

Proposition: *We must tame our tongue because it tends to control, kill, and corrupt every aspect of our lives, but we lack this ability in ourselves, so we must flee to Christ for forgiveness and spiritual power to begin speaking to God’s glory.*

Introduction – Story of middle school Spanish adjective game when I spoke words I regretted. Scripture teaches that my experience is not unique. I know you sin with words too—all the time.

A. Christians (Especially Teachers) Will Be Judged For What They Say (v 1)

1. Our Words Will Be Judged

In this passage, the overriding problem that James confronts is dissention in the local church. People are praising God yet slandering fellow believers. Perhaps even the teachers/leaders are guilty as well. James has already introduced this concern when he tells us that the religious man must keep a tight reign on his tongue (Jas 1:26). Here he expounds this theme in greater detail. First he told us to reign in our tongue. In this passage he tells us we can’t, and we’ll be judged for it. What a way to silence a room!

2. A Teacher’s Words Will Be Judged Strictly

James begins with the example of Bible teachers because a teacher’s primary tool is his words (his tongue). He argues it is a dangerous desire to be a teacher since it can lead to conflict in the church and certainly will lead to a stricter judgment. According to James, a controlled tongue is *the* key to blessing—the one thing that stands in our way to perfect holiness (1Pe 3:10). James echoes Jesus, who reserved his harshest words for the teachers of Israel, demonstrating the truth that teachers will be judged more strictly (Mt 23:1-33; Mk 12:40; Lk 20:47). In fact even our casual words will be judged (Mt 23:36). Teachers beware! This is the case because with greater responsibility comes greater expectations (Lk 12:48; Heb 13:17).

B. So Be Mindful! The Tongue Can Control a Person’s Entire Life (vv 2-4)

1. How to Be Perfect (v 2)

James says that if you can control your tongue, then you are self-controlled to such a degree that you are “perfect”. Winning the battle of the tongue is not an indication that you are strong enough to win all the other battles against sin. No, winning the battle of the tongue is proof that you have already won all the battles! In a sense, the tongue is the greatest obstacle to moral perfection. If you can keep sinful words off your tongue (which is the hardest thing to do), then you have fought the greatest battle and won. If you win the battle of the tongue, then nothing can tempt you to sin. James is saying, “He who controls his tongue controls his life.”

2. Illustrations from Human Life (vv 3-4)

The horse was the most powerful animal used for physical labor in the first century. The horse was the most valuable “machine” of the day. We still hear remnants of the horse’s strength today when we speak of a car’s “horsepower”. Yet the horse is controlled by a small bit in its mouth. Similarly, the ship was the largest vehicle in the first century. In a culture that still used chariots and horse-buggies for travel, the first-century ship must have seemed a mega-ocean liner. Yet the ship was controlled by a relatively small rudder. Small things can control larger things.

But notice that while it appears from this passage that mastery of the tongue is the key to mastery of life, there is an unsung third party in each illustration. The horse has a bit in its mouth, but there is a rider who uses the bit to control the horse. The ship has a rudder that steers it, but there is a pilot who directs the

rudder according to his will. Likewise, the tongue makes great boasts for the whole body, but a person's heart expresses itself in the tongue's speech. In each example, behind the small directional device is a volitional person directing it. The Bible speaks of a person's will (the directional device) as his "heart". Jesus taught that out of the heart proceeds good or evil speech (Mt 12:34-35). The heart moves the tongue, and since no man can change the heart, we cannot simply decide to control our tongue by resolving to do so, because our heart controls our resolutions. While the heart is the *source* of our sin problem, the tongue is the primary and greatest symptom of our problem.

C. So Be Warned! The Tongue Can Kill a Person's Entire Life (vv 5-6)

1. Boasting is Playing with Fire (v 5)

The tongue is small, but it speaks pompous things. It is capable of boasts without limit (Ps 12:3-4; Isa 28:15; Acts 8:9-10). All such boasting is destructive, like how a tiny spark of fire quickly spreads, burning and killing everything in its path.

2. Dancing with the Devil (v 6)

James is not speaking of language *per se*, but language corrupted by the fall. Sins of the tongue are so great they set the course of one's life. Man's destiny is hell-bent because of his sinful tongue. The *source* of the tongue's destructive power and its eventual *destination* is hell. Here James employs the tongue as a symbol for the wickedness of the whole world, possibly because it expresses all the evil in the world. It is even set on fire by hell because its evil comes from Satan himself.

D. So Be Consistent! The Tongue Can Corrupt a Person's Entire Life (vv 7-12)

1. The Untamable Evil (vv 7-8)

While all *kinds* of animals have been (and still are) tamed by humankind, no human can tame his own tongue. We know what makes words sinful is their intent. If even your good intentions are mixed with sin, is it really possible for you to speak at all without sinning? Or is James merely exaggerating when he says no man can tame the tongue? I think not. Clearly and simply, James means to say no mere human can tame the tongue. But observe that he leaves open the possibility that *someone* can tame the human tongue. Hope's door is still open.

2. Illustrations from Human Speech and Nature (vv 9-12)

The tongue's deadly poison is its inconsistency and hypocrisy. How is it not hypocrisy when we praise God yet also curse people (bearers of his image and likeness)? James argues that insulting a person is the same as insulting God himself. In essence we praise and curse God from the same mouth. This is surely wickedness, hypocrisy, and foolishness. James calls Christians to repent of expressing both blessings and curses from our mouths because such conduct is unbecoming of a Christian. He illustrates his point (fresh and salt water cannot come from the same spring; strange fruit cannot come from a plant) and teaches that if the product is evil, then the spring and plant must be evil. Therefore any words of blessing that come from a mouth that curses must be inconsistency and hypocrisy.

Conclusion – So who can tame the tongue? Certainly no mere human being. Sinful words control, kill, corrupt, and ultimately condemn us. But Christ forgives, resurrects, and restores to new life sinners who humbly repent of their sinful speech. Later, James explicitly points us to the God who forgives (Jas 4:6-10). [The Bible's story of "tongues."] At Pentecost, the first act of new creation was the redemption of the human tongue, a tongue without confusion intelligibly praising God (Acts 2:11). Now the spirit-filled person (i.e., every Christian) is enabled to speak words to God's glory. If you are convinced that your tongue needs to be tamed, then come to Jesus. He is the only one who can tame your tongue. Praise God he gives the Holy Spirit to empower you to bless God and others with a renewed, tamed tongue.