

Taming the Untamable

James 3:1-12

Series: The Book of James

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

This past week, I was checking on our residential housing on the campus of the Lanier Library. As you know we have an incredible partnership with the Library and I am thrilled at the Kingdom work we get to do together.

This housing is going to be a game-changer for our residents. **(SHOW PICS)** They are going to be able to live in community together, of course study and write papers at the library as well as work on our team here.

We have a GREAT group of residents – they are from 14 different universities, attending 8 different seminaries from as far away as California, Maryland, Virginia, Ohio, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and of course Texas.

Each month, we have development time with them that allows them to come together...gets them out of the personal ministry they are serving in and brings them together and it's a chance for us to invest in them, and I get the first session every year and my talk with them never changes.

I may add and edit it through the years, but after serving as a resident, leading a residential ministry, writing my doctrinal dissertation on holistic residential learning and training, I KNOW the direction I want to go with them, and I simply talk with them about how their years serving as a resident can be a success.

And one of the principles I teach them is simply this: "Hold the tongue". And here is what I tell them as we talk about leadership. I tell them, "One of the ways I know my heart is not where it should be is when my tongue is getting away from me."

This is true for me...and it's true for you. Give me 30 minutes with you over coffee and a conversation and I will KNOW after leaving that conversation how healthy/unhealthy your relationship with Jesus is.

THIS is what today's message is about...it's about the tongue. I'm calling it: **Taming the Untamable**

We're continuing in our study on the book of James and as mentioned nearly every weekend, James is a "show me what you believe kind of guy." He is a pastor that is extremely practical and wants to make sure that his congregation is NOT just talking about their faith, but living their faith out.

Chapter three is simply a continuation of what was written in chapter two – remember these chapter breaks didn't exist when the letter was originally written. They were added later to help us find our place in certain books.

So, as we read this is a continuation of where we left off last week where James says, "Look, there is a justification before God that is by faith alone." When it comes to salvation there is NOTHING we can do to earn salvation – it is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

BUT, there is a justification before men that is by works. While salvation comes by faith alone, our saving faith does NOT stay alone – James says, "works should come with it". Once we are saved, we should have a faith that works!

This is what he means when he says (2:26) "faith apart from works is dead." Pastor James continues this thought and writes that our faith should not only influence our work, but it should also influence our WORDS. Let's look at it:

James 3:1-12 – "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water."

James begins with addressing those that teach...he's addressing those that speak for or on behalf of God. At the time in which this is written, there was a certain prestige and authority that came with teaching.

It's really not that different from today. If you teach in a life group setting or a bible study of some kind...if you are a pastor and do what I'm doing today, this is what teaching from the Bible is: it's speaking for or on behalf of God, and by its very nature a certain element of authority that comes with it.

Now, thought of like this, there is a WEIGHT to this! THIS – what I'm doing right now...if you just came from leading a Life Group and teaching God's Word – it should NOT be taken lightly. James says, "those who teach will be judged with a stricter judgment."

While it is a privilege to teach God's word and be called to do it and gifted by God to do it, James offers a warning here to "tap the breaks" in longing to hold a teaching position in the church. Push pause on thinking you can just get up before people and speak for/on behalf of God and just swing from the hip with it!

This is a call to take teaching seriously. The words that we use...the content of what we say as we represent God – think about this!

It can either draw people closer to him OR drive them further away, and this should SOBER those of us that teach to no end.

Let me just say right here as we get going today, this is why we – those of us that labor over the text and teach and preach God's Word – this is WHY we need your prayers – that this reality of future judgment would anchor us to utter dependence on God.

illus. Prayer before preaching – position, (water into wine), purity, touch my lips...don't let anything come out that is NOT of you.

Look at what James writes here in **James 3:2** – **“For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.”**

“perfect” here means complete. It's the same word he used to describe what trials do for us chapter one – they mature us. Here we see we are “perfect”...complete if we are able to bridle this one big ole muscle (8 muscles) in our mouth, called the tongue!

Now, we ALL need work in this area of our life. I was discussing this text with a friend of mine this week and I made the comment that it's so interesting to me that James wrote this to the church somewhere around the mid 40's – many believe this may be the earliest book written in the New Testament!

And yet, it's as appropriate today as it was then...not much has changed through the years. It's why I'm named this message “Taming the Untamable”.

James KNEW this was an issue. He had listened to the teaching of his brother Jesus. He had heard Jesus teach that the words we speak really are more of a reflection of what's going on in our heart than anything else!

Matt. 12:34b – **“...For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.**

Matt. 15:18 – **“But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.”**

And James here...he cuts through the noise...he gets to the point. He is saying:

- “You’ve got your list of service projects...you’re going on mission trips. That’s good!”
- “You give when the basket is passed or you have set up recurring giving online to help advance the mission of the church. That’s good!”
- “You’re using your spiritual gift to help serve others. That’s good!”

“Look at you! your faith has works!” That’s awesome, but it doesn’t stop there. The question is, “What about your words? Do your words show that you have true faith?”

Hey, Pastor James pulled no punches, so Pastor Jarrett won’t either! We could say it like this:

- Let me read your texts...
- Let me look at the emails you forward and the comments that you put with them...
- Let me see your Facebook page and read some posts or comments on other’s posts...
- Let me put a recorder around the proverbial water cooler at the office...

Controlling the tongue...guarding the mouth...it was a problem with people in the early church, and it continues to be a problem among us in the church today, and so this is a topic that James knows **MUST** be addressed, and in doing so, he gives six different illustrations here to make his point regarding the problem of the tongue.

James was an incredible teacher...he knew the power of word pictures and used them to make and drive his points home.

- Think about how he has done this in his book up to this point. He’s talked about a person praying and doubting as being like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.
- He’s given the image of a person reading the word and not obeying it being like a person looking in the mirror and forgetting what he sees.
- A couple of weeks ago, he gave us the story of a rich man and poor man entering the church and talked about them being treated as differently as they look...so picturesque!

Well, here we have six different word pictures or images that speak to trying to control the uncontrollable...tame the untamable tongue! Let’s look at each of these images.

1. The Bit

James 3:3 – “If we put pits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.”

Now, I brought with me a bit. Thank you, James Durham. I don't know if you knew this about your pastor, but I went through a strong cowboy phase when I was a kid. For about three years “cowboying” is what I wanted to do.

Illus. Roping – astronaut, cowboy, football coach, preacher! I'm still in this phase!

Here's what's amazing about this little 4-inch piece of metal. The average weight of a horse (according to Google) is between 900-1200 lbs. You put this piece of metal that weighs maybe a pound into the mouth of a 1200 lb horse, and it can control it however it chooses.

It can be turned with this bit...we can put a horse in reverse with this bit. A small child can be on a horse and with this bit can direct that big animal wherever it wants it to go. Here's the second word picture:

2. The Rudder

James 3:4-5a – “Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things...”

You think about a giant ship...and as big as that ship is, it is turned with a small rudder (**SHOW IMAGE**).

The point of the bit and the rudder are exactly the same. Like the tongue, it may be small but it has the ability to influence and alter the direction of that which it controls. The rudder can move the direction of the ship...the bit can change the direction of the horse...the tongue has THAT kind of power!

It can change the course of your life and others. Listen to the Proverbs that says much about the tongue...the power of our words.

Prov. 18:21a – “Death and life are in the power of the tongue...”

How we speak to others can help us or hurt us in life! Ask any child growing up in a home where a parent believed the best in them and spoke words of inspiration to them verses the one who grew up in a home where they could never do anything right!

Unless that child has dealt with it, there is still bitterness and resentment toward that parent and friction in the relationship. Moms...dads, watch...be careful of the words you speak to your children!

Prov. 12:18 – “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

Prov. 12:25 – “Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad.”

? – Are the words you are speaking to others helping or hurting?

? – What about the words you speak to yourself?

I'm NOT advocating for the word of faith movement – where you can just speak your beliefs into existence, but we do need to understand that we tend to believe what we continually tell ourselves.

Are we constantly negative and cynical? Only focused on what we can't do and the mistakes of our past? Or do the words we speak to ourselves show forth our faith in God...our belief that “we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.”

How we answer these questions WILL make a difference in our lives! Our tongues influence our lives and the lives of those around us!

Illus. Coach Prime – last week! (explain, show tweet and **show clip**)

3. The Fire

This image shows us the damage that the tongue can do!

James 3:5b-6 – “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.”

James says the tongue is like this match right here!

Illus. Match – One little spark could create a whole lot of damage!

- Just a little bit of slander...
- Just a small spark of lying...
- Just a little flame of gossip can totally ruin a reputation...
- Just a spark of complaining on a team can spread it around the team like wildfire!
- Just a little bit of bragging...
- Just a spark of whining...
- Just a tiny bit of criticizing...

“how great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!”

Illus. Maui fires - A few weeks ago in Maui. While there is still debate going on about what caused the fire, experts best guess is that it was a powerline that had fallen in high winds and ignited the fire.

A little spark caused 6,000 people to be displaced. Killed nearly 100 people that we know of. Damaged over 2000 structures. Consumed over 2500 acres of land. Will cost 5.5 billion dollars to repair – SERIOUS damage!

This is the tongue, and James says here in (v.6) – “the tongue stains the whole body...and is set on fire by hell itself.”

Think with me on this: In the garden after Adam and Eve chose to rebel against God’s word, what was the first sin they committed after that? Was it not the sin of the tongue? They started to accuse one another and then even God himself!

- I know marriages have been completely destroyed by words that were vindictive and hateful and wrong...
- How many relationships have been ruined by words of accusation and anger...
- I can give you the names of churches that have been split because of words of divisiveness and disunity...

And do you want to know where these words come from? And it doesn’t matter if you won the argument...if your words have caused division, anger, strife or disunity, they have come from...originated in the pit of hell – that’s what the text says!

(v. 6b) – it’s set on fire by hell itself! This is the word “Gehenna” in the Greek. “Gehenna” was a valley right outside Jerusalem.

James congregants would have known EXACTLY what James was talking about. It was a trash site. Historically, it is where various kings had offered up child sacrifices. It was known as a “valley of slaughter”. It’s where garbage was dumped and trash was burned. It was well-known as a place of death.

And what James is saying here is careless and course talk comes straight from the trash dump...straight from hell.

Impure...corrupt...what the Bible calls “unwholesome talk” (we’ll talk more about it at the conclusion of the message) has no place in a believer’s life!

This is one of those passages that should rattle us...it should cause us do some serious internal reflection. And listen, “the end doesn’t justify the means” on this deal! That mindset is NOT going to pass the smell test on judgment day.

- “Someone needed to set them straight...”
- “I’m just speaking the truth...”

- “I’m just telling it like it is...”

Listen, it’s appropriate to criticize sinful behavior...we don’t just turn a blind eye and act like nothing is wrong when evil is being done! It’s right to call sin, sin...we should combat lies with truth – that’s part of our role and responsibility of being salt and light in the world.

We just need to remember in this that we are “ambassadors for Christ”. We represent him!

And calling out sinful behavior and combating lies with truth is one thing – that’s confronting actions...behavior...choices that don’t honor Jesus.

As scripture commands (2 Cor. 10:5a) we are to use words and our tongue to “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God” – what we are NOT to do is use words and our tongue, (this includes our thumbs) to destroy and tear down people who are made in the image of God.

This is James 3:9-10 and we’ll get there in just a second. But let’s move to our next image before doing so.

4. The Animal

James 3:7-8a – “For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue...”

Illus. Circus – I remember one year to raise money for our football team, we had to cell concessions at the circus. This was NOT a fund job for me being horrible at math! I’d take breaks in between selling the cotton candy and that circus amazed me!

At the circus they trained everything! Huge elephants would do exactly as the trainer would say. Lions – Kings of the jungle would jump through hoops! Heck, we took the family to SeaWorld a few years back and Shamu has been tamed!

We can tame the biggest and baddest beasts in the world tamed! (Auburn Tigers got tamed yesterday – A&M) - James writes and says, “But we can’t even tame our own tongues!”

He calls it a “restless evil”. Look at (v. 8-10).

James 3:8b-10 – “It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 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.”

In the Old Testament, particularly in the Psalms and Proverbs, those who lie...those who are evil...are characterized as having the tongue of a serpent.

Satan of course is the “Father of lies” and as the chief Serpent, the scriptures state that when he speaks lies, he is speaking his native language (John 8:44).

Psalm 140:1-3 – “Deliver me, O LORD, from evil men; preserve me from violent men, who plan evil things in their heart and stir up wars continually. They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's, and under their lips is the venom of asps.”

When Paul was making his argument that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, he offers up our speech as “Exhibit A”:

Rom. 3:10-14 – “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

James asks his congregation, “What are you doing?” You are followers of Jesus? You come into Church praising God, which is what your mouth is for (building up and blessing!) and then out of that very same mouth that came praise and worship and blessing of God, comes cursing and lying?

You can't praise God with the mouth of a serpent! He says, “My brothers, these things ought not be so!”

Illus. Parking lot – Pastor Jarrett, you've never been in our parking lot right after a service! Ha!

Illus. Bellaire Day Care - that was an old school way of discipline back in the day! Some of us today need Jesus to wash our mouth out with soap.

The last images James gives can go together.

5. The Spring

6. The Fig Tree

James 3:11-12 – “Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.”

In other words, when there is the blessing of God coming out of your mouth one moment, and then the cursing of God or others the next moment, it's a sure sign that something is not lining up correctly.

A fig tree will produce figs. Salt water is NOT coming out of a fresh water spring. In the same way if one is a believer in Christ than his language should reflect being a believer in Christ.

So, in closing let me give you very quickly using the scripture how we can try to tame the untamable tongue. I'll do this using the acrostic TAME.

T – Talk less – I thought of the *Hamilton* song about Aaron Burr on this one! You know the lyric? *Talk less, smile more...*

This is **James 1:19** – “**Know this my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.**”

Listen to some wisdom from the Proverbs:

Prov. 10:19 – “**When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.**”

Prov. 17:28 – “**Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.**”

Prov. 21:23 – “**Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble.**”

It’s amazing to me that in the day of our social media craze everyone thinks they have to have an opinion on everything. You don’t!

I heard this a long time ago and it’s true. You will never regret 100% of the words you don’t say!

Psalms 39:1a – “**I said, “I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue; I will guard my mouth with a muzzle...”**”

Put a muzzle on it! Talk less.

A – Avoid unwholesome language – slander, cussing, complaining (Ex. 16-17 – sin of murmuring), course joking, bragging, gossip – it all goes together and can be lumped in the same category – it’s what Paul called “unwholesome” or “corrupt” language.

The word means “rotten” or “worthless”.

Eph. 4:29 – “**Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.**”

As it relates to gossip, avoid it! I don’t know what the attractational pull of gossip is, but I do know it’s there!

Prov. 18:8 – “**The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.**”

Prov. 26:20 – “**For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.**”

Gossip is like fire...you give it air and it will destroy everything in its path! Snuff it out...don’t give it airtime and it will go away!

Avoid unwholesome language. The “M” in TAME is:

M – Mind the consequences – Understand that your words matter. Understand that your words have consequences. As we have already seen they can affect people in an either positive or negative way. Before you speak, mind the consequences.

Eph. 4:29-30 – “**Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.**” **And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.**”

Context: Grieving the Holy Spirit! This was personal for me this week.

illus. This week - I was in my quiet time reading and the Holy Spirit got me! Pinned me up against the wall...had to go and ask forgiveness.

E – Express grace – We really need to get better at this!

Col. 4:6a – “**Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt...**”

Prov. 22:11 – “**He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend.**”

We ought to be known for our gracious words...NOT flattery. But, encouraging...building up...loving. Speak words of forgiveness and grace to those that have hurt you. Use words that are kind and good...bless people with your words.

You want your marriage to go the distance? Start extinguishing criticism and expressing grace. It’s not just our works that prove we are a follower of Jesus. It’s our tongue as well!

So, let’s commit today to allow Jesus to by his grace TAME the untamable tongue!

Let’s pray.

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.