

## *Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript*

### **Taming the Tongue James 3:1-12 Part One**

Hopefully you remember the theme of the Book of James is “Tests of Living Faith.” This epistle was written so that we might know whether we are saved or not saved. This epistle was written so that we might know whether we are going to heaven or not going to heaven. This epistle was written so that we might know whether we truly know God or we do not.

The first test that we examined was the “Response to Trials test” in **James 1:2-18**. The second test that we examined was the “Response to the Word test” in **James 1:19-27**. The third test that we have examined was the “Impartiality test” in **James 2:1-13**. The fourth test that we examined was the “Works test” in **James 2:14-24**. And now we are going on to consider the fifth test which is the “Speech test” in **James 3:1-12**.

Let us read this passage of Scripture. **“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment. (2) For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. (3) Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well. (4) Behold, the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder, wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. (5) So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! (6) And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among your members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. (7) For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race. (8) But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. (9) With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God. (10) from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. (11) Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? (12) Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh.”**

When we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior our speech should be dramatically affected for the better. And anything else is unnatural. Look at **VV. 9-12**, **“With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God. (10) From the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. (11) Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? (12) Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh.”** If we find our lips producing a mixed bag of blessing and cursing, if we find our lips producing a mixed bag of so called spiritual expressions such as praise and worship when we are at church and find those very same lips producing speech more characteristic of the world when we are in traffic or when we are at our place of employment or in our homes, then we have a serious problem. It raises the question of exactly, “Who are we?”

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It is very important that our speech reflect what we profess. If we say that we are a Christian, we should speak like a Christian. Whether we are in church or in our car in traffic or in the break room at our place of employment or in the comfortable confines of our home. We should be characterized by speech that would characterize a follower of Christ.

The tongue, or in other words, the way we speak is like a mirror. It reveals who we are. It is like a tattletale who cannot keep from revealing the secrets of our hearts. In **Matt. 12:34** Jesus said that “**the mouth speaks out of that which fills the what? the heart!** How can we know whether we are saved or not saved? We can know by what we speak and how we speak. The saved will speak one way and the unsaved will speak in a different way. And because of this we can look at the way we speak to see whether we are a Christian or not a Christian.

If you have been a Christian for any length of time at all and you find yourself continuing to curse, yell, scream, defame, defile, belittle and people as individuals or any particular group of individuals, you cannot take those sinful expressions of speech lightly. Why? Because the very assurance that you are a Christian is at stake.

We cannot play down the importance of the tongue. Certainly James does not. In fact, he mentioned the tongue, or in other words refers to our speech, in every chapter of this epistle.

James, in **James 3:1-12** gives us 5 different reasons why we need to give attention to taming the tongue. James gives us five different reasons why we need to work hard at controlling the tongue. It is no small matter.

### The Potential for Judgment

**Matt. 12:36** says, “**And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment.**”

You might quickly answer, “I have had no problem with my speech this week.” I don’t want to be rude but I believe I can be fairly well assured that if you have answered that way that you have fallen into a wonderful case of self deception. Why do I say this? Look at **James 3:2**, “**For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.**” I don’t believe that any of you are perfect, and therefore I sincerely doubt whether any one in this room this week has been able to be perfectly righteous in respect to their speech.

Having righteous speech is more than saying I have had no uncontrollable outbursts. But let us not be so quick to excuse ourselves. In fact, to help us understand how difficult it is, James chooses to focus on a particular group of people who were very rarely ever thought of as having a problem with their speech. Let us read **James 3:1** and the first part of **V. 2** “**Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. (2) For we all stumble in many ways.**” One of the most highly valued expressions of noble speech is the teaching of God’s Word, but, even those who perform this can be messing up big time and be worthy of judgment.

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James, as he introduces this section on the tongue and the importance of controlling or taming it, begins with the admonition to the brethren, “**Let not many of you become teachers.**” What does James mean by this admonition. First of all we need to understand that he is addressing the church of Jesus Christ as a whole. It would be just as if James were standing in front of you this morning and would say to you, “**Let not many of you become teachers.**” And exactly what does James mean when he says this?

First of all we need to understand what it means by “teacher.” In a broad or general sense, a teacher is anyone who represents themselves as knowledgeable and seeks to transfer that knowledge to another. And in this sense we are all encouraged to be teachers. Listen to the words of **Heb. 5:11-12**, “**Concerning Him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. (12) For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.**”

The author of Hebrews makes it clear here that not only can any professing believer become a teacher, but this is in fact something we should all be striving toward. There is not a single Christian here this weekend who should not aspire to be a teacher, a conveyor of biblical truth to not only the church but also the world that is around us.

It is God’s will for all of His people to articulate His truth as accurately and thoroughly as they are able. When Joshua objected to the godly prophesying of Eldad and Medad in **Numbers 11:29**, Moses mildly rebuked him saying, “**would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!**” In the Great Commission, all Christians are called to “**go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you**” in **Matt. 28:19-20**.

This is the meaning of the word “teacher” in a general sense. And there is not a single person here this morning who, according to the clear teachings of God’s Word, should not be functioning on this level. Whether that is speaking the truth in love for the building up of the saints as we see in Eph. 4:15, or speaking the truth of the gospel to the world, or simply the training up of your children, you will be doing this.

But there is a more narrow use of the term in the Scriptures. And in the more narrow sense of the word, a teacher was anyone who functioned in an official teaching or preaching role in a public setting. We see this in **John 3:10** when Jesus spoke to Nicodemus and said to him, “**Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things.**” Certainly I would fall into this particular group. Our Sunday School teachers would fall into this particular group. Our growth group leaders would fall into this particular group. Anyone who would stand before a group of people and represent themselves as knowledgeable and seek to pass that knowledge to another would be considered a teacher in this more narrow sense.

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And it would appear that this would have to be the sense of the word in **James 3:1**. When James says, “Let not many of you become teachers” he is cautioning people from quickly standing up in public forums and representing themselves as knowledgeable of God’s word and attempting to pass that knowledge along to others.

To appreciate why this particular admonition was necessary, it would be important for us to understand the democratic nature of the early Christian assemblies. Christians had a tremendous amount of freedom to contribute whatever teaching they might want to the whole of the church fellowship. And of course this freedom certainly could, and did, lead to abuse. Listen to the instructions that Paul had to give to the Corinthian assembly in an attempt to establish order in **1 Cor. 14:26-33**, **“What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a Psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. (27) If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret; (28) but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. (29) And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. (30) But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent. (31) For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; (32) and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; (33) For God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.”**

This format that was being practiced in the Corinthian Church most likely was being practiced by the readers of this epistle. And it seems to be a concern to James that certain people were stepping forward in the role of teacher that shouldn’t have been. So James is commanding them to exercise caution before doing this.

Certainly if we speak harshly to someone, if we lie to someone, if we defame someone, we render ourselves guilty and we have sinned with our tongue. We have sinned in the area of our speech. But we can also sin when we are representing ourselves as a teacher of God’s Word. Sin does not have to be limited to uncontrollable outbursts but it can be present even when we think we are involved in the very noblest human activity. How can we sin when representing ourselves as a teacher of God’s Word?

We can sin by teaching out of impure motives. Why do I want to stand in front of people and teach His word? Is it for the Lord’s sake and the sake of His church, or is it for my sake?

Unfortunately there are church staff members that teach the word not for the welfare of the people as much as it is for their own financial welfare. This is why Peter gave the exhortation to elders that he did in **1 Pet. 5:2**, **“Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness.**

There are teachers who teach the Word out of selfish ambition. In **Phil.1:15-17**, **“Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; (16) the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel;**

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**(17) the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment.”** One way for us to dishonor the Lord when we teach, either in the general sense of the word, or in the more narrow sense of the word is to teach out of impure motives. Before we step forward and offer ourselves as a teacher, we need to examine this area.

We can also sin by teaching hypocritically. We can sin by not practicing what we preach.

Certainly the Pharisees were guilty of this. In **Matt. 23:1-4** we read these words, **“then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, (2) saying, “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; (3) therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them. (4) And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men’s shoulders but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.”**

Another way for us to dishonor the Lord when we teach, either in the general sense of the word or in the more narrow sense of the word is to not practice what we preach. We might sound very good. But in the very act of teaching we would be guilty of sin.

We can also sin by not putting out the effort to cut the word straight or in other words to interpret and present it properly.

**2 Tim. 2:15** makes it very clear how we should approach the word. It says, **“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.”** We cannot treat God’s Word like a sack of potatoes.

Believers need to approach the teaching of God’s Word with a great sense of responsibility on any occasion. Many people who have chosen to represent themselves as teachers of biblical truth in many different contexts, both in and outside of the church today, are poorly grounded in Scripture and ill-equipped to teach it. Such teachers who will invariably misrepresent and misstate God’s Word can do more spiritual and moral damage to God’s people than a hundred atheists or secularists attacking from the outside. And these well meaning but misled “wannabe” teachers will be held accountable for the damage that might result from the irresponsible handling of God’s Word.

I can’t tell you this morning that everything that I have ever spoken from this pulpit is true. I would hope that it has been. But I can tell you that I work to cut the Word of God straight. I have put out my best effort to seek the truth. **My prayer is this, “Lord, let me say only what you are saying in this passage and help me make that truth clear to those who hear.”**

The great Scottish reformer John Knox was so awed and burdened by the responsibility to declare God’s Word faithfully that, before his first sermon, he wept uncontrollably and had to be escorted from the pulpit until he could compose himself. One pastor reportedly said of preaching what could also be said of teaching, “There is no special honor in preaching. there is only special pain.

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The pulpit calls those anointed to it as the sea calls its sailors; and like the sea, it batters and bruises and does not rest. To preach, to really preach, is to die naked a little at a time and to know each time you do it that you must do it again.” This should be no different for any one who presents themselves as a teacher of God’s Word in any forum.

If you are in the process of putting yourself in a position of teaching on any level, be sure that you are getting good biblical information before you pass it to another. If you are presently teaching in a public forum and you are struggling with the interpretation of a particular passage I would, especially on the basis of the teaching of **James 3:1**, encourage you to call the church office and we will do what we can to help you. If you are using printed materials in any kind of formal teaching capacity, I would encourage you to provide a copy of those materials to the elders of this church so that they might be reviewed.

Before we teach we must be careful to check our motives, our own personal conformity to the word that we are teaching, and lastly we must have proven ourselves to be a workman.

Why would we encourage you to do this? Not only for the protection of the truth but also to protect you. Why? Because your teaching will be judged.

Let us again look at **James 3:1**, **“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.”** When James tells us that “teachers” will undergo a stricter judgment he is simply saying that increased responsibility means increased accountability. **Luke 12:48** says, **“From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”** When a professional athletic team is doing badly, who is the first to get the ax? The manager of the team. If we put ourselves in a position of formal teaching we are putting ourselves in a wonderful position to bring glory and honor and praise to the Lord which should, in fact, be our motivation. But know this, if we do this, we are putting ourselves at potential risk for a stricter judgment.

The judgment that is specifically being referred to here is a future judgment. The future tense looks forward to the time when all believers will stand before the judgment seat of Christ for the purpose of reward rather than establishing the proper punishment (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10). This of course assumes that we have a true living faith. If we do not, the judgment that we will experience will take place at the Great White Throne Judgment which results in eternal damnation.

James does not intend to restrain those who are called and gifted by God to teach. Those who are genuinely qualified, knowledgeable, and prepared, certainly should step forward. But whoever steps forward into the position of a teacher, in whatever forum that might be, and particularly into a public forum, needs to understand the seriousness of the position they have placed themselves in and the personal consequences that they might experience.

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### CONCLUSION

What is the bottom line? We need to tame our tongue because our words will be judged (Mt. 12:36). And this is especially true of those who represent themselves as teachers (James 3:1) Let us not become careless in this personal examination of our speech because we all stumble in many ways.