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**The Treacherous Tongue**  
**James 3:1-12**

It was Saturday evening in 1899 and four reporters from four different Denver Colorado newspapers all had the same problem. They were all struggling to come up with a story for the Sunday morning news. It was getting later in the evening and none of them had come up with anything worthy of print...and all four ended up at the Oxford Hotel at the bar drinking a beer sharing their misery. Al decided he would make up a story and turn it in. The other three laughed. Jack said he liked the idea and suggested all four fake a story and get off the hook. John thought they were all thinking too small and ought to get together and come up with one big whopper they could all use. They drank another round of beers. A phony domestic story would be too easy to check out, so discussing foreign angles they came up with China. They decided to write that a group of American Engineers were stopping over in Denver en route to China as the Chinese government were making plans to demolish the Great Wall and the engineers were asked to bid on the job. Harold was skeptical. Why would the Chinese government want to destroy their great wall? John thought and replied, "Their going to tear down the ancient boundary to symbolize international goodwill and welcome foreign trade." Another round of beers. By 11:00pm the four reporters had their stories outlined. They even went so far as to walk over and check four fictitious names of engineers into the hotel registry. They instructed the hotel clerk to tell anyone who asked that the engineers had left for California early that next morning. All four Denver newspapers carried the story on the front page. The Times Sunday headline read, "Great Chinese wall doomed! Peking seeks world trade!" It

was a phony made up story by four drunk newspaper reporters, but the story was taken seriously and was picked up and expanded on by papers on the East coast and then it spread to Europe and beyond. When the Chinese learned that the Americans were sending a demolition crew to tear down their national monument, they were enraged. Particularly upset was a militant group of Chinese traditionalists who were already on edge about foreign influence in China. This story was the spark that set them on a rampage against foreign embassies in Peking and slaughtered hundreds of missionaries. Within two months of the article thousands of military troops were sent in from six different countries in order to protect their own countrymen. The bloodshed and war that followed was sparked off by a hoax invented in a Denver bar. Every high school history student knows this as the Boxer Rebellion. And now you know the rest of the story. (K. Hughes p135)

Wars have started by a mere word. Lives have been ruined and placed in great power by the power of a word. Remember the children's rhyme; "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." Not true is it? We remember the scars of hurtful words spoken to us far longer than we do a broken arm or kick in the leg.

James wants to wake us up and see the incredible power of the words that we let out past our teeth and lips. James wants us to see how those words are an indicator of the spiritual condition deep down inside our heart. James wants us to know that the words that come out of us give evidence to a faith that is vital. In chapter 2 James challenges us to do a spiritual checkup. Our faith is vital and living when it is shown in our good deeds. Here in chapter three James does not stop from punching at us. He tells us to stop and listen to our words for it will reveal the vital faith within.

Turn with me in your Bibles to the book of James. We are in the middle of our "Faith Works" series. James is writing to believers and hammering his main point that faith, if its real, faith must work. The

believers who received this letter must have really struggled with controlling their tongues because James mentions something about it in every chapter of his book. In 1:19 “be slow to speak.” In 1:16 “If anyone thinks himself to be religious but does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless.” 2:12 “So speak and act as those who will be judged...” Now in chapter 3 read with me v.1-12.(READ)

James says, “I want you to wake up, people!” Do not discount. Do not underestimate. Do not minimize the power of the tongue both for great things and for destruction. V.1 You who are teachers, And you who aspire to be teachers, please be very careful that you do not pursue such a task in a casual, lazy or flippant manner. Teachers will be held responsible for all they teach. The more people they tell the more they will be held accountable. To much has been given much will be required. The problem with teachers is that when they fail to back up what they are teaching with their actions it can cause more damage then help. It is like the father that says, “Do as I say, not as I do”. Even if his words are right and true, his example wipes out the truth. Actions speak far louder then words. So James says please be very careful if you are aspiring to teach.

James is not trying to lower the competition by minimizing the teaching pool. The church can always use more good teachers. The Bible says those who pursue teaching pursue a good thing. But James wants to make sure people are pursuing teaching with the right motives. The teachers or ‘rabbi’s’ in Jesus day were treated with great respect. Their words were taken very seriously. A man’s duty to his Rabbi was even greater then his duty to his own parents for even though his parent brought him into the world, it was a Rabbi that could bring him into the world to come. It was said that if a Rabbi and your parents were captured by the enemy, the Rabbi must be ransomed first. That same respect for teachers spilled into the early church and many longed to

enjoy those benefits and honor. James says, "Please be careful those who desire to teach. The words that you speak are powerful. With great honor comes great responsibility. We will all be held accountable for our words. Unbelievers will be judged for their sin at the Great White Throne judgment. Romans 8:1 is clear that believers will not stand in judgment for our sin that has been paid for in full by Jesus at the cross. But believers will be judged at the Bema seat of Christ each of us giving account for our words and actions. (II Cor. 5:10), (Romans 14:12) In I Cor 3:12-15 it talks about the foundation that we build may be built using gold and silver or wood hay or straw. Our good deeds will be exposed for what they really are, revealed by fire. If it is all burned up, he will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. We will all be judged for the words we speak, the teachers will endure a stricter judgment. Please don't take it lightly.

V.2 James is the first to admit no one is perfectly able to control the tongue. He is quick to include himself, "for WE ALL stumble in many ways." We all talk a lot of words. Teachers tend to speak even more words. Humor me for just a moment. If everyone would please stand up. Yes. Good now turn and face the back of the gym. Take your right hand and place it on your head. Is it not amazing the power of words to move people? Go ahead and sit down. I didn't do that to make you mad at me, but simply to illustrate a point. Our words, even simply words have the power to move people to act.

James like a good preacher uses illustrations to make his point. V.3 he uses the example of a bit and bridle in the horses mouth. The bit is a small piece of metal strategically placed in the sensitive part of the horses mouth so that skilled movement of that bit can direct the entire 1/2 ton horse, left or right or fast or slow. A small piece can direct a powerful big animal. Verse 4 James illustrates again using a ship directed by a very small rudder. A huge ship, like a aircraft carrier the USS Independence is directed by a relatively very small rudder. A small

little man, the pilot, is able to stand at the helm and direct this huge ship. Even when the outside forces of wind and waves try to put it in another direction, the rudder keeps it straight on course. The small directs the large and powerful. Just as the tongue though it weighs only a couple of ounces and is scarcely three inches long, it has the ability to move great things and exert tremendous influence. James is trying to make it intensely clear that we wield great power in the words we speak. Fathers you wield great power to bless or to break your children. Mothers you have great power to encourage or tear down your children. Children you have great power to honor or wound your parents. Bosses, employees, students, relatives, friends, church leaders, fellow members, neighbors. Do not underestimate the great power we hold in our tongues.

V. 5,6 the tongue though small can not only be utilized for great good, it can cause tremendous damage as well. James offers up yet another illustration comparing the tongue to a spark that can set a forest aflame. Just a little flame can roar into a huge fire causing great damage.

On October 8, 1871 a cow in Mrs. O'Leary's barn kicked over the lantern as she was being milked. That small flame roared into a blaze that started the Chicago Fire wiping out 3-1/2 square miles of the city and 17,000 buildings, 250 lives were lost. But you may not know that on that very same October day in 1871 a spark in Northwest Wisconsin ignited a dry forest that burned for over a month and claimed more lives than the Chicago fire destroying billions of yards of timber...all from one spark. When we misuse our tongues we are guilty of spiritual arson and we destroy and damage anyone who may be downwind of our comments.

The tongue can be deadly dangerous. Proverbs 18:21 "death and life are in the power of the tongue." Look at Hitler and the powerfully deadly use of his words to send the world into World War II. Contrast that with the words of Winston Churchill whose words welded the hearts and souls of the people of England into a fortress of unity. We can choose to use our words for powerful good or terrible evil.

V.6 James says the tongue used for evil defile the entire rest of the body. How often does our mouth get us into trouble that then the legs and arms must try to get the body out of? The tongue is set on fire by hell. When you hear the tongue spewing out evil you don't have to guess what is motivating such words, you are hearing hell doing its work. That word for hell is the one James brother, Jesus, often used for hell. It's the word Gehenna and refers to the Valley of Hinnom, a valley south and west of the city of Jerusalem. This was originally used by the Canaanites to sacrifice their children to the pagan god Molech. When that dreadful practice was stopped by King Josiah, the place was deemed unclean so it was then used as a garbage dump where all the refuse of the city was dumped and burned. There was a continual stinking, horrible burning dump...that was Jesus picture of what hell would be like. James picks that picture up and tells us our evil hurtful words are set on fire by that kind of hell. The very world of iniquity. James is not talking about the earth, but a system set in rebellion against God. This is a world thinking that is opposes to God or apathetic towards God. All the stuff that ruins a society that is secular and not spiritual you will find it comes flowing from the tongue, fed by the world of evil. It affects the whole person. Evil speech, comes from an evil heart inside and it will have a great affect on the course of our life. The tongue can be used to direct great power or destroy and damage. Who are we following after? The God of truth or father of lies. James says just stop and listen to your words. You can tell by what comes out. The words may be fed to us by the father of lies, but we are the only ones responsible for what comes sliding out between our teeth. He are responsible for our words.

Just in case we are still tempted to think that we can manage the tongue on our own. Just in case we think all we have to do is hold our breath and count to ten and we will be able to hold in check that fleshy little blade in our mouth, James keeps on punching in v.7. Every species of beast, birds, reptiles, sea creatures have been tamed. But no one can

tame the tongue. I remember going to the Memorial Coliseum with my family to watch the Ringing Brothers and Barnum Bailey Circus. I watched in amazement as Gunther Gabel Williams with his long blond flowing hair stood and rode the lions and tigers around the stage. I have seen dolphins and whales do amazing tricks at Marine World. The dancing movements of the Lipizzaner horses are amazing. Some of you have trained your dogs and cats and horses to perform fascinating tricks. We humans pride our ability to train animals and will spend hundreds of hours teaching...but no one can tame the tongue. The tongue is full of deadly poison just waiting to be squeezed out of us.

Not only is the tongue able to direct great power, and do great damage and is impossible for men to train. It is also inconsistent, even hypocritical. Look at v.9 James says with the same tongue one moment we are praising are Lord and Father and then the minute we walk out of church and are in our cars we start ripping and cursing and tearing other people down. V.9 these people we are tearing into have been made in the likeness of God. God values and loves these people, yet we are ripping and destroying the people God cares for deeply. My brothers these things should not be happening. How can we praise God and say He is a great Creator one minute and then tear and destroy one who God has created and made in the likeness of His image the very next minute? Are we not saying, "God you make junk and I detest this particular created being?" My brethren says James, "These things ought not to be this way."

John, a professing Christian was sitting around with the guys on a lunch break at work. As a particularly rude foreman drove away, John let loose with a few choice words describing his anger toward the man. Immediately embarrassed he apologized and said, "I don't know why I said that...that's really not in me." To which his partner looked at him and answered, "It had to be in you, or else it would not have come out." If the tongue is inconsistent there really is a problem with the heart, what

is going on inside. Matthew 15:18 “But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart and they defile the man.”

James point he is making is that the fruit that comes out of the mouth reveals the root that bears it. Look at v. 11 does a fountain send out both fresh and bitter water from the same opening? No. Does a fig tree produce olives? No. Does an apple tree produce potatoes? Does a strawberry bush suddenly start growing avocados? No. Then if creation obeys God and nature follows to produce the fruit that God intended when he placed it on this earth. So should not we also produce the fruit of our mouths in keeping with being the creation of God. As Christians who belong to God, ought we also speak the words of God? Should not our root of Jesus inside be reveals by the fruit of our lips, the words we speak? Just as good works are the fruit of a vital faith, good words are the fruit of a mature heart.

Luke 6:43-45 “Each tree is known by its own fruit....for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.”

So if James says impossible for man to tame the mouth, why bother even trying? No man can tame the tongue, but God can. With God all things are possible. How do we tame our treacherous tongues? We need God's help. If Jesus can take the blasphemous tongue of the demoniac and tame it so that he went around to the cities of the Decapolis preaching the gospel and praising God...then He can tame our tongues. If Jesus can take the brash and bold tongue of Peter who spoke at the wrong times and even denied Jesus in the courtyard... then he can tame our tongues. He can tame a lying tongue. Jesus can tame our gossiping tongue. Jesus can tame our critical tongue and our sensual tongue and our harsh and bitter sarcastic tongue. He can do that because he can transform our heart. When God begins to deal with our heart we will be able to keep our tongue in check. God is one who is committed to changing us. God wants to take our cold hearts of stone and replace them with a heart of flesh and vital faith giving life. Perhaps

you once had a heart that was warm and a mouth that delivered encouraging fresh words to all around you, but it has grown strangely cold. Its terribly easy to tell if your heart has grown cold because it has a critical tongue tied to it. Your heart has grown cold and you can tell because it and an impure mouth attached to it. God wants to replace our heart of stone with a vital, living, beating, God honoring, faith giving heart of flesh.

We need God's help to control our tongue. A good place to start to confess our sin and ask forgiveness. Admit our tongue problem to God. Isaiah cried out to God, "Woe is me for I am a man with unclean lips." God took a hot piece of coal from the alter and cauterized his lips. WE need to ask God to cauterize our lips, to clean our lips and submit to His cleansing touch. In Romans chapter 6 it tells us that when we come to Christ we are no longer who we used to be. Our old self has been crucified with Christ. When we are born of the Spirit we die to the old life. We need to recognize that we are no longer under the control of the old life. We no longer have to satisfy the demand of the old life. No longer do I have to present the instruments of my body to unrighteousness. I no longer have to use my mouth to tear others down. I no longer have to present my legs to take me to places that would not please God. I no longer have to present my eyes to look at things that would not please God. I no longer have to present my hands as instruments of unrighteousness. I no longer have to talk the way I used to talk. You might say, "Well that is a whole lot easier said then done." Of course, but God has given us His grace as resource to live for him. Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. His grace is given to us not only for salvation, but also to live rightly. For those who are in Christ, we have the power to say "no" to critical words and say "yes" to God. When gossip make a grab for your tongue you can say no, I want to honor God with my lips. We ask God to cleanse our lips and then ask God to help us say no to evil words and yes to what is good and right and encouraging.

David struggled with his words and prayed this prayer. Psalm 19:14, “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord my Rock and my Redeemer.” Memorize it. Quote it yourself before you come into a situation you know you’ll be tempted to sin with your mouth. Recognize that you are no longer who you use to be you are dead to sin but alive in Christ Jesus. Romans 6:13 “and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.”

Do you want to become more and more a blessing and encouragement to those around you. Warren Wiersbe offers twelve words that will express the heart of one whose faith is vital. Use them to exercise a mouth that be a blessing toward. Here is the twelve word workout. Words one, two and three are “please” and “thank you”. These words treat others like people and not things. You are appreciating them. The words “I’m sorry” have a way of breaking down walls and building relational bridges. The words, “I love you” carry great power, even toward our enemies. Finally say the words “I’m praying for you” but only if you are really going to pray for them. And why not stop right there and use some of your words to pray for them?

I’d like to add three questions as a checklist to keep our tongues in check. Before you speak and a little voice goes off in your head...watch out, danger, hurtful words may be surfacing from your heart. Whoop! Whoop! Ask yourself these questions: 1. Are my words being said in loving concern for the other individual? 2. Does this person really need to know? Can they do anything about the problem to prevent harm besides pray? Then perhaps they don’t need to know all those juicy details 3. What is my real reason for passing on this information? Self-centered to make me look good? Or God-centered? What is the motive that is driving my mouth?

Do not underestimate the power of our words. Solomon was right 'Death and life are in the power of the tongue.' We have the opportunity to bless someone or blast someone. What will it be for us this next week. I want this week to pray this same prayer David did, "Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight." Every morning when we wake up this week ask the Lord, "May my words today bless and encourage those who hear them."