

James: Talk Burns

James 3:3-12

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to James chapter 3 as we continue our studies in the book of James. James 1 verses 1-18 deals with the subject of trials, and especially how the Christian is to respond to trials. James 1:19-27 identifies for us true Christianity, distinguishing it from false or simply claimed Christianity. And, in fact, James gives us several tests to look for in that passage which we'll consider a little bit later on.

In James chapter 2 we see evidence of true faith. True faith is joined with loving obedience in the Christian's life.

And then in James chapter 3 we see the subject of the tongue or our speech taken up. And so the structure of James' letter is clear and logical and connected. The connection is this: if you look at James 1 verses 26 and 27, you will see that James has given three areas of indication of true faith. In other words, "How do you identify someone who is really a Christian?" How do you make the distinction between someone who claims to be a Christian and who really is a Christian. James gives three test cases or areas of indication of how Christianity impacts a person's life. The first area that he lists is the tongue. The second area is in our care, love and concern for the needy. And thirdly, there is the area of our resisting worldliness. Each of those areas he takes up in this letter. The second area, that is love and care and concern for the needy, he deals primarily with in chapter 2, a passage we've already looked at. He'll deal with the tongue, the first area he that he mentioned in verse 26 of chapter 1 here in chapter 3, and from the end of chapter 3 really to the end of the book he will tackle the subject of worldliness and our being separate from the world as believers in such a way that we love the world in the sense of having a concern and desire for its best interest and at the same time that we do not love the world in the sense that we don't get caught up in the worldliness and the temporal and the ungodly thinking of the world around us. So that gives you an outline of James so far.

James in the passage we studied last time applied his teaching about the tongue especially to teachers. But we said, even then, that James' words about speech were not only for teachers but also for all Christians. That becomes very obvious

in the passage that we're going to look at today, James chapter 3 beginning in verse 3 down to verse 12. Let us hear God's holy word.

Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Behold, the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder, wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh.

Amen. This is God's word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we ask that You would teach us from Your word. We ask that Your word would be used as a mirror by the Spirit to show us our own hearts, to search us out and find if there be any unclean thing in us. And then also that Your word would be used as a lamp to guide us on our way. But above all we pray that Your word would be used as a teacher to lead us to Christ. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

James 3: 3-12 is a gigantic illustration of, and application of, the point that James made in James 3:2. So you better allow your eyes to fall on James 3:2. "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man able to bridle the whole body as well." Now, as we said, this picks up on what James had already said in James 1:26. Look there as well where he says, "If anyone thinks himself to be religious, yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless." So James has already inaugurated the principle that the tongue is of central concern to our growth in grace, to our living of the Christian life. And what he does in James 3:3-12 illustrates that and applies that over and over in different ways.

In fact, James is going to show us five things here, five ways in which the tongue is important. Why is the tongue so important? Why is our speech so important? James tells us five things to explain that.

I. The tongue holds a key place in holy living, its control is a prime component of sanctification.

And the first thing is this. Look at verses 3-5. Here, James explains to us that the tongue is important because the tongue holds a key place in holy living. Its control is a prime component in our sanctification. James argues in verses 3-5 that the tongue is disproportionately influential as a member of our body, and he gives two illustrations, which you'll see in verses 3 and 4. In verse 3 his first illustration is that of a horse and bit or a horse and bridle, and he points out how this relatively small instrument used by a skilled rider can guide a large and powerful animal with some ease. James says it's the same thing with the tongue. The tongue, though disproportionately small, has a disproportionately large influence on us as persons. It has a greater impact on our lives. In verse 2 he says, "even as the horse's bit guides its entire body, so also the tongue is something which impacts the whole body as well." And so he uses the first illustration to emphasize the relative importance of what we say.

And then the second illustration in verse 4 of a ship is like to it. Of course this is from the day of great sailing vessels which would have been driven by sails and wind, and he says even a large ship in a big storm where the wind is howling and blowing in all directions is guided by a pilot through a very small instrument, the rudder. And so again he shows the disproportionate influence of the tongue through the illustration of the rudder.

The point is that the tongue is capable of tremendous influence. And we all know that experientially. That's in some ways a common sense or common grace truth. Perhaps, you've been inspired at some point in your life to go on by the words of another. Sometimes there are words in great crisis. I suspect that many of you have treasured up at least a few words from statements and comments and speeches that you have heard in the last year since September 11, 2001. I for one, will never forget some of the words that president bush spoke during his address to congress in the wake of September 11th. "We will not tire. We will not falter. We will not fail." Those things are engrained in me and they are part of the things that have encouraged me to go on and to be faithful and to be resolute in the wake of this tremendous attack on our nation.

I remember a visit to the Imperial War Rooms in London where the speeches of Churchill during some of the darkest days of the Second World War are played. You move from one room, where you hear Hitler giving his mesmerizing speeches at Nuremberg and rallying thousands and thousands of Nazis, and then you go into the next room and you hear Churchill's reply as he speaks to his nation, and he calls them to resolute opposition to those who would invade them and end their way of life. One of the speeches has a phrase that goes like this, "We gave you the choice between honor and war. You chose dishonor, and you shall have war." I was ready to go out and sign up for the British army myself after hearing that speech. It moves us.

Words can be used powerfully in our life. There are people in this room who remember Roosevelt's fireside chats. And you'll remember, perhaps, how they encouraged you in dark days of our nation. And even the sound bits that we hear played over and over perhaps on the news channels or on the radio, have perhaps an encouraging impact upon us.

But we don't have to look to things quite so grand as speeches by leaders to prove the point that the tongue is disproportionately influential. Fathers in here will recognize this experience. Something's going wrong in the parenting scheme. And the child is doing something that he shouldn't be doing or that she shouldn't be doing, and as the father sits down to talk with that child, you start conjuring up in your own mind, "What did dad tell me when I was doing this?" Or, "What did mom tell me when I was doing this?" And you're searching for some bit of wisdom to share. And then, sure enough, something that your own parent said to you just comes out of your mouth involuntarily and you find those phrases that your parents have emblazoned on your mind coming out in your speech as you deal with your own children. And we see how the power of speech can impact us. Most of us can remember times that were very difficult where words of encouragement from friends were the difference between absolute despair and hope that there was some light at the end of the tunnel. James is stressing just how powerful, how disproportionately powerful, an instrument the tongue is. The control of the tongue leads to a master control over our lives and ourselves.

And so the first thing he says about the tongue is that it has a key place in holy living. If we are paying attention at all to the desire to be like Christ, if we are paying attention at all to the desire to live what we say we believe, if we are paying attention at all to wanting to grow in holiness, then James is saying one area that you can't leave out is the tongue. You've got to think about your speech and what your speech says about your holiness or your growth in grace. What does that mean for us as Christians? Have you realized, Christian, how powerful, how central, how influential the tongue is? Do you realize how important it is in your sanctification? And, if so, what are you doing about it?

Well, maybe you're here today maybe you're here this morning and you're not a Christian. You may publicly profess to be a Christian and you're not a Christian. And you may be secretly thinking to yourself that you don't need God's grace to be saved. Well, let me plant a seed of thought with you. What about your tongue? What does your tongue tell you about your need for grace? We'll come back to that thought in just a few moments. But think on those things. James is first and foremost pressing home to us that the tongue is a key to holy living.

II. The tongue has enormous power for actual harm, and so we dare not neglect the discipline of it.

The second thing he says you'll see at the end of verse 5 and in verse 6. And that is simply this: that the tongue, is not only enormously influential, it has great power to harm. It has enormous power for actual harm, and so we dare not neglect the discipline of it. Because of the very capacities of the tongue for influence, it is capable of doing enormous harm.

And he gives another illustration. Do you notice that he gives each of these illustrations the introductory word, *behold*. It's translated in verse 3 as *now* but in each of the other illustrations it's translated *behold* perhaps in your English Bible. But the third illustration that he gives right here in verse 5 after the illustration of the horse and of the ship is one that is a little bit close to home in dry parts of our nation. There is a woman in Arizona who really understands what James means when he says that a small fire can burn down a large forest. A small fire burned down a forest larger than the state of Rhode Island this year. The woman who started it knows how much damage a small fire can do. She almost wound up in jail for starting that fire. And that is precisely the illustration that James gives. He says in verse 6 that the tongue is just like that. It has the power to defile the entire body and the whole course of life.

I remember a friend starting a rumor that went all the way to Britain and came back again and caused a major controversy. And he learned what rumors and gossiping could do. The tongue has the power to defile the entire body and the whole course of life. And, in fact, he says in verse 6 that the source of that kind of use of the tongue is hell. James is simply pointing out the fact that though the tongue can be used greatly for encouragement, it correspondingly can be used for damage, for harm. It can destroy. Talk burns. It can redirect the course of life. It can disrupt a family. It can divide a congregation. We always knew that when our mother said "sticks and stones will break your bones, but words will never harm you" that they were just trying to say something to make us feel better. Because those words often hurt more than we heard, than any stick or stone that we had ever felt. Parents who watch children, it doesn't matter whether they're young or whether they're adolescent, know the power of harm that words can do. How many parents in this room have had their hearts break as they have seen something that another child has said to their child or that their child has said to another child? Children can be incredibly cruel in the words that they use against one another. And those words can cause divisions and damage that are never, ever repaired. James is saying the tongue is important not only because it's influential, because it can do huge damage.

III. The tongue is humanly uncontrollable, and so we have to turn to some help outside of ourselves to tame it.

Thirdly, James goes on to say in verses 7 and 8 that the tongue is, humanly speaking, uncontrollable. The tongue is humanly uncontrollable and so we have to turn to some help outside of ourselves in order to tame them. The tongue is an

indisputable evidence of the need for divine grace. And again, he takes a very common illustration. In verse 7 he says humans can train animals, but they can't tame tongues. Go to the circus. Go to Sea World. Go to the gulf aquarium and you will see humans show an incredible ability to train animals who are not normally domestic animals to do incredible tricks. Dolphins and otters, lions and elephants are amazingly taught by humans to do amazing behaviors. And yet James says, though humans can teach beasts to do tricks, they can't tame their own tongue. It's an ongoing, unavoidable evidence of the power of sin.

You remember when the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 3:14-15 wants to convince you that you really are a sinner and that you need grace, one of the things he does is that he goes to the tongue, and he says your tongue shows you that you need forgiveness of sins. If somebody responds to Paul, "Paul, I'm not a sinner. I don't need this Jesus. I don't need this grace that you're talking about from God." Paul's response is, "O.K., well, let's talk about your speech. What does your speech say about you?" And that speech shows us all our need for grace.

But it also shows us our powerlessness to change ourselves. James says "The tongue no one can tame." James is indicating that we have to go to outside help to change our speech, because our tongue reveals our heart. Our heart is not the solution to our tongue. So the people who tell us that we need to look within and find the goodness within have no solution for the tongue. Because the tongue is a heart problem. The tongue problem is a heart problem. So if you're going to solve the tongue problem, which is a heart problem, you can't look at the heart. You have to look somewhere else. And, of course, James is pointing us there to the grace of God which is in Jesus Christ.

Maybe you're struggling with the tongue this morning. Maybe you're struggling with gossip or with nagging. Maybe you're struggling with lying. Maybe you're struggling with boasting. You so desire the esteem of your classmates that you'll say anything to get them to think that you are with it, that you're cutting edge, that you're part of the in crowd. Maybe, maybe you are building yourself up by cutting other people down. Maybe you are sharing rumors which are causing division in a family or in the church. All of these things point to a sin problem, a heart problem that can't be solved by ourselves. It can only be solved by the grace of god in Jesus Christ. And so, whether we are Christians struggling with this sin or whether we are nonChristians struggling with this sin, we need to run to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ for the answer.

If we are a nonChristian, we need to run to the Lord Jesus Christ to be changed, to be transformed, not to turn over a new leaf, but to be changed from the inside out by the grace of God.

If we're Christians then we need to realize that we're not acting like Christians when we're committing these kinds of sins of the tongue, and we need to apply

ourselves in prayer to Christ for grace so that we might grow, so that we might stop this kind of use of speech and use it for godly purposes. And so James teaches us that the tongue is, humanly speaking, uncontrollable. And, therefore, it is very, very important because it shows us our need for grace.

IV. The tongue reveals deep-seated inconsistencies in spiritual life.

Fourthly, in verses 8-10, he goes on to say that the tongue is important because it reveals deep-seated inconsistencies in spiritual life. The tongue, though made by God to be a blessing, is used for both good and evil even by professing believers. Have you noticed that in verse 10 and in verse 12 James repeats the phrase "my brethren." In other words, he's indicating that the people to whom he is speaking he considers to be brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, and yet they are struggling with inconsistency in their language. James never specifies what that consistency is. Maybe he hints at it in the words *boasting*, "the tongue is small but it boasts of great things." Maybe he's speaking of prideful speech, but sins of the tongue are almost too many to list. He could have been speaking about lying. He could have been speaking about misleading. He could have been speaking about nagging. He could have been speaking about gossiping. He could have been speaking about cynical, satirical, cutting speech which is designed to cut another person down. There are numerous things that fall under the sin of the tongue, but he characterizes them all as "restless evil and full of deadly poison" in verse 8.

And then he observes that the tongue is used both to worship god and to malign those who are made in the image of God. And in verse 10, he says, "brothers, it shouldn't be this way." James is saying that the tongue itself, in its use and misuse, reveals deep-seated inconsistencies in spiritual life. You know, often times when we see something about ourselves that we don't like, we downplay that sin. Other sins are big. But our sin, oh, that's just a nice little sin. It's not a real problem. And what is James saying in verses 8-10? The tongue is a big problem. It's a real problem. It's a real big problem. And so when we see ourselves both using the tongue for blessing and for cursing, James is saying you're seeing an evidence of a deep-seated inconsistency in the Christian life that needs to be corrected. We need to run to god for grace. And it requires us both to humble ourselves in prayer before god, to consider the way that we're talking and to be vigilant monitoring the use of our tongues.

V. The tongue is an index of the heart.

But James isn't finished. In verses 11 and 12 he tells us that the tongue is an index of our heart. It not only reveals deep-seated inconsistencies, but it really shows us what is in our heart. And again, James is following his older brother, our master and Savior Jesus Christ, because in Matthew 15 verses 10 and 11

Jesus says to the crowd around Him, "Hear and understand, it is not what enters into the mouth of man that defiles him, but what proceeds out of the mouth that defiles the man." And both of the illustrations that James uses in verses 11 and 12 corroborate that point. A fountain cannot send out both fresh and bitter water, and a fig tree can't produce olives anymore than a vine can produce figs.

The point is that hypocrisy in speech reveals a heart problem. Inconsistency in speech reveals a heart problem that needs a remedy. If we are Christians, that heart problem is the remedy of sanctification. But sanctification is not only going to involve God working in us, but our striving as well. As Paul would say in Philippians 2:12-13, "Work out your sanctification with fear and with trembling because it is God who is at work in you."

In other words, Paul is stressing that God is at work in our growth and grace and we must be at work in our growth and grace. This is totally different from justification. We don't work at all in justification. God works by Christ to accept us as his children. But as we grow in grace we must strive, too.

But if these words are heard by the person who's not a Christian this morning, there's no work that you can do. The only thing that you can do is renounce your work. Because your work won't save you here. If you're not a believer, the only thing that you can do is to apply to Christ for grace, to trust in Him that He can change you even in the area of speech.

Now James says that our speech says something about our heart. And because of that the tongue is important. May God grant that we as a congregation grow in showing the mind of Christ our Savior in the things we say. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for the searching truth of Your word. And we are humbled when we consider our own speech in light of Your word. None of us can speak on this subject without self-indictment for we have all stumbled here. But we do not use this as an excuse not to grow, for we want to be like the Lord Jesus. We want to show that we know the love of the Lord Jesus. And that the love of the Lord Jesus is in our heart, and so, O God, may the mind of Christ our Savior so live in us day by day that His power is displayed in us not only in all that we do but in all that we say. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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