Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Taming the Tongue, Part 1
Scripture: James 3:1-5a
Code: 59-17

Let's open our Bibles as we study God's Word tonight to the third chapter of James, the third chapter of James. While you're doing that, just tell you a little personal incident that occurred in my life some years ago when I was pastoring here at Grace Church. I went to the dentist to have my every-five-year checkup. And he was fooling around in my mouth, doing whatever dentists do with all those things they poke at. And when he was finished, he said, "You have a problem." He said, "You have a rather large tumor on your tongue," which is not something that a preacher wants to hear. He said, "I don't know whether it's benign or malignant, but you need to go to a surgeon and have it removed." I asked him how large it was, he said, "It's larger than your thumb, and it's located somewhere in the back where you can't see it."

And I remember saying to the dentist at that time, "Now look, you start messing with my tongue and you're really getting to me. I live by my tongue." And I've thought about that many times since. They did the surgery a couple of days later, and what they found was benign and as far as I know, I haven't had any recurrence, although I admit I haven't been to a dentist in a while. But I've thought about that many times, that statement, "When you get to my tongue, you start messing with my tongue, you're really getting to me," and that's very true in quite another way than I intended it. The tongue really is you, it really is. The tongue is a tattletale, and it tells on the heart. Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." The tongue is the revealer of the heart.

Now, in this third chapter, James presents the matter of the tongue as another test of living faith, because true faith will be demonstrated by speech, and so will false faith. Nothing is more telling on the heart than the tongue, and it's of great concern to James. He mentions the tongue in every chapter. He mentions it twice in chapter 1, verses 19 and 26. He mentions it in chapter 2, verse 12. He mentions it in chapter 4, verse 11. He mentions it in chapter 5, verse 12, and he spends a large portion of chapter 3 dealing specifically with the matter of the tongue. Now, James, as you remember, is being used by the Holy Spirit to show us that true believers, who have been begotten by the Word of God, as he put it in chapter 1, verse 18, will manifest that new life in the way they live.

It will show up by their endurance in trials, as we saw in chapter 1. It will show up by their humility in temptation, which we also saw in chapter 1. It will show up by their obedience to the Scripture, which we also saw in chapter 1; by their loving concern for the needy without partiality, which we saw in chapter 2. It will show up by their life being a pattern of good works, which we saw in chapter 2, verses 14 to 26. And now he says new life, transformation, salvation will show up in the way people

talk. Their tongue, their speech, will tell on their heart. And so James is demanding here that we recognize that living faith shows itself in the control of the tongue.

Now, throughout the verses that begin the third chapter, down through verse 12, the words “mouth” and “tongue” are used frequently with reference to speech. And perhaps we ought to say at the very outset that James speaks of the mouth, and he speaks of the tongue, and in a sense he personifies them. Somebody has asked the question, “Why doesn’t James use the heart? Why doesn’t he say the heart is the problem, why does he say the tongue? The tongue only reacts to the heart. The mouth only responds to the heart.” But in Hebrew thought, the distinction between the man and the guilty member is not so clearly distinguished. The Hebrew, frankly, focuses very often on the guilty member rather than on the heart issue.

For example, we read about “feet swift to shed blood,” as if the feet were the culprits in a murder. We read about “eyes of adultery,” as if the eyes were guilty, when we know, of course, it’s the inner person. But in the Hebrew desire for concrete expression and practical expression, they very often spoke of the very member of the body itself as if it were the guilty party. And so, when James talks about the mouth and the tongue, it isn’t that he in fact blames the mouth and the tongue as if they operated independently of any other impulse. It is simply that they are the organ by which the heart expresses itself. And so James, in a sense, personifies the tongue as the living symbol of what is in the heart.

The rabbis – you can see this in Psalm 64, and verse 3 – used to say that the tongue was an arrow. And the reason they said the tongue was an arrow rather than the tongue was a knife was because an arrow kills at a distance, and the deadliness of the tongue was that it could kill without even being anywhere near the victim. The tongue is a deadly arrow. Nowhere is the union of faith and works more visible than in your speech and my speech. What a thought. In fact, somebody said, “Every one of us is carrying around a concealed weapon. All we have to do is open our mouths and it’s unconcealed.” Do you realize that you speak about 18 to 25,000 words a day? Some people have said that men speak 25,000 words a day and women speak 30,000 words a day.

I don’t know who counted that up, but the difficulty is by the time the man comes home from work, he has already spent his 25,000, and the woman hasn’t started on her 30,000. She’s been waiting for that opportunity. But we speak a tremendous number of words a day. Somebody calculated that we probably put together a 54-page book every day. And in a year, we would probably produce about 66 800-page books. This may shock you. You will, if you’re a normal person, spend one-fifth of your life talking. It’s kind of interesting, you probably remember as a child, I do, whenever I went to the doctor, my parents would take me to the doctor, the first thing the doctor would say is, “Let me see your tongue.”

And James is saying the same thing, “Let me see your tongue.” The nurse puts a thermometer under your tongue and tells your physical temperature. James says your tongue itself will take your spiritual temperature. Nothing is more liable to reveal total depravity than our mouth. As the people in the courtyard said to Peter, “The way you talk gives you away.” Well, they meant something different, but that’s a truism. And since God made His children by His Word, He assumes that they would be known by their words, and that there would be some connection between His Word, which produced them, and their word, which is the result of that producing.

It’s interesting to me, also, that in Genesis, chapter 3, verse 12, we find that the first actual sin after the fall was a sin of the tongue. It’s as if in the fall, the first expression of sin came right out of the mouth, because it sins most easily. Adam said, “The woman You gave me,” and slandered God by blaming God for the sin. And when the apostle Paul characterizes the fallenness of man, when he wants to design all the ugly features of man’s depravity, and when he wants to describe the wretchedness of man in his sinful condition, he hones right in on the tongue. And in Romans, chapter 3, very familiar words, in verse 13, he says this is how you describe a sinner: “Their throat is an open sepulcher; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of snakes is under their lips: Their mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.” The focal point of our fallenness and depravity is the mouth.

When Isaiah, wanting to confess to God his utter sinfulness in the midst of a vision of God’s holiness, expressed himself, he said, “I am a man with a dirty mouth.” Nothing more marked a man’s sinfulness than his mouth. A dirty mouth is most representative of depravity. So the mouth is the monitor on the human condition. Right words, then, would be the manifestation of a righteous life. That’s what James is saying. And so, in chapter 3, he calls us to measure our speech, to see if it is consistent with what we claim to be the reality of our faith. Controlling the tongue, then, is essential and James gives us five compelling reasons – five compelling reasons for the control of the tongue. We’ll look at the first couple of them tonight.

Number one: James calls us to control the tongue because its potential to condemn is so great – its potential to condemn. Verses 1 and 2: “My brothers, stop being so many teachers, knowing that we shall receive the greater judgment. For in many things we all stumble,” and we’ll stop at that point. James speaks about condemnation, or judgment. And the whole context of what he says at the beginning, though he doesn’t mention the tongue there, is this matter of speech. And the implication of what he is saying is, “You must take good care not to thrust yourself into a teaching position, because a teacher basically trades on his tongue, and you have such a high liability to abuse that, and to bring upon yourself potential judgment.”

That’s the point he’s making. And he begins with teachers, starting at the top, if speech is the mark of true faith, and if you go back to chapter 1, verse 26, he says that, “If any man among you seems to be religious, but bridles not his tongue, he deceives his own heart, the man’s religion is useless.” A faith which does not transform the tongue is no saving faith at all. So since speech is the mark of true faith,

it should be a proper measure, then, of those who articulate the faith, those who teach the faith. This also, by the way, points out the fact that dead faith, false faith, hypocrisy and deceit, is a danger for all men, even those who are teachers in the church. And even those who teach need to take a personal inventory on their speech to see if their faith is real.

And having introduced the subject at the level of teachers in the beginning, he will then move to a discussion more generally of everyone, and everyone's speech. Now, let's go back and look more closely at verse 1. "My brothers, let not many become teachers," and actually the "my brothers" comes after that in the Greek text, so that he starts out with this very strong statement, "Let not many become teachers." Now, that is not to deny the fact that God wants us to teach His Word, because God does want us to do that. The Lord wants us to articulate His truth. Back in Numbers, chapter 11, verse 26 through 29, we have an account, Moses talking. And Moses says, in verse 29, "Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!"

In the situation there with Eldad and Medad, Moses says, "I'm not disparaging about the role of a prophet, I wish to God that everybody did that." And there's a sense in which we wish that everyone were a preacher, and everyone were a teacher. And certainly, in Matthew 28, all of us are called to go into the world and make disciples, teaching people to observe whatever Christ has commanded. This is not disclaiming that. And there are some who are compelled to preach. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9, "Woe is unto me if I preach not." And in 1 Timothy 3, "If a man desires the office of an overseer" – which involves primarily teaching – "he desires a good thing." This is not to set that aside, or contradict that.

But it is to say we do not embark upon a teaching ministry without a sense of the seriousness involved. And no doubt in the assembly to which James is writing, there was some failure to consider this great seriousness, and people were aspiring and ascending to the teaching role with little or no thought as to the implications of it. And so he says, "My brothers," and thereby speaks of those who name the name of Christ within the church, "I want to prevent you from rushing in a foolish way into the role of teaching." Why? Because of the great potential to sin with your tongue; and when you sin with your tongue in private, that's one thing; when you sin with your tongue in public, that is quite another thing. And the potential for condemnation is far greater to the one at the wide level of verbal proclamation.

Now, what does he mean "to become a teacher" – what kind of teacher is he talking about? I began to think about that, and wondered just exactly what he had in mind. The word is *didaskalos*, it's the word that can be translated "master" in the gospels. So we could conclude that he's talking here about a recognized teacher; that he is saying, "Don't rush into the teaching office, don't rush into the preaching office. Don't hurry into some official ministry where you become a proclaimer and a teacher of God's Word." And among the Jews – and you remember James is writing to those with Jewish heritage and Jewish background – among the Jews there were official teachers.

There were official rabbis. Men like Nicodemus, who was recognized as a teacher in Israel. There were men who in that position loved their title, they loved their honor, they loved their recognition, they loved their power, they loved their prestige. In fact, everywhere a rabbi went, he was treated with great respect. It was actually believed that a man's duty to his rabbi exceeded his duty to his parents, because his parents only brought him into the life of this world, but his teacher brought him into the life of the world to come. It was actually said that if a man's parents and a man's teacher were captured by an enemy, the teacher must be ransomed first. If rabbi and parents needed help, it was a duty to help the rabbi first.

It was true that a rabbi was not allowed to take money for teaching, and that he was supposed to support his bodily needs by working at a trade, but it was held that it was especially pious and meritorious work to take a rabbi into your house and support him with every care. It was desperately easy, then, for a rabbi to become a kind of person whom Jesus depicted as a spiritual tyrant, an ostentatious ornament of piety, a lover of the highest place at any function, a person who gloried in the almost subservient respect which others allowed him in public. And it was that kind of attitude which Jesus so vociferously and pointedly condemned in Matthew 23, verses 4 through 7.

Such self-seeking honor coming from ill-intended motives was to be foreign to any true follower of Jesus Christ. And yet surely there were people in the congregation to which James writes who pursued that place of teacher because they were enamored with the whole aura of being in that position. And I might conclude that in the early church there were also officially-called teachers. There were apostles, and prophets, and pastors, and evangelists, and also teachers. The expression is very clearly mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:28, and you can decide whether it's pastor-teacher in Ephesians 4:11 or pastors and teachers, but there were those who were pastors, and evangelists, and teachers, and apostles, and prophets. And they were the officially recognized teachers in the church.

But beyond that, there were some unofficial opportunities to teach as well. For example, it was possible in a Jewish synagogue for unofficial teachers to stand up and speak. Anyone, for example, who was respected, who was revered, who had some kind of credentials, and some reason to be heard, could rise to teach in a synagogue, even though he had not properly been educated, or properly been schooled by that synagogue, or by any recognized instrument of that synagogue. A classic illustration of that would be our Lord Jesus Christ, who rose in the synagogue of Nazareth, stood to read the Scriptures, and then sat down to speak. He was a guest speaker, as it were. In Acts 13, as Paul and Barnabas are sent out from the church in Antioch, verses 5 and 15 have them arriving in a situation where they are given the opportunity to rise up in a synagogue and teach.

And so there were official teachers, and then there were unofficial opportunities to teach as well. I think that is true in the early church. If you look at 1 Corinthians 14, you will find, starting I think

around verse 26, Paul discusses the fact that in that church at Corinth, many people were speaking. He says, “When you come together, every one of you has a song, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.” And then he regulates that, by saying how it’s to be done and how it’s not to be done. But in the early church, apparently there was some format where people could rise up and give a teaching, a doctrine, a revelation, or whatever.

So you had, then, as in the synagogue, officials and unofficial teachers in the church, official and again unofficial teachers. And that’s not so foreign to us; we have that even now in our church, for example. We have officially recognized pastor-teachers, and evangelists, and teachers, who are set apart specifically to the function of teaching. And then there are many of you folks who teach. Maybe you teach in a home Bible study, maybe you teach in a children’s class, maybe you stand up to give a doctrine, a Word from the Lord, an understanding of Scripture in a Christian meeting or something. So I don’t think we want to limit James. Let’s go back to the verse and see what he says.

He says basically, a simple principle, “Let not many become teachers.” And I don’t think we can read into that any more than is there. Be very cautious when you embark upon the role of teacher at any level, whether it’s official or unofficial, because of the tremendous potential to condemnation your tongue will bring about. To go back to chapter 1, verse 19, “This you know, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear and slow to speak,” and this in a context of discussing the Word of God; swift to hear the Word of God, and slow to speak it. But in spite of this, there were and there are many who want to grab the prominence, who are impressed with the authority and the honor, and who have absolutely little or no thought about the responsibility and the accountability of such action.

Paul in instructing Timothy refers to such, in chapter 1 of 1 Timothy. He says, “There are some who have turned aside from the truth to vain jangling,” verse 7, “desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, or anything they’re affirming.” It was in the church at Ephesus. It was no doubt among the assembled saints to whom James writes that there were some aspiring to the role of teaching who had absolutely no idea of the possible implications of teaching error. It’s a frightening truth. It ought to be delivered to anyone who aspires to that position. James is not restraining the genuinely gifted. He is not restraining the genuinely qualified. He is not restraining the genuinely called. He is not restraining the sincere and knowledgeable.

But he is saying, “Take very great pains to ascertain the seriousness of the role of teaching, before you – to put it in the vernacular – shoot off your mouth.” He has in mind not only false teachers, but ignorant, unqualified, unprepared, and wrongly instructed teachers. Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord spoke,” Leviticus 10:3, and I’ll tell you, that sticks in my mind, and has for a while; this is what the Lord spoke. There’s one thing that I have made a continual burden in my own heart before the Lord in prayer every time I speak, and that is, “Lord, please let me say what You intended to say.” And no teacher should ever say less. Never. It is a weighty responsibility, not to be embarked upon

readily or easily.

The responsibility of the teacher is given twice in the book of Ezekiel, chapter 3, verses 17 and 18; chapter 33, verses 7 and 8 and 9, where the teacher is really warned that he is sort of a watchman on the wall to warn the people, and he better be careful that he does it right, or their blood is liable to be on his hands. In other words, there is a sense in which there is great responsibility. Paul, almost with a sigh of relief, in Acts 20 says, “I am clear from the blood of any man. I have not failed to declare unto you the whole counsel of God. I’ve discharged my duty.” Hebrews 13:17 says that we have to give an account to God for how we give leadership and direction and teaching to God’s people. It is indeed a serious issue.

We don’t even need to go into passages like 2 Peter 2, and the book of Jude, where God pronounces terrifying judgment on a false teacher. But even one who endeavors to teach the truth must understand something of the tremendous responsibility that he undertakes in doing that. Is it any wonder that John Knox, the first time he went into a pulpit, wept so uncontrollably they had to take him out, because he was so burdened with the task at hand? Don’t be quick to rush into the teaching position. I shared with some of our staff this week a quote from a preacher by the name of Bruce Thielemann. He said, “There’s no special honor in preaching, there is only special pain. The pulpit calls those anointed to it as the sea calls its sailors. And like the sea, it batters and bruises and does not rest. To preach, to really preach, is to die naked a little at a time, and to know each time you do it that you must do it again,” end quote.

“Do not swell the ranks of preachers,” says one translator. Why? Because the tongue has such potential for condemnation. Verse 1: “Knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment,” and the “we” is the “we” of identification. James pulls himself right in as one who is a teacher. He does not want to warn others without including himself. It is a stern warning relative to the accountability of anyone who teaches. We have a tremendous accountability to God when we teach at any level. That’s why it says, in 2 Timothy 2, “Be diligent to be approved of God, a workman that needs not to be” – what – “ashamed, because he is rightly dividing the word of truth.” There is shame connected with teaching error, and there is also judgment connected with teaching error.

That’s why, in 1 Timothy, chapter 4, the apostle Paul tells Timothy, “Look, be nourished up in the words of faith and good doctrine. Stay away from profane and old women’s fables.” And further down in the same text, “Give yourself to reading and exhortation and teaching.” And further down, “Meditate on these things.” And again, “Take heed to yourself and unto your teaching.” Very, very, very important matter. The word “judgment” is *krima*. It’s a neutral term, but generally is used in the New Testament to express a negative judgment. The future tense here probably looks at the judgment in the future when we will stand before the Lord. For an unsaved false teacher, it would be the time of the second coming in fearful judgment, that time spoken of by Jude, when Jude says, “The Lord comes with ten thousand of His saints.

“To execute judgment on all, and convict all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him” – that in a context of false teaching. So the future judgment for an unbeliever will be at the Second Coming of Christ. The future judgment for a believer would certainly be at the judgment seat of Christ, when we stand face to face with Him to receive whatever reward He would deem fitting to give to us. First Corinthians 4 says at that time “the Lord will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, make manifest the counsels of the heart: and then shall every man have praise of God.”

And Paul says, “Look, I’m going to wait till that time to have my ministry evaluated. It’s a small thing what you think. It’s a small thing what I think. It’s a big thing what God thinks, and I minister in view of what is coming ahead.” And I could tell you, I’ve been asked on several occasions, for whom do I prepare my sermons? One reporter said to me, “When newspapers are written for the eighth grade, for whom do you prepare your sermons?” And I said, “You might not understand this, but I prepare them for God. My only concern is that God be pleased, and His name be honored, and His Word be treated fairly and honestly.” And if I feel that I have done less than my best in that way, life becomes miserable at the deepest level for me.

So being a teacher of God’s Word is a very dangerous occupation for anyone, because of the power of the tongue to speak error, or to speak misjudgment, or to speak inappropriately, or to misrepresent Christ, or the Holy Spirit. And that’s why even the apostle Paul was reluctant; he was reluctant until he was pressed to do that. And you remember, he was converted in a marvelous conversion on the Damascus Road, but it was a long time, really, before he began to articulate the things of God. God took him out into the Nabatean area of Arabia and trained him for two years, and brought him back ready to proclaim. This is a great liability.

You say, “Well, maybe some of us can avoid it.” Look at verse 2. “We all stumble in many ways.” And the implication James is laying down here is “and the mouth is certainly one major one.” Everyone sins in a myriad of ways. And this one way, the mouth, underlies the warning regarding hurrying into the position of teaching. He says, “We all stumble.” This is a comprehensive word on the depravity of everybody. Proverbs 20, verse 9, says, “Who can say I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from sin?” The answer is nobody. Second Chronicles 6:36 says, “There is no man who does not sin.” Folks, you can’t put it any plainer than that. There is no man who does not sin. “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”

So we all sin, and we all sin in many ways. The word here is the word “stumble,” which is a substitute for the word “sin.” It means a moral lapse, a failure to do what is right; an offense against God is the idea. We all do it. It is present tense. We all do it commonly, and we all do it in many ways. In all kinds of ways, all of us continually fail to do what is right, and the tongue is one very, very dominant way in which we fail. And so it has great potential to condemn us. Now, while, in a sense, this is a

confession on the part of James, it is more an observation of truth than a personal confession. What he is saying is, “Don’t hurry to be spending your life using your mouth if you realize how potentially disastrous that is. Because you are a sinner, you’ll take it quite reluctantly rather than hurriedly.”

Scriptures refer to the disaster of the mouth. The Bible –and I just wrote down a list of things as I went through the Scriptures – the Bible refers directly or indirectly to a wicked tongue, a deceitful tongue, a lying tongue, a perverse tongue, a filthy tongue, a corrupt tongue, a bitter tongue, an angry tongue, a crafty tongue, a flattering tongue, a slanderous tongue, a gossiping tongue, a back-biting tongue, a blaspheming tongue, a foolish tongue, a boasting tongue, a murmuring tongue, a complaining tongue, a cursing tongue, a contentious tongue, a sensual tongue, a vile tongue, a tale-bearing tongue, a whispering tongue, an exaggerating tongue, et cetera. Did you see yourself anywhere in there? No wonder God put your tongue in a cage behind your teeth, walled in by your mouth.

May I be bold to say, most problems relate to the tongue – most of them. Somebody said, “Remember your tongue is in a wet place, and it can slip easily.” The easiest way to sin is to sin with your tongue. Nothing is more representative of man’s sinfulness than his mouth, and there is no easier way to sin than with your mouth, because you can say anything you want to say. There are no restraints. You can’t do any evil deed you might want to do, because maybe the circumstances aren’t there for you to do it. But you can say absolutely anything. But your tongue has tremendous potential to judge you. To look at this from the vantage point of our Lord, turn to Matthew, chapter 12. Matthew chapter 12, verse 34, most pointed.

And here Jesus is in a very intense dialogue with the Pharisees, who have accused Him of doing His works by the power of hell rather than heaven. And Jesus comes back at them, in verse 34, and says, “O generation of snakes, how can you, being evil, speak good things?” That’s just a basic truth. James will get back to that same principle later. “How can you, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.” I expect you to talk the way you talk because your heart’s the way it is. “A good man, out of the good treasure of the heart, brings forth good things: an evil man, out of the evil treasure, brings forth evil things. But I say to you” – mark this – “every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned.” Boy, what a statement.

Listen to this: do you realize that in final judgment, your eternal destiny can be determined by your words? You say, “I thought I was justified by faith in Jesus Christ.” That’s right. But the justification you receive by faith in Jesus Christ will be manifest in your words, so that you can literally be judged according to your words, for your words are a tattletale, they tell on your heart. And so in the end, it is right to say you’ll be judged by your words as to whether you are to go into the Kingdom of God or be shut out of the Kingdom. Your words. You say, “Does the Lord keep a record of everybody’s words?” It’s easy for Him. He doesn’t even have to write them down.

Do you know that even science has some interesting things to say? I read some years ago about a man who turned on his television in London, England, and saw a half-hour program that came out of Texas. He was so absolutely curious about the program that he called the station, found out that that was a local program that had been broadcast three years earlier. The only explanation they had that made any sense as to how he picked it up on his television was the fact that scientifically once something goes out into the airwaves, it stays there, and somehow it found its way to his receiver. Scientists say that the sound waves set in motion by every voice go on an endless journey through space.

And that if we had the right instruments, delicate and sophisticated enough, and the power to recapture those waves, we could recreate every word every person has ever spoken. Frightening. God has that machine. And so there's a real sense in which men's words will be the basis of their judgment, because they are the absolutely accurate judge of their soul. A man's heart is the storehouse, and his words indicate what is stored there. Proverbs 15:28 says, "The mouth of the wicked pours out evil things." So when you give your life to Christ, and your life is transformed, and you have a new heart, you have a new vocabulary. And certainly that great gift ought to be cultivated.

I believe God gives us a new heart, and with it comes a new tongue, but even that new tongue is a victim of that old fallenness, isn't it? So James says, "Control your tongue, because it has such potential to condemn." Secondly, it has such power to control. Not only does it have potential to condemn, but it has power to control. And this is absolutely fascinating. I hope we can get to this just dramatic spiritual insight. Everyone sins with the tongue. James says in verse 2, "If anyone stumbles or offends not in word, he is a perfect man." The only people who don't sin with their mouth are perfect people. Now, there's an interesting sort of debate about what James means here.

Does he mean perfect – *teleios* – does he mean perfect in the sense of absolutely perfect like God, like Christ? Well, he could mean that. He could be saying, "If a man does not ever stumble in his words, or offend in his words, he would be an absolutely perfect man." That's correct. And if he is saying that, then he is really saying, "None of you are perfect, so forget the idea that you think you might not stumble with your words, because only perfect people don't do that, and nobody's perfect." On the other hand, he may be using the word *teleios* to express maturity. And what he is saying, then, in a general sense, is if a man does not continue to stumble with his mouth or words, the same is a mature man. That is, he has reached spiritual maturity. He is like Christ, though not exactly like Christ.

I don't know that we can be dogmatic as to exactly which one James means, but let's just take them both. And let's say that James could be saying if you don't ever do that with your mouth, you're perfect, and no one can be perfect. And if you get control of your tongue, you're demonstrating spiritual maturity. I kind of lean toward that view. James is saying only spiritual mature people are

able to control their tongue. The only human being who ever lived who had an absolutely perfect tongue was Jesus Christ, and in John 7:46, you remember what they said? “No man ever spoke like this man.” He was perfect in His speech, absolutely without error. Listen to this: “Who did no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth.” No sin in His life, no sin in His mouth.

And so we can say, then, that to the degree that our holiness approaches the holiness of Christ, to that degree, we are conformed to His image, to that degree, our speech will be godly. And look what he says, verse 2: “If any man doesn’t stumble in word, he is a mature man, and able also to bridle his whole body,” to bridle the whole body as well. Now get this – this is a tremendously practical spiritual thought. I don’t think I ever really grasped this before. If a person can master his tongue, he can master his evil tendencies throughout his whole body, and that means his person. “Now, how do you come to that conclusion, James?” Listen.

The tongue, because it is the instant expression of the heart, because it can sin more readily and more often than any other member of the body, just because of circumstances – you can’t get in a position to sin in every way with your body, but you’re always in a position to sin with your tongue. Because the tongue can sin so easily, because it is such a monitor of depravity, if you can control the tongue, the greater sinner in your body, then by virtue of controlling the greater, you have gained control over the lesser. You see that? The person who controls the tongue will also control the body, with all of its other impulses. Since the tongue responds more immediately, and more quickly, and more easily, to sin, if it were controlled, the slower-responding parts would also be controlled, because the means of divine grace applied to the greater are then also applied to the lesser. What an insight.

You know what that says to me? That says if I want to focus my Christian life on one thing, if I want to get my act together, if I want to bring my whole spiritual life into control, I ought to work on my what? My tongue. Well, now we realize that it’s not fully possible to totally have a holy tongue, but to the extent that one controls his tongue, he will control his body. Why? Because whatever spiritual dynamics work to control your tongue will therefore work to control the rest of you. But it makes it so simple and so dynamic if we can just concentrate on the tongue. Isn’t that practical? I mean, just get it down to that. Focus on your mouth. And if the Holy Spirit gets control of the most volatile and the most potent member, the rest will be subdued.

Warren Weirsbe tells the story about a pastor friend who came to him and said he had a member of his church who was a notorious gossip. She would hang on the phone most all day long, sharing tidbits with anybody who would listen to her. She came to this pastor friend of Warren Weirsbe one day and she said, “Pastor, the Lord’s convicted me of my sin of gossip. My tongue is getting me and others into trouble.” He says, “My friend knew that she was not sincere, because she had gone through that routine so many times before. And guardedly he asked, ‘Well, what do you plan to do?’ Very piously she said, ‘I want to put my tongue on the altar.’” To which my friend calmly replied,

‘There isn’t an altar big enough.’”

Well, I don’t want to argue with him, but I think there is an altar big enough. I think we have to focus on our mouth, that’s what James is saying. Well, what a simplification, just concentrate on what you say; and whatever means of grace, and whatever dynamics of spiritual commitment take care of your tongue are going to, by virtue of controlling that, control the rest of you. The psalmist put it this way in Psalm 39, verse 1: “I said, ‘I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue. I will guard my mouth as with a muzzle.’” That is the place to start, beloved, that is the place to start. To help us understand that, James gives us two illustrations. Verse 3, “Now,” he says “we put bits in the horses’ mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.”

Here’s illustration number one – boy, this is a first-class illustration – to show that if you control the tongue, you control everything. He uses a horse. How do you control a horse? You control a horse by controlling his tongue. You put a piece of metal in a horse’s mouth. It lays on his tongue. And then you put a harness around that, pull it up over his head, take some reins, and when you pull that, you pull that metal bit against the horse’s tongue. So it is a very good illustration. By controlling the horse’s tongue, you control the horse’s movements. A horse, by the way, let me tell you, is useless without that. Did you ever know a horse to volunteer to plow a field? Just show up one day, “Like to plow your field, sir.” Did you ever know a horse to volunteer to pull a wagon? How about a horse volunteer to carry a rider?

You have to break them, don’t you? And you break them with a bit in the mouth, and you control the whole body by controlling the tongue. You can direct the whole body. That’s what James is saying. You get control of your tongue and you can direct your whole body. Everything else comes into line. What a graphic illustration. In fact, this is axiomatic enough that it may have been standard stock for writers and wise men in that time and place, and James may even be borrowing the illustration. But the point is clear. By controlling the tongue, the whole life is directed to a useful purpose. Without the control of the tongue, the horse is absolutely useless. You want to know something? An unbroken, unbridled horse is absolutely good for nothing, just run around.

Another illustration he gives in verse 4. “Behold,” he says, here’s another one: “the ships, though they are so great, and driven by strong winds, yet are they turned about with a very small rudder, wherever the pilot desires,” or “wherever the impulse of the pilot desires.” That’s another very graphic illustration. A huge ship, and you say, “Well, they weren’t so big in that day.” Well, the one in Acts 27, if I remember right, had 276 passengers on it; that’s a pretty good size ship, driven in tremendous Euroclydon, euroaquilo, that northeastern wind that came. That great ship driven across the Mediterranean, of course, was out of control in Acts 27, but under control, it was guided totally by the rudder. That small little rudder moves that massive ship.

I have been, this summer I was on a 70,000 ton vessel. It's a city, absolutely an entire floating city, thousands of people on it. And it's moved through the sea by this little rudder. I went up to the captain's quarters, and then up on the steering bridge, and there is a guy with this little thing in his hand moving that city everywhere and anywhere, pulling it into a dock, and doesn't even touch the dock – such control. That's what James says. If you can just get control of the little tongue, you can move everything else. The idea is this – listen to it: power applied at the right point is sufficient to control the whole vessel. And power applied at the right point, being the mouth, is sufficient to control the whole person.

And that's the second point. James says control your tongue because of its power to control you – its power to control you. Speak only gracious words. Can I be real practical with you? Speak only gracious words. Speak only kind words. Speak only loving words, true words, thoughtful words, holy words, sensitive words, edifying words. Speak only gentle words, comforting words, words of blessing, words of humility, words of wisdom, words of thanksgiving. Speak only unselfish words, and peaceful words, and if you do that, you'll control every other part of your life, because the only way you can do all of that is being under the power of the Spirit of God. But the focal point is to concentrate on the control of your tongue.

Boy, does that simplify things conceptually. Your tongue is like a master switch. One commentator writes, "If our tongue were so well under control that it refused to formulate the words of self-pity, the images of lustfulness, the thoughts of anger and resentment, then these things are cut down before they have a chance to live. The master switch has deprived them of any power to switch on that side of our lives. The control of the tongue is more than an evidence of spiritual maturity; it is also the means to it." The master-switch – what an idea. I have in my back of my house this switchboard that I have a whole lot of these little switches on, you know, circuit breakers. And one at the bottom is a master switch.

And you can switch off anything you want. You can play with all the others all the way along, or you can just shut the whole thing down by throwing the master switch, and then it's absolutely irrelevant what you do with the others. That's essentially what this writer is saying. Your tongue is the master switch. Throw that thing off, and nothing else can function. Every other thing becomes inconsequential. And he sums it up in verse 5. "Even so, the tongue is a little member, but boasts great things." Stop there. What does he mean? It's a braggart, it boasts great things. You know why? It can do great things. Boy, it's potent. It is proud of its power to control, and it can really do it.

It is a powerful instrument. It can tear down people. It can tear down churches. It can destroy relationships. It can wreck a marriage. It can devastate a family. It can rip up a nation. It can lead to murder. It can lead to war. On the other hand, it can build up. It can create love, enthusiasm, encouragement, comfort, peace, joy. Powerful, powerful thing is the tongue. And if we get a hold of it and control it, it can control all the rest of us. So James says, "Look at your speech. Is it the speech of

living faith? And apply yourself to control your tongue, because of its power to condemn you and its power to control you." What a practical word that is for us. Let's bow together in prayer.

And just before we pray, there's so much more to be said. I really feel the Lord is going to instruct us as we go through the next portion of this next Lord's Day. But let's covenant together, and this has been on my heart all week, it's just been unspoken. I resist making public announcements about what I'm going to do, but in my heart I've asked the Lord to begin to help me on a daily basis to start every day with a conscious desire to let the Spirit of God control my tongue – to let the Spirit of God control my tongue. After all, as it says in Colossians, chapter 3, "If I have put on the new man, then I should put aside all anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from my mouth, and never lie to anyone, and lay aside all the old self with its evil practices."

If I'm a new creature in Christ, there's no place for that. And how can I harness all of the potential areas in my life? James says, "Control your tongue." So let's just covenant in our hearts each day to start that day with a conscious effort that sustains through the day, to let my tongue be an instrument of grace, and blessing, and truth, to all who hear me speak. And as I devote myself to a Spirit-controlled tongue, everything else will come into line. Let's pray, in silence, each of us, inviting the Spirit of God to work that way in our lives. Father, we do ask You that You would give us the grace by Your Spirit to control our tongue.

Even those of us who are redeemed, who have a living faith, who are truly transformed, who have a new heart, a heart that brings forth good things, find that there are so many of those old things still there, left in our flesh. Lord, help us to yield to the Spirit at the point of our tongue, so that our speech is always with grace, seasoned with salt, building up one another. Forgive us – forgive us, Lord, for the violations of speech, so frequent. And sanctify our mouths and so our whole bodies for Your glory. In Christ's name, amen.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2016 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).