise.

And He's able to do something for you. He's able to answer your prayer in a song we sometimes sing. Be of sin the double cure.

Cleanse me from its guilt and power. And the knowledge that all those words against God and men and women and children and teenagers and grandparents and older people, that all the guilt of that can be cleansed away and coupled with it, there is power in Jesus Christ to set you free from bondage to the misuse of the tongue. Oh, you come to Him and you discover what a glorious Savior He is.

You know, as I said early on, almost everywhere I go, I find this experience that people notice I've got an accent. Well, you know, the wonderful thing about preaching God's Word is that 15 minutes into it, people stop noticing what kind of accent the man has. Isn't that true? My favorite place outside of the sanctuary of the Lord's people in the United States is in elevators, falling into conversation with people in elevators and then getting off at my floor and then they pluck up courage to say to me, where do you come from? And as the doors close, I love to say, Columbia, South Carolina.

And see the look of puzzlement. Now, my friends, that's a parable of what is possible for the people of God in our own time. That wherever you are, it's not so much what people say when you're in the room, but the questions that are lingering in their minds when you leave the room that makes them say, where did she come from? What kind of accent is that? This is somebody who has been with Jesus.

And by God's grace, James is saying, we may so grow to maturity as to begin to speak like our blessed Lord Jesus. Heavenly Father, thank you for the riches and marvel of your word. Thank you for the power of the gospel.

Thank you for the exhilaration of having our consciences searched by your word and cleansed by your power. Thank you for the privilege of being embraced in your word by the words of our Lord Jesus Christ. And thank you most of all that when we come and say to you, speak Lord, your servants are listening.

Our Lord Jesus Christ himself comes to us and preaches his own word right into our hearts. Oh, preach this word, dear Lord, into our hearts. And all the words that will follow, words that will build us up, words that will give us instruction, words that will encourage us, words that will expose us, words that will cause us to sing, words that will help us to heal, words that will help us to begin to sound like Jesus.

And then with these frail, stammering lips, we will say all the glory and all the honor and all the praise belongs to Jesus. Hasten that day, oh Lord, when every knee shall bow to him and every tongue in heaven and on earth and under the earth will confess that he is Lord. To the glory of God the Father.

And this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Video: <https://sermonindex2.b-cdn.net/IIDN4DQgneI.mp4>

Source:

<https://sermonindex.net/speakers/sinclair-ferguson/the-tongue-the-bridle-and-the-blessing-an-exposition-of-james-3-1-12/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net