

A Study in James
Part 8 – “The Faith That Saves”
James 3:1-12

At the dawn of every spring it seems that the movie *Jaws* makes a comeback. With more and more people planning a trip to the beach it becomes a very popular horror movie as a great white shark decides to find an easy meal on the beaches of a west coast resort. When I saw it was scheduled sometime ago, I began to think about it. So, I did a little research. I found that all marine biologists agree there is no other fish that can match the shark's jaw power! They have measured a pressure of 36,000 pounds per square inch in just a medium sized shark!

Now that's a lot of jaw power; however, James would say that's nothing compared to the power of a man's mouth. And, in fact, the strongest muscle in our body is the tongue; at least if we measure strength by the degree of difficulty to control it! This is the reason James asserts that the most challenging thing a Christian has to do is to control his tongue.

TAKE YOUR BIBLES PLEASE...

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. 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. 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. (James 3:1-12 ESV).

James is aware that we all will stumble in our Christian lives. There are no perfect Christians. Surely we cannot argue with that truth; however, his point is that the ultimate in self-control, which is the surest mark of a Godly life, is to tame our tongue. It is an indication of the goal of our lives. The more we become like Christ, the more control we ought to possess over our speech and the less chance of being offensive to someone we become.

At least at the beginning of this discussion it is helpful to note that the Bible speaks about the tongue on many occasions. The Scripture talks about lying tongues; flattering tongues; deceitful tongues; false tongues; and backbiting tongues. However, there is no more detailed treatment than in our text today. We ought to also understand that the tongue is both the cause and cure of a very destructive pattern in our lives. Jesus said it this way: for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

There are three truths that we ought to note.

First, the Power of the Tongue Makes It Difficult to Control (vv. 1-5).

1. The tongue is small, but mighty. To illustrate this, James uses three examples of things that are small, but exercise great power.

If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. (v. 3).

Our method of controlling a horse today has not changed much since the first century. The mighty strength and will of a horse is tamed and placed under the rider's will by a small piece of metal in the horse's mouth attached to the reins. This little piece of metal put between the teeth of a horse is small, but mighty. In the same way, the tongue is comparatively small with power far beyond its size.

2. Second, James uses the illustration of the rudder of a ship. The world of the first century did not have great ocean going vessels as we know them today. However, James would have certainly been familiar with smaller ships and sailing. These ships were strong enough to withstand the test of great wind and storm, yet the course of the ship was determined by the captain standing at his station. He conveyed his desire by means of the helm, or rudder. With one hand, the captain could turn the entire ship in any direction he desired. In the same way the tongue is a small part of our body, yet it is able to accomplish large things. It is built to turn life around.

One of the best autobiographies I have ever read is that of Loren Eiseley, [All the Strange Hours](#). Eiseley is one of America's greatest naturalists and scientists. In his book he tells of an incident early in his academic training. In fact, it was in his first English class of college. It was a traumatic experience for him; one which changed the direction of his life. For his first theme assignment, the professor called him to stay after class and said, "You didn't compose this; it is written too well." He had labored long and hard over the assignment, and it was indeed his work. But, Eiseley was shy. One did not talk back to college professors in that day. He simply turned away. He did not write another piece until well into his middle years. Oh, he did write, and distinguished himself as a writer of many letters, articles, and books. Who knows, however, how many more were lost in those early years while he labored under the stingy remarks of that professor's belligerent false accusation. One must wonder what might have been!

3. Third, James uses the image of a small spark starting a great forest fire. All of us have seen the devastating results of a fire that has burned out of control. Often such destruction began with merely a spark. So it is with the tongue. It may be a slight comment, but because of the power of our words, it may be devastating.

Second, the Nature of the Tongue Make It Difficult to Control (vv. 6-8).

Our tongue is by nature destructive and vicious. This has been true of man since the fall. James clearly sets this principle before us in the text. **He makes five declarations about the tongue.**

1. **The tongue is a fire.** As such if it is not controlled it destroys everything in its path. When under control it can be a great benefit to man. A fire can warm a house, bake a cake, and bless the family of men. The same fire out of control can burn a man's house, scorch his clothing beyond repair, and destroy his body.
2. **The tongue is a world of iniquity.** This is the most difficult passage in these paragraphs. The general meaning is clear. However, the specific details are more elusive to our understanding. The general truth is that the tongue is the cause of evil and defilement in the life of man. It is a world of evil itself. In it and through it all kinds of evil are done. The whole course of human life is affected. The direction of a child is affected by the tongue of a parent; the course of a marriage is affected by the tongues of its partners; the course of your vocational life is affected by those who work about you; and, how you come to the end of your life will be affected by those who have spoken to you and what they have said. What could be more indicting than this truth? How careful we must be with our tongues!
3. **The tongue is a wild animal.** James cites man's accomplishment in taming all kinds of wild beasts, "but the tongue no man can tame." "Tame" is a word that means to "overpower" or "conquer." The tongue is self-willed and headstrong in its nature. Fallen man cannot overpower the tongue. It is as impossible as changing the sun rising in the east!
4. **The tongue is an unruly evil.** This means that the nature of the tongue is that of a restless, unsettled evil. It is ever on the move looking for something bad or evil to say or do. It will often speak a lie, when the truth would have done just as easily. It will often speak unkindness when kindness would be better. It is just inclined continuously toward evil.
5. **The tongue is full of deadly poison.** The tongue is like a deadly viper. It lashes out destroying hope, character, feelings, or whatever may be in its path. If something so terrible is allowed to run loose in the world, no one and nothing is safe!

Third, the Inconsistency of the Tongue Make It Difficult to Control (vv. 9-12).

It is not that the tongue never says anything good or never utters anything but deadly sounds. This is a part of the problem. It will often manifest some goodness. It will speak praise to God one moment and damn a fellow human being the next. It is utterly undependable and inconsistent. Unlike almost everything else in nature, the tongue will do opposites. No tree will normally bear two types of fruit. You do not get figs and olives from the same tree, or cherries and apples. The same fountain will produce only one kind of water. Either the water will be salty or fresh, but not both. Trees, vines, and fountains are not the tongue, however. The tongue will produce good fruit one moment and rotten the next! It cannot be trusted. It is inconsistent and unreliable in its very nature.

To tame this beast we must resolve to bring it under the power of the Holy Spirit. We must be prepared to make confession to God of our inability to control the tongue and seek the forgiveness of those we have hurt with it. Only this will do!

I like the little poem by Helen T. Allison:

One little unshed raindrop
May think itself too small;
Yet, somewhere, a thirsty flower
 Awaits its fall.

One little word, unspoken,
May seem too small to say;
But, somewhere, for that one word,
 A heart may pray.