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Lesson 7 — *Real Faith: Real Faith Controls the Tongue (3:1-12)*

INTRODUCTION

- Like the highly trained special agent that goes rogue and becomes the most dangerous threat to his former company, our tongue can at any moment wreak havoc within our own lives.
- Few passages on moral infidelity, murder, theft, etc. use the same sobering, graphically negative language that this passage uses to talk about our speech. This passage should shake us to our core and appropriately leave us speechless (that’s a safe starting point!).
- In James 1:26, the author previewed three areas of life where real faith will make a visible impact—in their controlled speech, impartial ministry, and distinction from the world. That first mark of real faith is what James addresses now in chapter 3. Those who are both hearing and doing the Word, those who have both professed faith and practiced works will demonstrate that in the way they talk. James says that they will “bridle [their] tongue.”
- This passage provides 5 reasons why our speech should be a focal-point for us in our sanctification.

OUR SPEECH WILL BE JUDGED (v. 1).

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

Formally, a “teacher” is someone in the official capacity of instructing God’s people (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11). Informally, it refers to our general responsibility to teach one another (cf. Colossians 1:28; 3:16). Whenever we teach others, we put ourselves in heightened position of judgment.

1. A teacher has greater responsibility.

- a. A responsibility to know truth (Jeremiah 23:16-22; 2 Timothy 2:15; Isaiah 8:20; “thus saith the LORD”).
- b. A responsibility to teach truth—their “talk talks” (Colossians 1:28).
 - With faithfulness (1 Timothy 4:11-16; 2 Timothy 4:2, 5)
 - With accuracy (2 Timothy 2:15; Jeremiah 23:1, 23-32), clarity (Colossians 4:4), and boldness (Ephesians 6:19-20)
 - With humility and graciousness (Colossians 4:6; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; Ephesians 4:15, 31-32)
 - With purpose (Ezekiel 34:1-10; Isaiah 50:4; Ephesians 4:29)
 - With integrity (Matthew 7:1-5; James 3:13-18)
- c. A responsibility to practice truth—their “walk talks” (Jeremiah 23:13-15).

Illustration: pros and cons of the reality of living in “the fish bowl” of ministry

- They must model responding to trials with a conclusion of joyful endurance (1:1-12).
- They must demonstrate satisfaction in God and denial of their desires (1:13-18).
- They must not be teachers only, but doers (1:19-27).
- They must not practice favoritism, even when some hearers are easier to handle than others (2:1-13).
- They must accompany their reputation of faith with a repertoire of righteous living (2:14-26).
- They must live lives distinct from the world in humility (4:1-10).
- They must exhibit a dependence upon God that impacts their daily planning (4:13-17).

- They must hold loosely to wealth (5:1-6) and remain steadfast until the end (5:7-12).
- They must express faith in God through prayer, community, and discipleship (5:13-20).
- A good example — Ezra 7:10, “For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.”

2. A teacher has greater accountability (2 Timothy 4:1, 8; Hebrews 13:17; Jude 14-15).

- Teachers are accountable for what they teach (and don’t teach—Ezekiel 33:7-9; Acts 20:26-27).
- Teachers are accountable for how they teach (Galatians 6:1; Moses striking the rock).
- Teachers are accountable for practicing what they preach.

Application: Interestingly, this verse appears to kind of be James’ application of what he is about to say. It’s like he starts with a primary exhortation, which reminds him of a much needed warning, which then develops into the whole next section, which has a much more far reaching application. So, while teachers certainly will be accountable for what they say, they are not the only ones. All believers are responsible for their speech (cf. Matthew 12:36-37).

OUR SPEECH CAN BE CONTROLLING (vv. 2-5).

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. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

James sees the tongue (i.e., speech) as a microcosm of man’s spiritual depravity. Indeed, “The mouth is a focal point and vivid indicator of man’s fallenness and sinful heart condition (cf. Is. 6:5; Matt. 15:11, 16–19; Mark 7:20–23; Rom. 3:13, 14).”¹

1. Our speech is uniquely difficult to control (v. 2).

- “Many” areas of life are difficult to control, and we all “stumble” (i.e., sin) in “many ways” (v. 2a).
- But speech is the most difficult, for as James says, only “perfect” people can control (i.e., “bridle” or “hold in check”) their speech. James uses this jarring language (i.e., “perfect” could refer to true perfection or spiritual maturity) to express how difficult it is to tame the tongue and not stumble over one’s speech. Illustration: Although we joke that driving the speed limit is the last target of sanctification, James says that our speech is.
- Verses 7-8 add, “For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue.” Like a wild animal or a demon-possessed man (Mark 5:4), our speech is difficult to tame or subdue. Illustration: Even Paul struggled (cf. Acts 23:1-5).
- Verse 2 leads us to a couple conclusions:
 - Uncontrolled speech indicates spiritual immaturity.
 - Controlled speech leads to a controlled life (cf. vv. 3-4). If we would control our tongue, we could control the rest of ourselves.

2. Our speech is usually controlling us (vv. 3-5).

If we are not controlling our speech, it is controlling us.

a. Our tongue is a small member.

- The tongue is like a horse’ bit (v. 3).
- The tongue is like a ship’s rudder (v. 4). Illustration: a steering wheel
- The tongue is like a “small fire” (v. 5).

OUR SPEECH CAN BE DESTRUCTIVE (vv. 5-8).

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, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

b. Our tongue has great influence.

- It sets direction (vv. 3-4). — Although we should be “bridling” our tongue (1:26; 3:2), it is often bridling (like a “bit,” v. 3) or “guiding”/directing us (vv. 3-4), however its “will...directs” (3:4). “Will” literally refers to an “impulse” and accurately describes our speech as impulsive. “So also” (v. 5), our speech often takes charge, impacting this and influencing that (and here and in the next point we are being reminded of the underlying influence of the heart). Just consider the contrast in direction set by Hitler’s speech versus Churchill’s speech. Their tongue was the small rudder that directed their entire nations into infamous divergence and conflict.
- It demands obedience (v. 3). The word suggests persuading someone to obey or follow. Whether it’s the words of my heart in my head or the words of my mouth on my lips, I must admit that my tongue is often persuading me to follow its cue. Illustration: An emotional disagreement with someone often fuels my words, thought or spoken, to be inflammatory and divisive, leading me away from rather than toward the person.
- It is not easily broken (v. 4). — “Strong wind” cannot break the control of a “small rudder.”

Application: Do you have the better of your speech, or does it have the better of you? The best way to control your speech is before you speak, not while you are speaking—learn to “think before you speak” (Illustration: kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Saturley) and learn to control the words/meditations of your heart (Psalm 19:14).

1. Corrupt speech causes a corrupt life.

- a. Its confidence (vv. 5-6a) — The tongue boasts an impact much greater than its size: “boasts of great things”; a small “fire” that sets a firestorm blazing through a vast forest.
- b. Its character (v. 6) — corrupt: “a world of unrighteousness” (cf. Mark 7:20-23), both reflecting and provoking our depravity
- c. Its consequence (vv. 6, 7-8) — destruction: “staining the whole body” (remember v. 2); “a restless [unstable, 1:8] evil, full of deadly poison” (Psalm 55:21) → Discussion: In what ways can our speech destroy? Arguments, gossip, slander, criticism, silence, deception, foolishness, immorality, etc.
- d. Its capacity (v. 6) — “setting on fire the entire course of life”: this refers either to the scope (every facet) or duration (from birth to the grave) or life, or to both).

Application: Examples—

- Global
 - Consider the influence of the tongue in the first sin.
 - Consider the influence of the tongue in many historical atrocities.
 - Consider the influence of the tongue in ongoing racial tensions and community divisions

- Consider the influence of the tongue in false teaching and the subsequent waywardness of innocent people.
- Personal
 - Consider the influence of the tongue in split churches.
 - Consider the influence of the tongue in broken homes.
 - Consider the influence of the tongue in murders.
 - Consider the influence of the tongue in many of our personal sins.
 - How might we, with our present speech, be “setting on fire the course of our or other peoples’ lives”?

Our speech can be destructive, and corrupt speech causes a corrupt life. This is why wisdom literature throughout the Bible encourages a slowness to speak (James 1:19), a lessening of words (Proverbs 10:19; 29:11; Ecclesiastes 6:11), a fitness to our speech (Proverbs 25:11), and a softness to our answers (Proverbs 15:1).

2. Corrupt speech is caused by Satan himself.

- The fire of corrupt communication is lit by “hell.” “Hell has outcroppings in this world, and one of them is evil speaking” (Richardson, 154).
- Its destruction, therefore, knows almost no limits. Calvin wrote that our tongue is an “instrument for catching, encouraging, and increasing the fires of hell.”²
- Satan uses words as the liar, accuser, deceiver, tempter, etc. And as Peter discovered, he can infect our words with his venom and use our speech to do his bidding (cf. Mark 8:31-33; cf. James 3:14-16).

OUR SPEECH CAN BE HYPOCRITICAL (vv. 9-12)

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.

1. Hypocrisy is normal.

- With our speech, we bless God.
- With our speech, we curse God’s image-bearers.

2. Hypocrisy is unnatural.

- This simply shouldn’t “be so.”
- Nature illustrates this.
 - Water spring—NOT fresh and bitter (or salt) water
 - Fig tree—NOT olives
 - Grapevine—NOT figs

Application: Unfortunately, that which is unnatural, inconsistent, and ironic often characterizes our speech. What has your speech been like with your friends this evening? Is it noticeably different than when you were with your family this morning? What was your speech like when you told your friend about Jesus? Did the same grace impact it when you gossiped about your boss? What is it like when dialoguing with a friend face-to-face? Does it maintain the same cordial tone when defending your position on Facebook?

Hypocritical speech cheapens anything we say, for who is to know what aspect of our speech is most in keeping with our heart (the “fresh” or the “bitter”)? We want people to think that the “corrupt” speech is the accidental “bitter” water from the “fresh” spring; God’s Word, however, suggests that maybe the opposite is true (cf. Matthew 7:18, 20). Our speech should be straightforward and honest, genuine and consistent (cf. Matthew 5:37).

OUR SPEECH CAN BE FRUITFUL (vv. 13-18)

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Now, in light of what we've read so far, this point may seem to contradict this passage. After all, we read in verses 7-8, "For every kind of [animal]...can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue." If we cannot tame our tongue, how do we expect it to become fruitful? The answer, of course, is that there is One who can tame our tongue and use it to bring forth good fruit.

In fact, James clearly hinted at this in verses 7-8, but the English isn't able to handle his Greek very well. Motyer explains:

In verse 7 the words by humankind are literally 'by human nature' or, possibly better, 'by a nature that is merely human'; and in verse 8, no human being is 'no-one is able to tame—(that is to say) of men'. James does not simply say that the tongue is untameable, but that it cannot be subdued by any power resident in mere human nature or possessed by a mere human being. Beyond this he does not go, but he may feel that the hint is plain enough.

On the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:2-4) a different fire from that which ascends from Gehenna descended from heaven to kindle new powers and give new speech to the human tongue. If we must say that the outworking of sin first appeared in the abuse of speech (Gn. 3:12; see p. 119, above), we must also say that the first act in the new creation was the renewal of the power of speech, a tongue intelligibly declaring the wonderful works of God (Acts 2:11). Maybe this is what James wants us to learn from verses 7-8a. Would not this be a marvellous display of the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ in our lives, if our tongues were as his: 'No man ever spoke like this man!' (Jn. 7:46 [cf. Ephesians 4:29])?³

Having hinted at the ability of only our Savior to redeem our speech and make it fit for our Master's use, James focuses on that transformation in verses 13-18. These verses demonstrate that the corrupt communication depicted in vv. 1-13—and its counterpart of grace-ministering speech (cf. Ephesians 4:29; Colossians 4:6)—is simply a **fruit** that is revealing a **heart** that is being energized by a certain **source**.

1. **Satan's** wisdom: It springs from a **selfish** heart and demonstrates itself with **evil** works (vv. 14-16).

- *Source*: "earthly," "sensual," "demonic" = limited to this world system, characterized by human depravity, energized by Satan
- *Heart*: "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition" = harsh, resentful attitude toward others; selfishness that engenders antagonism and factionalism
- *Fruit*: "boast and be false to the truth"; "disorder and every vile practice" = speech is a clear representation of this kind of fruit

2. **God's** wisdom: It springs from a **righteous** heart and demonstrates itself with **good** works (vv. 13, 17-18).

- *Source*: "from above" = God given (cf. 1:5)
- *Heart*: "righteousness" (v. 18) = Christ's righteousness imputed to us through the implanting of the gospel in our hearts (cf. 1:18, 21)
- *Fruit*: "good conduct" = "works" of "meekness" (humble, gracious), "pure," "peaceable," "gentle" (meek, selfless, yielding), "open to reason" (teachable, obedient), "full of mercy and good fruits," "impartial," and "sincere"

Application: Which wisdom are you asking for (1:5) and practicing (Philippians 2:12-13)?

CONCLUSION

In this passage we've considered five reasons why our speech should be a serious consideration in our sanctification: it will be judged, it is controlling, it is destructive, it is hypocritical, and it can be fruitful.

In conclusion, consider three specific ways in which we can give serious consideration to this area this week:

- *Truth:* We have not controlled our tongue.
Response: We must confess our sin (vv. 2, 8, 9-10, 14-16; cf. Isaiah 6:5-7).
- *Truth:* God alone can tame our tongue.
Response: We must seek His grace (vv. 8, 13, 17-18; cf. 4:6).
- *Truth:* Our tongue is our most dangerous member.
Response: We must be diligent to practically “work out” and “work in light of” the gospel in this particular area (vv. 13, 17-18).
 - “Working out” His gracious love in the gospel:
 - Is this humble speech?
 - Is this pure speech?
 - Is this peaceable speech?
 - Is this gentle and yielding speech?
 - Is this merciful and kind speech?
 - Is this impartial speech?
 - Is this genuine speech?
 - “Working in light of” His gracious love in the gospel:
 - It is because of what He didn't say to/against me (i.e., judgment, a list or grievances, etc.), that motivates me to silence, forgiveness, and gentleness in my speech toward others.
 - It is because of what He did say to/about me (i.e., expressing forgiveness and declaring me righteous), that enables me to grace-filled speech toward others.

- It is because He talks to me at all, that I am humbled to speak in meekness and ministry.
- It is because of what He is saying to others (i.e., convicting, teaching, etc.), that compels me to prayer rather than rebuke and criticism.
- It is because of what He will say (i.e., vindicating me while judging others), that gives me the joyful liberty of letting Him be my revenge, rather than my words.

ENDNOTES

¹ John MacArthur Jr., ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), 1930.

² John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke Volume III and The Epistles of James and Jude*, trans. A. W. Morrison (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 291, quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 139.

³ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James: The Tests of Faith*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 124–125. In footnote 15, Motyer adds, “In the Greek of John's Gospel these words have the same sort of order as that in v. 8 of the present passage in James: the noun ‘man’ is held back right to the end of the sentence for emphasis: *oudepote elalēsen houtōs anthrōpos*. ‘never did one speak thus—no man’. James could well have had Jesus in mind throughout. The Lord's wonderful speech often caught people's attention; cf. Lk. 4:22; Jn. 6:68.”