**LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE RIGHT**

**The Marks of a mature Christian**

**He has power over his tongue**

**Sermon 5:**

**James 3:2-12**

**Taming the Tongue**

**James 3:2-12**

This morning we will be continuing the sermon series on Living the Christian Life right; the marks, or characteristics, of a mature Christian. In the previous messages of this series we covered James’ intent (Conduct not Creed) in his message to believers to develop spiritual maturity. As a quick review, James identified five marks of a mature Christian**.** The focus is on how Christians should be living their faith. In the pasts weeks I discussed how we needed to learn to be patient in testing and turn trials into triumphs by applying the four principles of**:** Count - a joyful attitude; Know – an understanding Mind; Let – a Surrendered Will; and Ask – a Believing Heart. We also looked at the dangers of temptations, the process of sin, and the need to be Doers, not just Hearers of The Word. The past two messages examined the second mark of a mature Christian, Practicing the truth. We studied the relationship between faith and love and faith and works as they apply to practicing the truth by considering four basic Christian doctrines and three types of faith in the light of the way we treat other people**.** Today we will move on to the third mark of a mature Christian, Power over his tongue.

We all like to feel powerful. Most of us would also admit that we want to be in control of our lives. As I get older, and hopefully wiser, I confess that control is an illusion- except to God. Still, all of us would like to practice self-control and feel like we are self-disciplined and responsible adults. I mean, the LEAST we can do is control OURSELVES, right? It sounds simple. All we have to do is set our minds to the task and we can avoid that chocolate cake, ignore that four-wheeler that is on PFD sale, and actually go to work on that beautiful summer day when the salmon are running, right? Well, that may be a lot to bite off so why don’t we try wading into the ocean of self-control by mastering just one small muscle in our bodies – the tongue - that should be easy – I mean, all we have to do is close our mouths and we have it captured!

One sociological study showed that the average adult spoke 16,000 words a day. The study also broke that down between the genders to discern how many words per day women spoke vice how many men spoke…at this point I am going to attempt to model today’s theme characteristic and say no more…I am working on that wisdom thing! Gossip is defined as, “*a rumor or report of an intimate nature” or “a person who habitually reveals personal or sensational facts about others.”* Scripture does not speak kindly of gossips or people who use hurtful words. The book of Proverbs alone specifically condemns gossips in five different chapters so we should be well-warned of the seriousness of using idle words.

The Christians to whom James wrote were apparently having serious problems with their tongues. James had already warned them three times in the first two chapters. In chapter 1 he told them to be, “swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (James 1:19); and that “The believer who does not bridle his tongue is not truly religious”, (James 1:26). In chapter 2, he added, “We must speak and act as though we were already facing Christ in judgment.” (James 2: 12). The power of speech is one of the greatest powers God has given us. With the tongue, man can praise God, pray, preach the Word, and lead the lost to Christ. What a privilege! But with that same tongue he can tell lies that could ruin a man’s reputation or break a person’s heart. The ability to speak words is the ability to influence others and accomplish tremendous tasks; and yet we take this ability for granted.

Our Scripture today is James 3:2-12.

Verses 2-12 have to do with the human tongue and its possibilities for good and evil. This subject is dealt with in every chapter of James! You will find these references in 1:19; 26; 2:12; 4:11; and 5:12 as well as in our text today. This repetition should give us a hint as to the importance of the matter.

In order to impress on us the importance of controlled speech, and the great consequences of our words, James gave us six pictures of the tongue: the bit, the rudder, fire, a poisonous animal, a spring, and a tree. I have put these six pictures into three classifications that reveal the three powers of the tongue.

- Power to Direct

- Power to Destroy

- Power to Delight

Let’s look first at the…

*Power to Direct: (3:2-4)*

James starts off this section in verse 2 reminding us that every Christian will stumble in many ways. And sins of the tongue seem to head the list. The person who is able to discipline his tongue gives evidence that he can control his whole body. He proves that he is a mature (perfect) man.

Is James making a mistake by connecting sins of the tongue with sins committed by the whole body? No, because *words* usually lead to *deeds*. A person makes an unguarded statement and suddenly finds himself involved in a fight. His tongue has forced the rest of his body to defend itself.

In verse 3 James begins his word pictures. In selecting the bit and the rudder, James presented two items that are small of themselves, yet exercise great power, just like the tongue. A small bit enables a rider to control the great horse, and a small rudder enables the pilot to steer the huge ship. The tongue is a small member of the body, and yet it has the power to accomplish great things.

Both the bit and the rudder must overcome contrary forces. The bit must overcome the wild nature of the horse, and the rudder must fight the winds and currents that would drive the ship off course. The human tongue also must overcome contrary forces. We have an old nature that wants to control us and make us sin. There are circumstances around us that would make us say things we ought not to say. Sin on the inside and pressures on the outside are seeking to get control of the tongue.

This means that both the bit and the rudder must be under control of a strong hand. The expert horseman keeps the mighty power of his steed under control, and the experienced pilot courageously steers the ship through the storm. When Jesus Christ controls the tongue, then we need not fear saying the wrong things – or even saying the right things the wrong way! Solomon warned us that, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov. 18:21); and David prayed, “Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips. 4Do not let my heart be drawn to what is evil.” (Ps. 141:3-4). David knew that *the heart was the key* to right speech. “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Matt. 12:34). When Jesus Christ is Lord of the heart, then He is Lord of the lips too.

The bit and rudder have the power to direct which means they *affect the lives of others*. The words we speak affect the lives of others. A judge’s , “Guilty” or “Not Guilty” determines the destiny of the prisoner and impacts the lives of his family and friends. Even a simple yes or no from a parent can greatly affect the direction of a child’s life.

Never underestimate the guidance you give by the words you speak or do not speak. Peter preached at Pentecost and 3,000 souls came to salvation through faith in Christ. It would do us all good to read frequently the Book of Proverbs and pay attention to the many references to speech. A gentle answer turns away wrath,   
 but a harsh word stirs up anger. (15:1) The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy.(12:22) Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues.(10:19) Yes, the tongue is like a bit and rudder: it has the power to direct. Let us use this power to direct people in God’s way.

The second group of powers is the**…**

*Power to Destroy(3:5-8)*

Over a million acres of forests are lost to wildfires in Alaska every year. Much of this damage occurs as a result of a spark from a cigarette or campfire. A fire can begin with just a small spark and grow to consume vast quantities of land and property. Our words can start fires. Proverbs 26 tells us, “Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down. As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.” In most organizations, including churches, there are members who cannot control their tongues and the result is disharmony and destruction.

Like a fire, the tongue can “heat things up.” David wrote, “I said, I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; …But my anguish increased; my heart grew hot within me. While I meditated, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue.” (Ps 39:1-3). It happens all the time, we *intend* to remain calm and in control then a hot head and a hot heart can lead to burning words that later we will regret. David had a temper, and he had to have God’s help in controlling it. Solomon advised that, “He who restrains his word has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.” (Prov 17:27)

Fire not only starts small and grows, and creates heat; it also defiles. Many small house fires do far more widespread damage through smoke than what was actually burned. Fiery words can desecrate a home, a Bible Study Class, or a church.

Fire burns and hurts and our words can burn and hurt. One of the sorrows Our Lord had to bear when He was here on earth was the way His enemies talked about Him. They called Him gluttonous and a winebibber because He graciously accepted invitations to dine with people the Pharisees did not like. When He performed miracles they said he was in league with Satan.

Fire spreads, and the more fuel you give it, the faster it spreads. As it spreads, fire destroys; and the words we speak have the power to destroy. For every word in Hitler’s book, *Mein Kampf,* 125 lives were lost in WW II. Our words may not have caused wars or wrecked cities, but they can break hearts and ruin reputations. They can also destroy souls by sending them into eternity without Christ. How important it is for us to let our speech be always full of Grace and seasoned with salt (Col 4:6).

Not only is the tongue like a fire, but it is also like a dangerous animal. It is restless and unruly, and it seeks its prey and then pounces and kills. In verses 7 and 8 James tells us that mankind has tamed (domesticated) all kinds of animals, but cannot tame the tongue. It sounds hopeless, until we realize that, while man cannot tame the tongue, God Can! The “poison” of verse 8 is the last figure used by James to describe the harmful influence of the tongue. Some animals’ poisonous venom is so potent that only a drop may kill. The tongue does not need to make long speeches in order to be harmful—a mere word will often suffice. There is a quote from a children’s verse that sums this up quite well:

*I lost a very little word, only the other day*

*It was a very naughty word I had not meant to say*

*But, then, it was not really lost when from my lips it flew*

*My little brother picked it up, and now he says it too!*

While this is true of our tongues, we know that the trouble is much deeper than that. It is not the tongue that conceives the evil things it says nor does the tongue manufacture the poison it ejects. These evils originate in the heart, and are only expressed by the tongue. So, the message of the Gospel is not directed to the external life but to the heart of men. If the heart is changed, the life will follow suit.

The tongue is a mighty tool and can serve as a vicious weapon, but it can also be a great instrument of peace-- when we let God control it. That brings us to our last category, the**…**

*Power to Delight* (vv.9-12)

The spring symbolizes refreshment and encouragement – how we all need that! “The words of a man’s mouth are as deep waters, and the wellspring of wisdom as a flowing brook” (Prov. 18:4). “The mouth of a righteous man is a well of life” (Prov 10:11). Water is life-giving, and our words can give life. However, if water is not controlled, it brings death and destruction. Floods cause billions of dollars in damage and thousands of lives every year. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov 18:21).

But, when we receive cool, refreshing water we are revived, re-energized, and refreshed - filled with hope. Paul’s prayer was that he might “refresh” the saints in Rome when he came to them (Rom. 15:32).

Water also cleanses. There was a laver in the OT tabernacle and temple, provided for the cleansing of the priests’ hands and feet. John 15:3 tells us that God’s word is the spiritual water that cleanses us. Our words to others can also help cleanse and sanctify them. Our words should be like the river in Ezekiel 47 that brought life to everything it touched.

The tongue is also delightful because it is like a tree. In the mid-east, trees are vitally important to the economy. They hold down soil, provide beauty and shade, and bear fruit. Our words too can help shelter and shade a weary traveler and can help to feed a hungry soul. Proverbs 10:21 tells us that the “lips of the righteous feed many.” And Jesus said, “The words that I speak to you, they are spirit, and they are life.” (John 6:63) As we share Jesus’ words with others, we feed and encourage them along the way.

The most important thing about a tree is the root system. If the roots don’t go down deep, the tree will not grow in a healthy manner. If we are rooted in the things of The Lord, then our words will be the fruit of our fellowship with Him. If you and I are going to have tongues that delight, then we must meet with The Lord each day and learn from Him. We must get our spiritual roots deep into His Word. We must pray and meditate and allow the Spirit of God to fill our hearts with God’s love and truth.

But James issued a warning: a spring cannot produce two kinds of water, and a tree cannot bear two different kinds of fruit. We expect a spring to produce only fresh water and a fig tree to produce only figs. Nature reproduces after its kind. If the tongue is inconsistent, there is something radically wrong with the heart. The tongue that blesses the Father then turns around and curses the men made in His image, is in desperate need of spiritual healing. How easy it is to sing songs of worship at church and argue with your family on the way home. These are the things James said “should not be.”

The problem, of course, is not the tongue, but the heart. Matthew 5:18 says, “But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.” As we fill our hearts with God’s Word, and yield to the Holy Spirit, He can use us to bring delight to others, and we will be refreshing springs and trees.

In closing out our study on the tongue, I would recommend that we all start using the *Twelve words that can transform your life.* If you use, and sincerely mean, these words, you will find that God will use you to be a blessing and encouragement to others.

Please and Thank you: When you use these three words, you are treating others like people and not things – you are showing appreciation.

I’m sorry: These two words have a way of breaking down walls and building bridges.

I love you: These are not just words of romance. As Christians, we should love fellow Christians and even love our enemies. These words carry tremendous power.

I’m praying for you: When you talk to God about people, then you can talk to people about God. Our private praying for people helps us in our public meeting with people. This phrase should always be said in an encouraging way to let others know that we care enough for them to meet them at the throne of grace.

The tongue can be a big troublemaker or a great blessing in people’s lives. The difference is in whether we try to control it ourselves, or we allow God to control it. Give God your tongue and your heart each day and ask Him to use you to be a blessing to others.

Next week we will examine the fourth mark of a mature Christian – being a Peacemaker, not Troublemaker.

**James 3:2-12**

New International Version (NIV)

**Taming the Tongue**

2We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

3When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 4Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. 5Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 6The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

7All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, 8but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

9With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. 10Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. 11Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

`