

Today we will start with a riddle. “I am often held, but never touched. I am always wet, but never rust. I often bite, but I am seldom bit. To use me well, you must have wit. What am I?”

Can you figure it out? Ready for the answer? It is...the tongue! Indeed, the tongue can be held without being touched. It will not rust. And it can bite although it has no teeth.

Today we continue on in our sermon series “Jim Time” and this week we’ve arrived at chapter 3. The first few verse of this chapter are dedicated to “Taming the Tongue”.

Now James has an obsessive interest in the tongue. How obsessive is it? Well, this book has 108 verses across five chapters. Forty-six of those verses in some way, shape, or form deal with the tongue, language, speech. That’s 43% of the book of James. Two out of every five verses in James deals with the tongue. And chapter three gives us his most concentrated teachings on the tongue.

James starts with a warning to teachers of The Word. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will face stricter judgment.” A bit concerning, am I right?

Why does James say this? Because as we’ve seen in our own lifetime, false teachings can destroy or damage the faith of those who are taught. Just look at Jim Jones who falsely led 909 followers to their death.

James instructs both the teacher and the taught. His following words encompass all people. “For we all stumble in many ways.” James’s admission. We all sin; we all use stumbling images in our feeble attempts to reveal the truth. As we stumble, most pray that we will stay on the path. Most will move forward. But some of us might spread our arms out and hit the pavement hard. Kind of like emerging from a sinful life. We may stumble, but that does not mean that we completely fall away from the faith. We still want to move forward.

James continues with his perfect ideal imagery. “Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is mature, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.” James then dives in about the tongue, beginning with his first point.

It can be hard not to stumble in what we say. We say things carelessly, in anger, frustration, or panic. We speak without thinking. Some are known for this very behavior. Using lies, self-justifying words, harmful words, empty words. James says that these misguided words are not without effect. They affect both lives and bodies. The tongue can control us, and James uses a farming example to illustrate this point.

“If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies.” Crazy right? A one pound bit able to control an animal that can weigh up to 2,000 pounds.

Move the bit to the left, the horse goes left. Move it to the right, the horse goes right along. Move it up to make it go faster, and pull it down to make that hulking horse come to a halt. This one-pound thing controlling this huge animal. Ok James, very pedestrian of you. Is that all you got? Haha...silly rabbit. James drives his point home with one more image. Vs 4 “Look at ships: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot who directs.”

In James’s time, ships were one of the fastest ways to travel. Carrying crews and cargo, they could move along quickly by large gusts of wind. Yes, wind was important, but what ultimately called the shots on this mighty vessel? That little rudder controlling where it went. James’s point? What the tongue, a bit, and a rudder have in common. Each something so small affecting something much larger. Each small thing controlling something much larger.

Our little, teeny, tiny tongues controlling our entire bodies. Directing our lives. Yes, our tongues can control and affect our actions.

This is seen well in the movie Wonder.

[Show Video]

This movie is the true story of Auggie Pullman diagnosed with Treacher's Collins Syndrome. A condition that results in severe facial deformity. Throughout the movie, Auggie endures ruthless teasing. Auggie is compared to Emperor Palpatine from Star Wars, a character whose face is wrinkly and deformed from an injury. Auggie is called a freak, a monster, ugly, unlovable, and disease riddled. All begin to treat him as such. If someone touched Auggie, they might be temporarily alienated because they might get his "cooties." Tongues controlling actions.

Our tongues indicate what we believe, what we think. If a tongue says that someone is "worthless" or "stupid," we can be led to believe it about that someone, or others, or even ourselves. That lie about worthlessness can be repeated so much that we start to believe that it's true! Our tongues can control us and can be a conduit to control others. Yes, it's possible with this tiny part of our body.

James moves on to the damage this tiny tongue is capable of, it can destroy. It only takes a spark. As proof, consider one of history's most famous fires, started from a single spark.

When Mrs. O'Leary's cow knocked over a little lantern and started the Great Chicago Fire, who knew that it would do so much damage? The fire destroyed 73 miles of roads, 120 miles of sidewalks, and over 17,000 buildings. The fire killed over 300 people and did over 1.3 billion dollars in damage! This fire made 100,000 of Chicago's 300,000 people homeless. Yes, it only takes a spark.

"How great a forest is set ablaze by a such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of life, and is itself set on fire by hell." This is how James describes the tongues' ability to

destroy. Words can reflect our fallen nature. Our tongues don't just destroy us; they destroy others as well.

We've all heard, maybe even said, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." According to James and life, this is completely untrue.

In reality, hurtful words we hear from others will last far longer than scars, bruises, or lumps. Words like, "I hate you, and want nothing to do with you" will last longer than a bruise. Words like, "I'm leaving, we're through," will hurt more than a blow. Saying, "I don't love you," will hurt more than any scar we can receive. Overhearing, or even hearing, what people really think about us, through conversations that start with things like, "Well bless their heart..." will sting and linger longer than any real stone hitting us. What our tongue says can destroy families and friendships. Can devastate relationships. Can tarnish trust. Can hurt and humiliate. Can eliminate self-worth and confidence. Can destroy everything we have, and everything we have worked for. They can even destroy us! They can forever change our lives. Some words can never be fully taken back. Our little tongue can be destructive. It can destroy.

With that in mind, might we be thinking the same thing. "I'm trying to hold it, trying keep it back, trying bite down." All to no avail. I mean, we can tame animals like Babe the Pig, Flipper the dolphin, Shamu, Mr. Ed the horse, or Wishbone the dog. We can go to a circus and see lions, elephants, and chimpanzees as they obey their masters. But will we ever see the tongue tamed.

Sad news. James says, "but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly." Try as you may, it will break free. It cannot be fully held back. Bite it down, and it will emerge victorious, ready to sting.

Despite this fact, it doesn't stop James from calling for consistency. He says that the tongue's use should reflect our calling. "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."

And James is spot on. With our tongue we can sing our praises to God in church and then with that same tongue go to the restaurant after church and wound someone with it right after. This leads us back to verse two. We all stumble in many ways. After all, anyone does not stumble in what is said? That is a perfect person. Someone able to bridle their whole body.

Be at ease because there is only one perfect person. Only one who controlled his tongue for our sake and our salvation. One who when was condemned, one who didn't open His mouth to refute or to fight. One who on the cross cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me". One who bore the punishment for our sin.

Jesus was teased, Jesus was crucified, He did not curse. His only plea? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And then at the end of it all, says, "It is finished."

Jesus's tongue? It was not silenced. On Easter morning, Our Lord arose from the dead and speaks forevermore! Jesus is the servant who knows how to sustain one who is weary.

Through Jesus, God says. "You are forgiven. You are loved. You are chosen before the world began. You are redeemed from sin and the devil. You are beautiful in me. You are blessed. You are called. You are protected. You are cared for. You are my child. You are valuable. You are important and you mean the world to me. You are mine!" Our Lord works in us through His Word, and through our baptism. Jesus moves us to use our tongue properly, to sing praises in response to His love and grace given to us. To use our tongues to speak words that build up, cheer, encourage, speak well of, and bless others. Jesus wants to speak through our tongues the the wonderful words of Life. Jesus' words of love. When we fail and stumble, hear the words of the Perfect One: "You are forgiven!"

James says that our tongues can control, and they can destroy. They are set on fire by hell, but in Jesus Christ, that fire is tamed, tongues redeemed for a good use. Tongues that are tamed.