

## *Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript*

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

We have been examining the Epistle of James. The theme of this epistle is “Tests of Living Faith.” This epistle was written so that we might know whether we are saved or not saved. The first test was the “Response to Trials test” in **James 1:1-18**. The second test was the “Response to the Word test” in **James 1:19-27**. The third test was the “Impartiality test” in **James 2:1-13**. The fourth test was “The Works test” in **James 2:14-24**. We are now considering the fifth test that we have found in this epistle and we are calling this test the “Speech test” in **James 3:1-12**.

How can we know whether or not we have saving faith? How can we know whether or not we are in fact born again? We can know by the way we communicate. We can know by what we say and how we say it. The Bible teaches us that out of the heart, the mouth speaks.

In developing this test, James shares with us five different reasons why we should control our tongues. He gives us five different reasons why we should tame our tongues. We have now considered 3 of the 5 different reasons. They are:

The tongue’s potential to bring judgment Let us look at **James 3:1** “**Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.**”

The tongue’s potential to effect the course of our lives Let us look at **James 3:2-4** “**(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 directed by a very small rudder, wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.**”

The tongue’s potential for destruction Let us look at **James 3:5-6** “**(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 our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.**” The uncontrolled tongue is an incredibly powerful tool of destruction and James compares it to the destructive power of fire at the beginning of v. 6.

Immediately after this comparison James gives us three major elements of danger associated with the uncontrolled tongue all contained in v. 6. The uncontrolled tongue defiles the entire person. The uncontrolled tongue sets on fire the entire course of our lives. And finally, but most importantly, we need to understand that the uncontrolled tongue is set on fire by hell itself. In other words the uncontrolled tongue can, and will, become the instrument of Satan to accomplish incredible destruction.

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Certainly I know that we all have experienced the destructive potential of the tongue. We highlighted for you some of the ways our tongue can be used destructively in **James 1:26**. But I purposely left out one area of sinful speech when we went through that study with the intent of expanding on it when we came to this passage in **James 3**. And now we are here.

The most destructive form of sinful speech that a person can engage in is the “evil report.” An evil report involves distortion of facts, incomplete facts or false information. It is given with wrong motivations and if taken at face value will cause the hearer to come to inaccurate conclusions and perhaps respond with unscriptural “solutions.” We commonly refer to an evil report as “gossip or slander.”

Last week, when I introduced this area of speech, I gave to you a biblical illustration of it in **2 Sam. 15** where Absalom distorted facts, gave incomplete facts and flat out lied to the people of Israel. He did this out of impure motives. And the people taking what he said at face value gave their allegiance to Absalom. The result of this evil reporting led King David to flee the city of Jerusalem and ultimately culminated in a civil war.

I would hope because of the very destructive potential of evil reporting that we would purpose ourselves never to be involved with it in any way, whether that is in the birth of an evil report or it’s growth.

### How can we avoid becoming involved in giving birth to evil reports?

When I speak of not being involved in the birth of an evil report, I am talking about not being the initiator. I am talking about not being the person who actually starts the fire. How can we avoid being that person? Let us look at inadequate solutions to this dilemma.

Only pass information that you believe to be true. Why would this be an inadequate guideline? It would be an inadequate guideline because it assumes people can know the truth and present the truth in an unbiased way. This assumption is of course a bad assumption.

When the Pharisees charged Jesus before the people with casting out demons by the power of the devil in **Mt.12:24**, did they believe that this was in fact true? I would think that they did.

Did the people who accused Jesus and his disciples of being gluttonous in **Mt.11:19** knowingly misrepresent the facts. Not necessarily.

People unknowingly share falsehoods all the time. I would venture to guess that most evil reports are in fact of this variety.

Over twenty years ago in our church we went through a very painful time. We had a staff member in our church that I co-labored with for almost four years. It was my opinion that it was not in his best interest or the best interest of the church that he would continue on in that position. So after a great amount of agonizing I went to the elder board and shared my feelings.

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They concurred with my judgment and I informed him that he needed to prepare himself to leave the staff of our church. The grief that I felt was intense. It was not something that I and the elders entered into lightly. But as a result of this action, an individual within our church became bitter. That individual began to share with her friends. What was this woman sharing? She was sharing that “I was personally motivated in the action I took.” She said that I was jealous and that I was threatened this former staff member. Did this woman knowingly make these things up? I certainly don’t in any way think so. I believe that she believed these things.

At that time in the life of our church we were not well prepared to deal with this kind of outbreak. It festered in our church over several years and culminated with 11 people charging me with being “unloving, manipulative, and unteachable.” I asked to be put on trial and was examined by what we called then, the executive board of our church.

They, after an incredibly lengthy process with every word of testimony being recorded, found me innocent of all the charges. But the pain that I felt, the pain my family felt, and the pain the church went through was excruciating.

Were the reports that were circulated about me false? I believe they were. The executive board of the church believed they were. But the people who actually brought testimony against me did not. But even though they would not consider the report false, the report was determined to be false. Certainly we can only pass information that we believe to be true, but this is not an effective deterrent to initiating an evil report. What is another inadequate solution to giving evil reports.

Only pass positive information. Why would this be an inadequate solution to the problem of initiating evil reports? The reason why this would not be an adequate solution to the problem of evil reporting is not because it would not stop evil reporting but rather because it would throw the baby out with the bath water. In other words, evil reporting is not equivalent to negative reporting.

Certainly we know that we are responsible to confront sin when we see it in the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is clear in many different New Testament passages. Certainly it is clear in **Matt.18:15** when it tells us “**And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.**” But someone might be quick to point out it is true that we are to confront our brothers and sisters in Christ with their sin but we certainly should not involve other people when we confront them. Doesn’t **Matt.18:15** tell us to go privately? And that is true. But there are a few times when a public rebuke is more appropriate. Certainly we see this being demonstrated when Paul rebuked Peter publicly in **Gal. 2:11-14**. Why would Paul do this? The reason, I believe, is clear. Peter’s sin impacted an entire group of people and was done in front of an entire group of people. It was necessary for Peter, as well as the people who had been sinned against to hear Paul’s rebuke of Peter publicly so that the damage of Peter’s actions would be addressed. And Peter would have the opportunity to restore integrity to his public ministry. But someone might say. But both of these illustrations in **Matt.18:15** and **Gal. 2:11-14** involving perceived sin was done in the presence of the alleged offenders and not behind their backs. And this is true. But certainly this is not always true.

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Have you ever heard about David's sin with Bathsheba? David committed adultery and then orchestrated the death of her husband in a military assault. I would think that his sin is heinous by anyone's standard. But you know about it. How? Because the Scriptures reported it to us. Not to harm David's reputation, but to serve us and all those who might read the story.

Over the course of my life and ministry I have thought things, felt things and done things which have been sin. I have many flaws. I have been at times impatient, I have been at times angry, I have been at times covetous, I have been at times envious, I have been at times jealous, I have been at times lustful. I have been at times uncaring. I have been at times discouraged. I have been at times all these things and more. I know that some of you may have been eyewitnesses to certain of these transgressions. If you were not there to personally observe them, or know about them I am now telling you that these things are true. If you want to relate something you know to be true about me, even though it may be negative, and you share it in such a way as to protect my reputation and with a heart to serve the person you are sharing with, then please share with them.

It is true that if you honor the old expression, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all" it would keep us from evil reporting, but it is an inadequate solution because it will invariably lead us not only to not say what we shouldn't but it will also expose us to not saying those things that we should.

Saying something about a person's faults, weaknesses, or transgressions is in itself not an evil report. If only sharing what we believe to be true is inadequate to prevent us from sharing evil reports. If only sharing positive things will keep us from sharing evil reports but is an inadequate solution because it will also keep us from sharing potentially helpful and necessary things, then what is the preferred approach?

Always pause to reflect before speaking about another person. Hopefully you will remember **James 1:19** which tells us, "**This you know, my beloved brethren. But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.**" If this is true of all speech then this would be especially true of our speech when speaking about another person. Why? Because as **2 Cor. 11:11** tells us, "**We are not ignorant of the schemes of Satan.**" And what is one of Satan's most effective schemes to bring about maximum destruction. It is our tongue. If Satan can get hold of our tongue and begin to use it to defile and defame others, he can set on fire a great forest (**James 3:4-6**).

So if you have begun to understand the importance of being slow to speak in general. Let us be especially slow when it comes to speaking of others. And what should we be doing while we are waiting to speak?

We need to go to prayer. What was Jesus instruction to the disciples in the Garden of Gethemane as He was awaiting his betrayal, arrest, and ultimate crucifixion? In **Matt. 26:41** it says he told His disciples, "**Keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.**" And what specifically should we do in prayer?

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We should examine our own life carefully and confess our sins. Hopefully you remember the words of Jesus to His disciples in **Matt. 7:5**, **“You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”** It truly is amazing how quick we are to find fault in another when we ourselves are so needy.

The apostle Paul had some very interesting words for some people who had a problem with self righteousness in **Gal. 6:1-5**. Listen to these words, **“(1) Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. (2) Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ. (3) For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. (4) But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. (5) For each one shall bear his own load.”** The self righteous individual is always harder on other people than he is on himself.

Paul presents a hypothetical case of a believer who is suddenly tripped up and falls into sin. The word “overtaken” carries the idea of being surprised, so it is not a case of deliberate disobedience. Why does Paul use this illustration? Because nothing reveals the wickedness of the self righteous person better than the way they treat those who have sinned or who are perceived as weak or immature. Remember the Pharisees who dragged a woman taken in adultery before Jesus in **John 8**. Or the Jewish mob that almost killed Paul because they thought he had defied the temple by bringing in Gentiles in **Acts 21:27ff**.

Self righteous individuals do not need facts or proof; they need only suspicions and rumors. Their self-righteous imaginations will do the rest. So, in this section of Scripture, Paul is really contrasting the way the self righteous individual would deal with an erring or immature brother, and the way the spiritual man would deal with him.

The spiritual man would seek to restore the brother in love, while the self righteous man would exploit the brother, using him, and his perceived situation to minister to his own need. The word “restore” means “to mend,” as a net, or to restore a broken bone.” If you have ever had a broken bone, you know how painful it is to have it set. The sinning believer is like a broken bone in the body, and he needs to be restored. The believer who is led by the Spirit and living in the liberty of grace will seek to help the erring or immature brother.

Instead of trying to help or encourage or restore the erring brother, the legalist will condemn him and then use the brother to make himself look good. This is what the Pharisee did in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in **Luke 18:9-14**. Listen to this incredible story. **“And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: (10) two men went up into the mountain to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. (11) The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, ‘God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. (12) I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get; (13) But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ (14) I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted.”**

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The Scripture teaches us that love covers a multitude of sin in **1 Pet. 4:8**. The self righteous individual rejoices when a brother falls, or he believes he has found some fault and sometimes will even share it with others. Why? Because then he can in effect exalt his own goodness.

### CONCLUSION

The uncontrolled tongue is a fire. It is the very world of iniquity. It sets on fire the entire course of our lives and it is on fire by hell itself.

In terms of the destructive power of the tongue, there is no greater illustration of it than the evil report.

In light of this fact, we need as believers to purpose ourselves never to be involved with it in any way. Whether that is in its birth or in its growth.

This morning we have begun to consider this very important area by considering first of all, “How can we avoid becoming involved in giving birth to evil reports?”

We first of all need to pause before speaking about another for the purpose of prayer. And in our prayer we need to be examining our own lives and confessing our sins.

After having done this, we are then and only then, prepared to ask certain very important questions of ourselves before we feel the freedom to say negative things about another person.