

Introduction:

“It was just a little slip of the tongue.” “It was only a little white lie.” “They’re just words.” So very often we minimize the sins of the tongue. Especially if those sins happen in extenuating circumstances. After all, the tongue is only a small part of the body. We all know we need to watch what we say, but surely in the big scheme of things cussing, lying, and gossip don’t measure up to adultery, theft, and murder. After all, sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will never hurt us. However, as we have been going through the letter from James this year in our look at practical holiness, James encourages us to take a step back and reconsider our view of sinful speech. Spend a few minutes with me to discover the dangers of an unbridled tongue.

Discussion:

- I. The tongue is a small member that packs a big wallop.
 - A. We should never minimize the sins of the tongue. Consider **James 3:3-6**. A small bit is used to guide the entire horse. A small rudder is used to steer an entire ship. In like manner, the tongue may be small but it boasts large things. It only takes a spark to get a fire going. A small fire can light an entire forest. The tongue can set our entire lives on fire. Further, though we think the sins of the tongue are small in comparison to others, James explains that the tongue stains the whole body. The stain of the sins of speech is no less than the stain of sins committed by the whole body.
 - B. Further, we should never minimize the power of keeping our tongue bridled. As **James 3:2** explains, the one who bridles his tongue can bridle his whole body becoming a perfect man (complete, mature man).
- II. The tongue steers the whole body.
 - A. Digging deeper into our last point, we recognize that the big power punch of the tongue for our whole lives is that what we say impacts our lives. We think we can say things but not act on them. We are wrong. Our bodies follow where our tongues lead.
 - B. That is the subtle point of the two illustrations in **James 3:3-6**. What does the bridle do for the horse? It turns it. What does the rudder do for even the large ship? It steers it. In like manner, our tongue steers our bodies. You think you can make the immoral jokes and your body not follow in immorality? You think you can speak obscenities and your whole person not become obscene? You think you can slander and gossip and your whole person not become malicious? You may think you can have that control, but as **James 3:2** explained, if you can’t bridle your tongue, you won’t be able to bridle the rest of you. Oh, you may make a good effort for a while, but in the end you will fail repeatedly.
- III. The tongue is a barometer of your heart.
 - A. As we’ve said on other occasions, James hearkens back repeatedly to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and also to the teaching of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. If we want to understand what James is saying, we need to see those connections. In that light, consider his illustrations in **James 3:9-12**.
 - B. Both the illustration of the trees and the spring hearken back to earlier teaching.
 1. The illustration of the fig tree hearkens back to Jesus’s teaching. Note **Matthew 7:15-20**. It brings out the root and fruit principle. Do not deceive yourself, if your fruit is improper speech, it indicates there is still a problem with the root. Jesus returns to this in **Matthew 12:33-37**. The root is the heart. Out of the heart the mouth speaks.
 2. The illustration of the spring hearkens back to the wisdom literature. **Proverbs 4:23** instructs us: “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (ESV).
 - C. Why does the tongue pack such a big wallop in our lives? Because it exposes our heart. For some reason, people today often deceive themselves into saying nobody can know their heart. That simply isn’t true. When we hear your words, we hear your heart. You can say you love, but when you speak hate, you hate. You can say you are a kind person, but when you speak malice, you are mean. You can say you are honest and sincere in heart, but when you lie, you are a dishonest liar. You can say you are moral, but when you tell obscene jokes, you reveal the immorality of your heart.

- D. We need to understand this is true in extenuating circumstances as well as normal ones. We all give ourselves just a little more latitude and leeway when times are hard. Someone cut us off on the road, we are covered up with stress, we were hurt, someone was mean to us first, etc. However, we need to notice an interesting connection James makes in his letter. In **James 3:2**, he says, "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body" (ESV). He only says this after first having said at the beginning of his letter: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full [this is a form of the word translated "perfect" elsewhere] effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (**James 1:2-4**, ESV). Please don't make the major copout of saying "perfect" here merely means mature. While there is truth in that statement, James did not intend to let us squirm in sins of the tongue as if mature people just keep on sinning indiscriminately. Notice however that the purpose of trials, hardships, and extenuating circumstances is to grow us to maturity, completeness, perfection. We are to become that perfect man or woman through those hardships that James talked about in **James 3:2**. Do you see the point? Hardships are not an excuse to give our speech more latitude. They are the tools God uses to show us our immaturity, our incompleteness, our imperfection so we can grow. You may have had a bad day, but angry speech, bitter comebacks, snarky attacks in those moments reveal your heart.
- E. Certainly, there are true slips of the tongue. There are times when you say what you don't mean because of your tongue getting tangled. Or you accidentally chose the wrong word. There are times when what the other person hears is not what you really meant because of different experiences, perspectives, backgrounds. However, in general, what we say exposes our hearts. Let us give up on trying to claim the root of our heart is in good shape if the fruit of our tongue is covered up with sin.

IV. The tongue is a barometer of our religion.

- A. In **James 1:26-27**, James provides the death knell to the minimizing of the sins of speech. "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless" (ESV). The term for religion here refers to the part of religion most concerned with rituals and worship acts. The point is clear. If we give our tongues the leeway to speak bitterness, lies, immorality, obscenity, gossip, slander, then coming to church, listening to sermons, singing songs, taking the Lord's Supper are worthless.
- B. Few of us realize, however, that James's next statement is just as much about the tongue as well. He explains that pure and undefiled religion is "to keep oneself unstained from the world" (ESV). Do you remember what **James 3:6** says? The tongue is a "world of unrighteousness" that "stains" the whole body. Too many of us think we are involved in pure religion because we attend a non-instrumental, non-institutional, non-recreational church. We think we are involved in pure religion because we dot the Is and cross the Ts of the pattern of worship and work of the local congregation. Then we argue about those things with hate and bitterness in our speech. I'm not saying those issues of pattern don't matter. However, I am saying if you go about lying, gossiping, grumbling, cussing, and the like, then those issues of pattern don't matter. You might as well eat a hamburger for the Lord's Supper if you are going to let yourself gossip and slander.
- C. The tongue is a barometer of our religion. And our religion is worthless if our tongue is as well.

V. The tongue is a barometer of our relationship with God.

- A. Some people will scoff at the last point as they have started touting, "It's about relationship, not religion." Of course, this statement neither understands a true relationship with God or true religion. But rather than getting bogged down in that, let's talk about our relationship with God. Because our tongue is a barometer of our relationship with God as well.
- B. James hints at this when he gives the illustration in **James 3:9-10**. "With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so" (ESV). We gather in our assemblies and worship God, singing praises to Him. We go into our prayer closets and give thanks and blessing to Him. When talking to other Christians we talk about the blessings of God and how great we think He is. But then we get in our private conversations and we ridicule, mock, slander our brethren, our neighbors, and anyone that bothers us. We especially do this if they are committing a sin that particularly bothers us like drunkenness, adultery, homosexuality. We often think this is allowed in the name of politics. We may even do this against our own brethren when they don't see everything exactly the way we do. James says these things ought not be so.
- C. But dig deeper and look at what James says in **James 4:11-12**. He says we must not speak against one another, because when we do, we speak against God's law. If you're like me, that is completely confusing. How is speaking against one another speaking against God's law? Because all of this hearkens back to the law of

God mentioned in **James 2:8**: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” That is a quote from **Leviticus 19:18**. It caps off a section of Scripture that defines loving our neighbor as ourselves. Notice some of the statements in that section. “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord” (**Leviticus 19:15-18**, ESV). All of these have to do with speaking against your brethren. So, if you justify in your own mind speaking evil against your brothers and sisters, you have made yourself the judge. You have spoken against God and His law. You have made yourself god in your own life. You can tell yourself all day long that your relationship with God is good, but if you are speaking evil against brethren, you are speaking evil against God.

- D. Note one more statement made by James. In **James 5:9**, he says, “Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.” This ties in with what we’ve just discussed from **James 4:11-12**. I bring this up specifically because James mentions this while talking again about suffering and hardship. We may be going through a hard time, however that is no permission to take it out on brethren (or others). Again, we are to remain steadfast in hardship and grow to maturity.

VI. The tongue cannot be bridled by man (or woman).

- A. For anyone who has read James’s letter before, you’ve probably been thinking about this one point the whole time. What good is any of what I’m saying considering **James 3:7-8**? “For every kind of beast and bird, or reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue” (ESV). What is the point? Are we all stuck? Should we simply give up, go home, and give in to the sins of the tongue and the body? Of course not.
- B. The sins of the tongue point us to our greatest need. They point us to the gospel. They point us to God, to Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit. They point us to the fact that if we think we are going to stand before God some day and impress Him with our goodness, righteousness, maturity, completeness, and perfection, we are going to be in a bad, bad way. They point us to the fact that getting our pattern of religion right doesn’t make us any better in judgment to anyone else. And they point us to the very fact that we hate most: the sins of the tongue explain to us with repetitive fervor that no matter how hard we try to get this body under control to prove we deserve salvation and heaven, we simply don’t. We need something. We need God and we need what He has to give.
- C. Go back to **James 1:17-18**. What comes from God? Every good and perfect gift. **James 3:2** said if we could bridle our own tongues, we were perfect (same word). But we learn from **James 3:7-8**, we can’t bridle our tongues, so we can’t be perfect. But where do perfect gifts come from? They come from God. Dig deeper into the passage and see that we have been brought forth by God’s good and perfect word of truth. Though we, by our own power and might, can never make our speech or ourselves perfect, God has brought us to life and perfection through His speech (His word of truth). Just as He created the world long ago by His word, He has recreated us by His word. Praise the Lord. And of course, can any of us miss the double entendre? Not only are we talking about God’s perfect speech, we are talking about God’s perfect Son who is His Word (**John 1:1, 14**) and is His truth (**John 14:6**).
- D. Consider **James 3:13-18**. What is the problem here? The root or spring is bad because the wisdom which governs it is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. It produces the bad fruit of boasting and deception (and disorder and every evil practice). How could it do anything else? What does it need? It needs a different kind of wisdom. It needs a wisdom that will produce not just a fruit of peace, but a harvest of peace. Where does that come from? It is wisdom from above. Look back at **James 1:2-3**. Remember that God’s goal for us is perfect completeness, lacking nothing. Do you remember what James says next? “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (**James 1:5**, ESV). If we want to be perfect, we need God’s good and perfect gift of wisdom. We need to ask Him for it.
- E. There is one other place where James uses the term “perfect” in his letter. In **James 1:25**, he says, “But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing” (ESV). In **James 2:12**, he reminds us, “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty” (ESV). I don’t know all the ways God will give to us His perfect wisdom. That, however, doesn’t cause me to say we should sit on our backsides, doing nothing and just hope somehow the wisdom gets in there. God has revealed His perfect law to us. There may be a million other ways God will also give us wisdom, but we need to exercise the one way and the one gift we know He has

given. We need to look into His Word and let it govern our hearts, minds, consciences. When His wisdom governs our hearts, it will spring forth from our mouths, and will guide our bodies, our religion, and our relationship with Him. Of course, we do this with a healthy reminder that without the grace of God through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus we have no hope of speaking and acting according to the perfect law of liberty, but through it we will have victory over this huge enemy.

- F. In the final analysis, our speech will only ever be bridled by God through the grace of His Son. Only when we give control of our tongue over to Him will it be bridled. Look again at the two illustrations of **James 3:3-4**. Why is the small bit put in the horse's mouth? So we can guide it. Where does the small rudder lead the large ship? Wherever the pilot directs it. When we give the reins over to Jesus and let Him be the pilot, then our tongue will become a wonderful blessing that guides us and steers us even closer to Him.

Conclusion:

There are three ways you can respond to this sermon. First, you can always claim I don't have any idea what I'm talking about, blow it off, and just keep on doing whatever you are doing. If you are going to say that, I hope it is only after your own personal, careful study of James's letter. Further, please don't respond that way without coming to me to show me where I've missed it. However, I'm much more concerned about these next two. If you're like me, during the preaching of this sermon you have been reminded of and thought about hundreds of speech sins. You've thought about times you blew up at kids or spouse, you lied, you gossiped, you grumbled and complained, you spoke badly about a brother or sister behind their back, and on the list can go. The temptation is to think all is hopeless. You'll never overcome. You've just been reminded how bad you really are and been told you can't actually fix it. So, you might take the second response of simply giving up. May I encourage you to take the third way? Don't let your failures only remind you of how bad you are. Let them remind you how much you need God, how much you need Jesus. Let your failures drive you to throne of Christ's grace. He is the Word of God by which we are born again. He is the perfect gift that will strengthen and empower us. He is the victory over our sins, even of the tongue. Turn your life over to Him in baptism or recommit your life to Him, delving into the wisdom He gives and watch as He accomplishes victory in and through you. What choice will you make today?