

Speech and the Power of the Tongue

Think about the last time you said something you immediately wished you could take back.

Not a dramatic moment, necessarily. It might have been something small. A comment at the dinner table that landed harder than you meant it to. A message sent in frustration before you had thought it through. A word in an argument that went somewhere it was never supposed to go. And the moment it was out, you knew. You knew before the other person even reacted.

We have all been there.
And most of us have been on both sides of it.

That is exactly where James is going in chapter 3.

We tend to think of the ways we go wrong mostly in terms of things we do. Actions. Choices. What we did or did not do. The tongue rarely makes that list, and yet if you sat quietly for a moment and thought about the damage done in your relationships over the years, my guess is that a significant portion of it came not from something you did with your hands, but from something you said with your mouth.

James is not surprised by that. He has been thinking about the tongue since chapter 1, where he wrote that if anyone thinks they are religious but does not bridle their tongue, they deceive their heart and their religion is worthless. James 1:26. He has been building toward this.

In chapter 3, he gives it his full attention. And what he has to say is confronting. Deliberately so.

He opens with a warning to teachers.

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will receive the greater judgment.” James 3:1.

Teachers in James’s world carried real weight. They spoke with authority into the community. What they said shaped how people thought and lived. The responsibility was serious, and the accountability was serious to match.

But James does not stay with teachers for long. By verse 2 he has broadened the lens:

“For we all stumble in many ways.”

All of us. He includes himself in that. It is not a humble confession

so much as a plain observation. This is the human condition. We stumble, and nowhere do we stumble more visibly, more instantly, and sometimes more permanently than in what we say.

Then he makes this statement:

“And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.” James 3:2.

That is a striking claim. The one who can control what they say can control everything else. Which means the tongue is not just one problem among many. It is the controlling problem. Get this right, James is saying, and everything else follows.

Then he shows you why it is so hard.

He gives us two images first. A bit in a horse's mouth. A rudder on a ship. Both are small. Both direct something far larger than themselves. A horse is powerful, but a bit in the right hands guides the whole animal. A ship can be enormous, driven by great winds, and yet a small rudder determines where it goes.

James says: the tongue is like that. Small in the body. But its reach is wildly disproportionate to its size. This is not yet a warning about destruction. It is an observation about influence. The tongue matters more than we typically treat it as mattering. It is doing more than we think.

Then in verse 5 the tone shifts.

“How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire.” James 3:5.

And then:

“And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.” James 3:6.

James piles on. The tongue stains the whole body. It sets on fire the whole course of life. It is itself set on fire by hell. And in verses 7 and 8 he lands the argument with the line that stops everything cold:

“But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” James 3:8.

Notice what James does not do here. He does not follow that with a technique. He does not offer a strategy or a practice or a set of steps. He simply lets it stand.

This is more lament than instruction. And that is deliberate. He wants the weight of the problem to land fully before anything else is said. Because if you have not really felt how serious this is, you will not take the next part seriously either.

Then he arrives at the heart of it. Verses 9 and 10.

“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.” James 3:9-10.

This is James’s deepest move in the whole passage. And it is worth slowing down for.

The people we speak against — dismissively, harshly, carelessly — are people who carry the likeness of God. That is not a polite way of saying they have value. It is a specific theological claim. When God made human beings, he made them bearing his image. That image was not entirely lost in the fall. It is still there. Every person you will speak to or about today carries something of the likeness of the God you prayed to this morning.

So when the same mouth that blesses God turns around and tears down a person made in God’s image, James says this is not just rude or unkind or socially awkward. It is a contradiction at the deepest level. It does not make sense. It ought not to be.

He makes the point with three quick questions. Does a spring pour forth both fresh water and bitter water from the same opening? Does a fig tree produce olives? Does a grapevine produce figs? The answers are all obvious. And that is precisely his point. What comes out of us should not be two completely different things depending on who we are talking to or how we feel in the moment.

He ends the passage there. In the tension. Without resolving it.

That tension is worth sitting with, because James’s deepest challenge here is not just behavioural. It is diagnostic.

What does the way you speak about people tell you about what you actually believe about them? Not what you say you believe. What your words reveal you believe.

The person you spoke about with contempt. The one you dismissed. The one you reduced to their worst moment or

their most irritating quality. James is asking: do you actually see them as someone made in the likeness of God? Because your words suggest otherwise.

That is a harder question than “did I say something I shouldn’t have?” It reaches further back. And it is worth sitting with honestly rather than answering too quickly. Because the quick answer is almost always yes, of course I believe that. But James is not interested in the quick answer. He is interested in what your words have already revealed before you had a chance to give one.

So take that question with you. Not as a guilt exercise. As a genuine investigation. Pay attention to what comes out of your mouth over the next few days and ask yourself: what does this tell me about what I actually believe about this person? You might be surprised by what you find. And what you find is worth bringing to God honestly, because honest-seeing is where change tends to begin.

James ends this passage without giving us a solution. For a writer as practical as James, that silence is worth noticing. He has named the problem with full force and then simply stopped. No technique. No remedy. No reassurance.

The lament is not a failure of the passage. It is the passage doing exactly what James intended. He wanted the weight to land. And it does.

There is one small detail that some readers have noticed. In verse 8, James does not simply say no one can tame the tongue. The Greek is slightly more precise: no one of humans can. It may be nothing more than emphasis, a sharpening of the irony that humans who can tame every species of wild animal cannot tame this one small member of their own body. But the word is there. And a reader sitting with that phrase might find themselves asking: if not by human effort, then how?

James does not answer that in chapter 3. He leaves the question in the room.

And that, in its own way, is an invitation worth taking seriously.