

## Marks of a Faith That Works

### *A Faith that Works...* ***Manages the Mouth*** James 3:1-18

#### Introduction

We are now in our seventh week of our series *Marks of a Faith that Works*. So far we've seen that a faith that works:

- Grows through Difficulty (1:2-12)
- Turns from Temptation (1:13-18)
- Obeys God's Word (1:19-27)
- Shows no Favoritism (2:1-13)
- Behaves Like it Believes (2:14-26)

But in the passage we're looking at today James tells us that a faith that works...*manages the mouth*.

We all know just how difficult that is at times. After all, we spend one-fifth of our life talking. I understand that a man speaks about 20, 000 words a day; a woman, 30,000 words a day.

Maybe that's why James says in verse 2 "If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a *perfect* man..." In fact, James says something about the mouth and our words in every one of the five chapters of this book.<sup>1</sup> That's why I was tempted to title this message, "Don't let your tongue lick you." To avoid that, we need to understand the *problem of the tongue* and *why* we should watch what we say. That's what James addresses first in verses 1-6.

#### **PROBLEM: Why Should I Watch What I Say? (1-12)**

##### **A. My Words Direct (1-5a)**

Not many of you should presume to be *teachers*, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. James 3:1

James begins by zeroing in on a small group of influential people in the church – the leaders and teachers. These people influence and direct others in two primary ways: their lives and their lips. When the two are in harmony and the leaders' lives and lips are marked by integrity, the impact is positive. But when the words of their lips don't correspond to the works of their lives, there's a problem. Where there is inconsistency, hypocrisy, or heresy, the consequences are disastrous.

Our words *direct*. That is why you need to pray for those who are in positions of leading or teaching. We will be held responsible for our words. Jesus said (and no doubt James heard these words from Jesus' lips):

But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned. Matthew 12:36-37

But it's not just teachers or leaders who are held responsible for their words. We all are. Our words (for each one of us) give direction to our lives. This is what James says in verse 2:

We *all* stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. James 3:2

Once again, James' humility and realism shines forth. "We *all* stumble in many ways." That's the understatement of the year! But James doesn't point fingers; he humbly includes himself in the mix. And one of those ways in which we all stumble is in our words.

It was President Calvin Coolidge who once said: "I have noticed that nothing I never said ever did me any harm."<sup>ii</sup> The solution, of course, is not to keep quite all the time, but to carefully weigh our words. James says that this is a mark of maturity. One who is not at fault in what he says is "perfect." That doesn't mean without fault. The same word is used in chapter 1 where (as we saw) it means *mature*. A mature person controls his words and as a result is able to control or give direction to his entire life.<sup>iii</sup>

James continues with two illustrations to show the degree to which a small thing like our tongue can direct our lives, for good or for evil.

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. James 3:3

Just imagine a large stallion, weighing over 2,000 pounds. Riding the horse is a little 95 pound jockey on his back who controls every move that horse makes. And he does that by means of a little piece of metal stuck strategically in the mouth of the horse.

Words are like that. The tongue is small, just like the bit in that horse's mouth. As long as the horse is under the control of an experienced rider, things go well. But if not, it can spell disaster. James is already alluding to the question: Who's in charge of your mouth? Your tongue wields great power to direct both your life and the lives of others.<sup>iv</sup> And that is why our tongues need to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. The Psalmist said: "I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth ..." Psalm 39:1.

But James quickly hits us with another illustration to drive his point home. He moves from the equestrian field to the sea. Verse 4:

Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. James 3:4

The famous Queen Mary is over 1,000 feet long providing more than 3 acres of recreational space. The ship weighs more than 81,000 tons. Its rudder is 140 tons, quite small compared to the size and weight of the ship. But it is that rudder, under the direction of the pilot, which steers that massive boat. At times, this is even counter current or against strong winds.

During World War II there was a well-known saying: "A slip of the lip may sink a ship."<sup>v</sup> Long before Freud came along, James well knew what a slip of the lip could do. So if you want to avoid shipwreck, you better hold your tongue.

A horse is an irrational creature. A ship is an inanimate object. Both can be directed to good or disastrous ends by means of something very small. James says in verse 5:

Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. James 3:5

The horse must be under the control of the rider. The ship must be under the direction of the pilot. And our tongues must be under the direction of God himself through His Holy Spirit. Why? Because as Solomon says, "The tongue has the power of life and death" (Proverbs 18:21). Our words direct both our lives and the lives of others.

### **B. My Words Can Destroy (5B-8)**

We should watch what we say because our words direct where we go. But they can also destroy what we have, and destroy others. Remember the little saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." I don't believe that. In my experience, my broken bones have healed quite readily. It's rather the destructive words that have left some enduring scars.

The best when perverted becomes the worst. What is our strongest asset can also be our greatest liability. That's what James focuses on in verses 5b-8.

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. James 3:5b

We've seen in the news lately the vast amount of forest space that has been destroyed by carelessness. One of the largest forest fires we've seen in the States was in Black Hills of South Dakota in August of 2000. More than a thousand firefighters battled this wildfire for two weeks straight. Over eighty thousand acres of valuable timber were burned. How did it start? A 46 year-old woman light a cigarette and tossed the still-burning match to the ground. It immediately started the fire. But rather than attempting to put it out, she looked at it and decided to leave the area.<sup>vi</sup>

It requires little effort to produce a "wildfire" with our tongues.

The tongue also is 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.  
James 3:6

Some people are “verbal arsonists.” Again Solomon says, “As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife” (Proverbs 26:21). Rumors, half-truths, grumblings, sarcastic remarks, hurtful things said in the heat of anger—all of these smoldering matches have the potential for burning down acres of office morale, family peace, and church unity.

Such “verbal arson” often has a chain-reaction effect. James says that it “sets the whole course of his life on fire.” People spoke in the ancient world of the circle of existence, the idea of one thing leading to another. What the tongue initiates is difficult to stop. Words can’t be recalled and they often produce a devastating chain-reaction inspired by hell itself.<sup>vii</sup>

It’s been said: “Blow on a spark and it will burn. Spit on it and you will put it out. Both are from the mouth.” You can choose to either blow on the spark and contribute to the chain reaction that leads to destruction, or you can “spit” on it and refuse to carry it any further. Our tongues can either destroy others or develop others.

The next illustration that James uses is that of a zoo (verses 7-8):

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea<sup>viii</sup> 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. James 3:7, 8

When I visited South Africa several years ago, I went to one of those drive-through nature parks. And there I saw all kinds of animals and reptiles that up to that time I had only seen in pictures. What you don’t want to do, however, is open the window or door of your car. And you certainly don’t want to get out of the car. While I was admiring through the window of the car several lions who appeared to be tame enough, my host reminded me that several years previously some Korean visitors to that same spot had gotten out of their cars and were immediately mauled to death by such lions. Yet we know that man can tame such creatures, at least partially. You can attend any zoo and witness such otherwise ferocious creatures obediently submitting to the trainer.

James says that lions can be tamed; all kinds of animals can be tamed. But “no man” can tame the tongue. It’s like the poison under the fangs of a serpent. The fangs of a viper are normally in the upper jaw. But when the snake coils back its head in order to strike, which is the image here, the fangs drop down and press open a sack of deadly poison which is hidden under the lips.<sup>ix</sup>

No man can tame the tongue...but Jesus can. Remember when Jesus met the man with an evil spirit who lived among the tombs (Mark 5:2-8)? The story says that “no man could bind him any more...” But Jesus could and did. And he can do the same for you. That’s why in the following verses James talks about how our words display who we are.

### **C. My Words Display Who I Am (9-12)**

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

My words direct. My words can destroy. But in both cases, my words display who I really am. And sometimes there is a great inconsistency between who we claim to be and what we say with our mouths. We sing "O for a thousand tongues to sing, my great redeemers praise" in church, and then we get in the car and yell "Shut up!" at our kid. Essentially, we "curse" others. This doesn't necessarily mean to use profanity. It can mean any kind of put down that attacks another person's character.

This is the Jekyll and Hyde phenomena of the mouth. And James is saying that even nature doesn't have such duplicity. In nature, whatever is in the well comes out in the water. An apple tree doesn't produce cherries. A fig tree doesn't produce pears. A salt spring doesn't produce fresh water. Jesus said, "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34).

As I look at my life, this bothers me. And it should bother you, too. Just as authentic faith is expressed in authentic works, so also authentic faith is expressed in edifying words. Our words are the barometer of our heart. If you have a tongue problem, it's much more serious than you think. It's really a heart problem. If you have a complaining tongue, you have a bitter heart. If you have a dirty tongue, you have an impure heart. If you have a harsh tongue, you have a hardened heart. If you have a boasting tongue, you have a prideful heart. If you have an angry tongue, you have an insecure heart. "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34).

### **THE SOLUTION: How Can I Manage My Mouth? (13-18)**

What's then the solution? How can I manage my mouth?

#### **A. Let God manage your life.**

First, let God change who you are. Go to the root of the problem. The prophet Isaiah, when confronted by the holiness of God, said "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips." But then one of the angels came to him with a live coal in his hand, touched his lips and said "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." (Isaiah 6:5-7).

Maybe you're saying that to God right now. "Wow! I'm just like Isaiah, a man, a woman, a child of unclean lips." I've used my mouth in wrong and hurtful ways, towards my children, my wife, my friends, my co-workers, or members of my church. When we confess that sin, the Lord also says, "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

It's impossible to sling mud at someone and keep your own hands clean.

The only way to manage your mouth is to let Jesus Christ manage your life. Let Jesus Christ be the bit, the rudder, the spark of your life. 2 Corinthians 5:17

**B. Seek true wisdom, not false "wisdom."**

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. 14 But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. 15 Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. 16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. 17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. James 3:13-18

True wisdom is not shown first of all in our words but in our works. Some in the church who thought they were wise desired to be teachers and to influence others. But what came out of their lips was not consistent with their life. James insists that true wisdom – the wisdom that comes from God – is shown not first in what comes out of our lips, but what is seen in our lives. True wisdom is seen not first in our words, but in our works. True wisdom is not saying something, but showing something.

	<b>True Wisdom</b>	<b>False Wisdom</b>
<b>Source</b>	Heaven	Hell
<b>Character</b>	Pure Peace-loving Considerate Submissive Full of mercy / good fruit Impartial Sincere	Earthly Unspiritual Of the devil Envy Selfish ambition
<b>Result</b>	Peace Righteousness	Disorder Evil practice

### C. Think before you speak.

James 1:19 My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,

There is a progression here. If you have an anger problem, you need to start where this verse starts. You need to learn to listen. The one who listens is slow to speak. And the one who is slow to speak, is slow to verbalize their anger in inappropriate ways.

Has your tongue been brought under the control of the Holy Spirit. Vernon McGee used to say, “The real sign of the control of the Holy Spirit is not speaking in an unknown tongue, but controlling the tongue that you do know.” But who can do this? No man can, as James reminds us. Only God can. Will you give him the control of your tongue?

Make your own list of ways to improve *your* tongue control. Which one are you going to work on this week?

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<sup>i</sup> While James’ focus in chapters 1-2 is on Faith and works, he now shifts the emphasis in chapter 3 to the relationship between faith and words. You can’t have the proper words without works, and you can’t have genuine works without the proper words.

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. President Calvin Coolidge (1872-1933); Source: John A. Garraty, *1,001 Things Everyone Should Know About American History* (Doubleday, 1989), p.133; submitted to [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com) by Jeffrey Arthurs.

<sup>iii</sup> See Matthew 12:34 “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” and James 1:26 “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.”

<sup>iv</sup> Examples of the directive power of the tongue are seen in such influential people as Bernard de Clairvaux whose eloquent words led to a continent wide mobilization to join the Second Crusade; Patrick Henry whose cry “Give me liberty or give me death!” inspired so many in the early colonies to fight for their national liberty; and John Kennedy who inspired many by his words “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.”

<sup>v</sup> There is a picture of a South Pacific battle scene in which Marines are storming a beachhead. They’re dropping like flies from the barrage of gunfire. One Marine is seriously wounded and bleeding. The picture has a simple two-word caption: “Somebody Talked.”

<sup>vi</sup> Adapted from Rubel Shelly, Nashville, Tennessee; “Wyoming Woman Accused of Starting South Dakota Wildfire” CNN.com. Idea clipped from [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

<sup>vii</sup> The word for “hell” is the word *gehenna* referring to the Gehenna Valley outside the city walls southeast of Jerusalem. This was the residence of the pagan deity Moloch, the place of refuse, the city dump. There are 12 references to Gehenna in the New Testament. Apart from James, all the other references are found on the lips of Jesus in the Gospels. It is a place where the wicked are destroyed (Matthew 5:22) and where body and soul are judged (Matthew 10:28; Mark 9:43-47). This punishment is eternal (Matthew 25:41, 46).

<sup>viii</sup> James uses the typical fourfold biblical classification of the animal world (cf. Genesis 9:2).

<sup>ix</sup> See also Ps 140:3 “They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent’s; the poison of vipers is on their lips;” Rom 3:13 “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips.”