

Taming the Tongue

Job 2:13; James 1:19, 20

“... a word not spoken for 7 days & 7 nights”

Someone has said that *great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, and small minds discuss people*. The church that James is writing to was full of small-minded people who gossiped about each other and tore one another apart with their tongues. Does that characterize our lives today?

The tongue remains hidden for the most part, but when it does make its presence known it has devastating power. The tongue can express or repress; release or restrain; enlighten or obscure; adore or abhor; offend or befriend; affirm or alienate; build or belittle; comfort or criticize; delight or destroy; be sincere or sinister. The tongue can Xerox the good or X-ray the bad.

In [James 1: 3-12](#), James uses 6 different word pictures of the tongue to help us see how small, yet powerful it is:

- A bit
- A rudder
- A fire
- A dangerous animal
- A spring
- Fruit

1. **Bit** – The first metaphor is the **bit** that is put into a horse’s mouth by a trainer. This relatively small piece of metal can control a very powerful animal, directing the horse to the right or left and telling him to stop. When the bit is pulled back by the rider, it presses against the horse’s tongue causing him to stop.
2. **Rudder** – James also compares the tongue to a **rudder** on a boat. Just as a small rudder can control the direction of a large liner or even an aircraft carrier, so too, the tongue can control our lives.

Taming the Tongue (Continued)

Both the bit and the rudder must overcome contrary forces. The bit controls the wild nature of a horse; the rudder must fight the winds and currents that would drive the ship off course. Both the bit and the rudder must be under the control of a strong hand.

The story is told about boy in high school. He was out water skiing with some friends. He said: *“When it was my turn to ski, we circled the lake a couple times and then I signaled that I wanted to quit. My buddy was driving the boat and decided to turn the wheel sharply to get me to wipe out. As he turned, the boat dipped suddenly to the left, causing him to fall out of his seat. I hit the water, of course, and then the boat started coming right toward me—full throttle. At the very last second, my sister reached over and turned the wheel—the boat just missed me by inches!”*

“What was intended to be fun almost turned into a disaster. And, with just a small turn of the wheel, my life was saved.” Friends, our tongues are the same way. They’re small but they have the power to delight or destroy. From our mouths come either words of life or words of death.

3. **Fire** – After talking about the power of a bit in the mouth of a horse, and the power of a small rudder to steer a large boat, James uses the image of **fire** in [James 3:5-6](#): ***“Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue is also a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”***

Just like a small spark can ignite an entire forest, so too words that flow out of tongues can corrupt lives and shipwreck families. Words that are unleashed without thought can significantly affect and alter lives. James is pretty strong here as he tells us that our tongues are set on fire by hell itself.

When I was about 11 or 12 years of age, one night I wanted to impress my cousins as they were coming down that farm road in the night to visit with us.

Taming the Tongue (Continued)

For some reason, my dad had a small fire burning in our back yard. I saw it as dying down, it seemed to me that the sparks were barely shooting up, the logs were now just simmering SO, I, seeing a small can of gas nearby, came to the quick conclusion that it would be extremely great for my cousin to see a BIG FLAME SHOOT HIGH INTO THE AIR SO, BEING A BRAVE YOUNG MAN, I THREW THAT GAS ON THE FIRE—MY DAD NOT BEING FAR AWAY SAW WHAT I DID – and now I can leave the rest of the story to your imagination.

Parents really know what is best. Words of parents and manner of life of mom's and dad's, weigh heavily upon children not only when they are young but throughout their lifetime.

Parents, if you want heaven's help for your home, you need to realize the potential your words have for construction or destruction. Your words can bring a form of death to your kids. We might not even realize what our words do to our children. When sparks fly in our homes, firestorms can erupt creating a blazing inferno that leaves deep scars and lasting pain.

After Karen Carpenter died of heart failure at the age of 32 brought on by years of fighting an eating disorder, it came out that her fatal obsession with her weight was triggered by a single reviewer's comment. When referring to Karen, this man called her "Richard's chubby sister." While I'm sure there were other factors attributing to Karen Carpenter's struggles, this one comment unleashed a flurry of self-doubt, which led to her eventual disease and death.

We really need to watch our words, don't we? Let me give you a suggestion. When your child does something wrong, instead of saying something like, "*You're naughty,*" or "*You're such a brat,*" why not say something like, "*What you did was wrong and I don't want you to do that again.*" It's real easy to say things to our kids that are not really true—the tragedy is that they can very easily grow up thinking they *are* naughty, or bratty, or chubby, or ugly, or dumb. Try to separate *who* they are from *what* they do.

We are to be careful not to be deliberately caustic and destroy people with our words. We really do not look better when we cut others down.

Taming the Tongue (Continued)

Do you remember the saying, *“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me?”* I don’t know who came up with this but it’s just not true because words can break our hearts. Broken bones can heal with time, but a broken spirit caused by words of death, is not quickly repaired.

Like our actors so wonderfully depicted, words can spread like fire in our families. We all need to ask ourselves the question today – How many people have we maimed or destroyed with our words? Are kids dying a slow death because of lethal lexicon? Is the tongue quick to criticize? Do our words build up or do they tear down?

4. **A dangerous animal** – As important as it is to not speak death words and to instead speak words of life, we have a problem. Take a look at [James 3: 7-8](#): ***“All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”*** I can’t tame my tongue. You can’t tame your tongue.

It’s amazing when you think about it. Every dangerous animal can eventually be tamed. Ferocious lions can jump through burning hoops, grizzly bears can ride on horses, and huge elephants can do handstands. We have a remarkable ability to tame ferocious beasts but can’t get hold of our tongues.

Like snake venom, or corrosive rust, our tongues are just looking to strike unsuspecting people – they’re active, they never rest. There is no sting of a serpent that does as much damage as one wagging tongue.

[James 3: 9-10](#) lay out the dichotomy and hypocritical nature of our tongues: ***“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.”*** We *bless* God while we *blast* away at others! There’s something wrong with this picture.

Taming the Tongue (Continued)

5. **A spring** – James now draws his fifth word picture to help us see that it should be impossible for us to both bless and blast out of the same mouth. He asks a penetrating question in [James 3: 11](#): ***“Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?”*** The image here is of a fresh, flowing stream that has both bitter water and sweet water flowing through it. Natural springs still remain in the Middle East today. Some produce fresh water, and some produce salt water. However, none produce both. It is not possible.

James is saying here that just as it is impossible for a spring to have both sweet and sour water, so too it is inconceivable for the tongue to send forth both righteousness and rumors; blessing and blasting, compliments and cursing.

6. **Fruit** – The final image is that of fruit in [verse 12](#): ***“My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”*** We expect a fig tree to have figs on it and a grapevine to have grapes. Nature reproduces after its kind.

James is calling us to be consistent. What comes out of our mouths is a reflection of what is in our hearts.