

Tame Your Tongue NOW: A Reflection on James 3:1-12

Tame your tongue now is the urgent call that emerges from James 3:1-12. The passage doesn't simply suggest careful speech; it exposes the immense power of our words to either build up or destroy, and it urges every believer to take that power seriously today.

James 3:1-5 - The Small Spark That Directs the Whole Life

James 3:1-5 -

"¹Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. ²For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. ³Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. ⁴Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. ⁵So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!"



“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.”

In this verse, James was not discouraging Christians from teaching, but he was warning of the added responsibility in teaching the Word. Too often, a new Christian will be filled with enthusiasm and will want to become a teacher or an evangelist. There is nothing wrong with that motivation, but that person must gain a sound understanding of the Gospel and grow in maturity as a Christian.

This simply makes sense. Who will have a person become a swimming instructor who just learned to swim? Would a person be comfortable taking flying lessons from a person with little time and experience flying? Teaching the word requires the ability to correctly understand what the scriptures are saying AND be able to apply the principles to the listeners in a way that they will be able to understand. The best example of that is Jesus Christ. Throughout His life, He would state a scripture and then make an application from everyday life, or He would tell a parable based on everyday life and then state the scripture. Mark 12:1-11 is a good example of this.

Along with enthusiasm, a new teacher or an evangelist may try to find something that is completely new to teach. Something that no one else has discovered. But there IS nothing new under the sun, and that certainly applies to study of the scriptures. Now, yes, a familiar passage of scripture may suddenly become clearer. The interrelationships between different passages will become easier to see and explain. But that is due to the power of the Word and serious study.



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After saying all that, should a person aspire to be a teacher? Of course! No one will ever fully grasp the wisdom of the scriptures, because the author is the Living God, His wisdom is infinite, and study of the Word is a lifetime study. But a teacher MUST make sure that he is prepared before teaching anything. There is no scriptural basis for saying that the Holy Spirit will give a person the right words. That is false doctrine. It is not uncommon to have someone say that the Holy Spirit “Led me to say or proclaim this or that”. A spirit may be guiding that person, but it is certainly not the Holy Spirit of God.

“² For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.”

The key point James was making in verse two was “*we all stumble*”, not that we all fall. To fall means the relationship with the Father has been severed. Two warnings were given in the book of Hebrews concerning those that fall; but here, the image is of a Christian striving to be Christ-like, a person with a deep love for the Lord, but a person that occasionally stumbles.

Then James wrote, “*If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.*” Speech is the place where there is the greatest potential for stumbling. If a person could control the words that he/she says, then that person would have the maturity to completely control his/her body. Yet, only one person had that level of maturity; and that was Jesus Christ.



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But at the same time, this is the goal that every Christian should strive for. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul compared the Christian life and discipline to running in a race. Then in 1 Corinthians 9:27, Paul wrote, *“²⁷ but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.”* This does NOT mean that a person will live a sinless life. Every Christian WILL stumble, but when that happens, then the Christian will regain his/her balance and re-focus on the goal.

Then, James wrote, *“³ Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!”* Oh, the regrets a person will have over words spoken in anger, frustration, or in a spiritually weak moment. Or possibly a word NOT spoken that could have encouraged another person. This also includes non-verbal sounds that can communicate both positive and negative meanings. “That is just great!” can have opposite meanings depending on the tone used.

A forest fire starts from a small fire. Possibly a spark, a campfire that was not properly extinguished. In extremely dry conditions, even the hot exhaust of a truck that brushes against dry grass can start a fire. Unless that small fire is quickly extinguished, it can lead to enormous forest fires.

Now think of a comment spoken or some sound a person makes. Possibly the words are accurate, maybe a little vindictive, but there was



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no reason to give the message to another. Maybe someone boasted about what he/she would do with no intention of following through. Then, as the message is passed on, those words take on a life of their own. As the message spreads, it changes and becomes more exciting and juicier. Like a forest fire, that message spreads and can cause terrible damage.

How many famous and powerful men and women have been brought down by the words that were spoken? How many friendships have been damaged by words spoken? Why is gossiping so condemned in both the Old and New Testament? Nothing can build up or destroy a reputation quicker than the words spoken. Like a bridle in a horse's mouth or the rudder of a ship, the tongue will drive a person's life for good or evil.

James 3:6-12 - The Fire That Cannot Be Tamed Humanly

James 3:6-12 -

"⁶ And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. ⁸ But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly

poison.⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;¹⁰ from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.¹¹ Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can saltwater produce fresh.”

In verse 6, James wrote,

“And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.”

This verse would seem to imply that the tongue is automatically evil, but that, of course, is not true. Jesus certainly used His tongue in speaking throughout His ministry yet without sin. Instead, the undisciplined tongue is the voice that will communicate every evil and sinful attitude, emotion, and act. The tongue will give expression to every work of the flesh. Paul wrote in Galatians 5:19-21,

"Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

The tongue gives body and reality to each of those sinful acts.

The potential to use the tongue improperly is so great because it IS hard to control it. That was the point James was making. Members within a congregation will come from different backgrounds, different levels of education, and different levels of wealth. In the early church, for the first time, Jews and Gentiles were expected to work together and to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. The same holds true today. Yet, the tongue, used improperly, can cause new Christians to stumble and even fall back into the world. Congregations have split or dissolved because of the tongue. No wonder James described it as a fire, the very world of iniquity! And a Christian guilty of causing such dissension will face the consequences of his/her actions.

In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, Paul wrote,

¹⁶ “Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷ If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.”

The word “temple” means sanctuary, and Paul was describing the church at Corinth.

In verse 7-8, James wrote,

⁷ “For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. ⁸ But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.”

The world has been put under subjection of mankind. In too many cases, God’s Creation has been abused and fouled by the actions of sinful man, but nature has been tamed by mankind.

But the tongue cannot be tamed. There is never a time where a person can confidently expect the tongue to always say the right thing at



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the right moment. If a person becomes distracted, or allows the worldly nature a chance, the tongue will “seize the moment” to cause grief or damage. In verse 8, James called the tongue a “restless evil”. The word used for this was the same that James used in James 1:8 for an “unstable man”. The tongue cannot be trusted. It cannot be allowed to run free.

And James continued this thought in verses 9-10,

“⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰ from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.”

The tongue is much like electricity. Electricity wants to go to earth-ground. It wants to escape. But it is contained and controlled through how it is installed, fuses, circuit breakers and other safety devices so it can be used.

The tongue is the same. It must be contained and controlled with safety features that will prevent it from escaping. But how is that done? It is accomplished by applying the principles of the Bible, especially the New Testament, every moment of a Christian’s life. One person lived a perfect life, Jesus Christ, and that included the use of His tongue. His example, His teaching, and the inspired teaching of the



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New Testament show HOW to contain the tongue. In verses 11-12, James gave a final comparison,

"¹¹ Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can saltwater produce fresh."

A Christian MUST decide which path he/she is going to take. Many people will present a very Christ-like appearance before other Christians and then, away from Christians, their words turn filthy with cursing that are the exact opposite of what a Christian should be doing. There is no "riding the fence". The decision must be made, "Will I live my life for Christ or not?"

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main lesson of James 3:1-12?

It teaches the immense power of the tongue and the need for Christians to control their speech, comparing it to a small fire that can destroy a forest.



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Why does James say not many should become teachers?

James warns that teachers face a stricter judgment because they carry the greater responsibility of correctly handling God's Word and influencing others.

How can I tame my tongue according to the Bible?

By applying biblical principles daily, following Jesus' perfect example, and relying on the Holy Spirit to guard your words. The goal is continual growth, even though only Christ ever fully tamed the tongue.

What does the Bible mean by "the tongue is a fire"?

It means uncontrolled speech can cause widespread destruction, setting the whole course of life on fire. James teaches that this destructive power is often fueled by hellish influences.

Can a Christian completely control their tongue?



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According to James 3:8, no human can fully tame the tongue; it is a restless evil. However, every Christian is called to persistently discipline their speech so that it consistently honors God.