

5. True Christian Faith: Has a tamed tongue

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Date: 11 April 2010

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[0 : 00] Good evening. If you have your Bibles, if you could open them to James chapter 3 on page 1012. And before we come to this scripture, let me just pray.

Father, we thank you so much for your word that you have not left us in darkness. We pray, Lord, that as we gather in your name now, we will be those who are slow to speak, but quick to listen and quick to apply. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

The name of Jerry Ratner may be familiar to some of you in the business world. Jerry Ratner was, in the 1980s, I believe, the proprietor of the largest jewellery empire in the world. He had 2,000 jewellery stores worldwide. And they specialised in two things. They specialised in very expensive jewellery, very expensive, and they specialised in very cheap, high street jewellery. They managed to sell both things simultaneously. And at the height of his empire, he was invited to address a huge meeting of directors of businesses.

[1 : 21] And the meeting was going very well. People were listening to what he was saying. People were laughing at his jokes, and he got a bit carried away. And he made a flippant remark that the reason they could sell things so cheap was because they were selling rubbish.

And everyone laughed, and they all thought it was very funny. But there was a journalist from the Daily Mirror listening to the speech. And the next day, this was headline news.

And over the next few weeks, word got round this thing snowballed. And Jerry Ratner lost, we are told, his job. He had a £650,000 salary.

£500 million was wiped off the valuation of the company. And a billion pound turnover was slashed overnight. What is more, he lost his business, his reputation, his fortune, and he tarnished the family name.

Jerry Ratner discovered that words are powerful, and the tongue is deadly. He learned a lesson, and James wants us to learn that lesson tonight, in chapter 3 of his letter.

[2 : 27] This is our fifth study now, since January, in the letter of James. And we've seen that throughout his concern is that his hearers have a consistent and a genuine Christian faith.

A faith that endures trials and is strengthened through them. A faith which hears and obeys the word of God. A faith which is rooted in doctrine, but practical in application.

And in chapter 1, verse 26, he summarises for us what true faith, what true religion is. And he says, True religion, says James, is to bridle the tongue, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Holiness, practical love, and a restraint of our speech. And as we turn to chapter 3, he then focuses his attention on the first of these.

The taming of the tongue, the bridling of the tongue. And he starts by saying, Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

[4 : 01] For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. It seems in the congregations James was writing to, there were some people wishing to be teachers, wishing to instruct others in the faith.

And it's a noble ambition. And in the early church, there was great privilege in being a teacher. We're told elsewhere that they are to be considered worthy of honour.

We're told in 1 Corinthians that they are to receive some form of material recompense for their labours. And we're told in 1 John that they were to be welcomed into the homes of believers when they travelled around.

It was a privileged position. But with great privilege comes great responsibility. And in his letter, James reminds them of that responsibility.

We who teach will be judged with greater strictness. He reminds them they're responsible not just for their own spiritual welfare, but for that of the people entrusted to their care.

[5 : 09] They are under-shepherds, serving the chief shepherd. And one day the chief shepherd will return and inquire of them what they fed his sheep and how they cared for the flock he had given to them.

So James reminds them of their responsibility. And then he reminds them in verse 2 of their weakness. We all stumble. We all fall. We all slip up in many ways.

And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man. James' readers were clearly not perfect men and women.

And they were stumbling in all sorts of things that they were saying. They were speaking evil of one another. They were boasting about themselves and about the future.

They were saying things which they didn't mean they were hypocrites. They all stumbled in many ways. And James is reminding them that the teaching office is a verbal office.

[6 : 07] It is a speaking office. In the first century, you see, they didn't have IVP publishers. They didn't have the Epaphras bookroom. They didn't even have the internet. No one could blog their thoughts about the state of the church.

And so teaching was done verbally. In small groups, in individual bases, in large settings like this. And a teacher, therefore, had to restrain their tongue.

They had to be able to control their tongue. Firstly, because they were to set an example. Paul writes to Timothy and says to him, set an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. They were to show others what it meant to live as a Christian. What it meant to converse and to speak and to dialogue as a Christian. And if they couldn't control their tongues, it wouldn't be a very good example for the congregation to follow.

But, of course, they were to teach as well. They were to teach the doctrines of the faith. And if they couldn't control what they were saying, that would lead to more harm than good.

[7 : 13] So you think, for example, of Apollos. We read about in Acts, Apollos was, we are told, this zealous young man, mighty in the scriptures. And he taught boldly in the synagogues.

But he didn't quite understand what he was teaching. He knew only the baptism of John. And after he left Ephesus, Paul arrived in town. And Paul was delighted to meet some believers.

And he said, oh, wonderful, lovely to see you. And have you received the Holy Spirit? And they said, oh, well, we didn't realize there was a Holy Spirit. Because Apollos hadn't realized and he hadn't told them.

So the teacher has to be very careful about what they say and very precise in what they say it. We all stumble in many ways, says James. If you want to be a teacher, ask yourself, are you setting an example in your speech?

And do you know what it is you are trying to say? Very challenging words, as I stand here before you all. But challenging for any of us here who are involved in teaching in any capacity.

[8 : 16] Teaching our families, teaching your children, teaching a youth group, teaching a Sunday school, teaching a student Bible study, teaching a lady's fellowship. Are we aware of our weakness and of the responsibility of our position?

And do we therefore ask God for help, both in setting an example and in communicating the faith? But James then moves on to the audience, the wider audience, having explained the responsibility of responsible teaching.

He opens up his discussion. And in verses 3 to 4, he gives us the secret of self-control. And some weeks ago, you may have read, it wasn't really front page news, Britain sent a warship to the Falkland Isles.

There's already in an island of about 3,000 people, 1,000 military personnel, and an air base and some warships constantly circling the island. But there was a bit of a debate with Argentina about who owns the island.

The Argentines were saying it was there and Britain and Gordon Brown wanted to show that it was a British island. So they sent this warship. And when you look at the islands on a map, there's not very much there.

[9 : 27] There's 3,000 people, there's who knows how many sheep, there's some dolphins, there's a few penguins, just a few rocks really in the South Atlantic. But it has recently been discovered that in the waters surrounding the Falkland Islands, there are potentially billions of barrels of oil.

And there are oil rigs which have been sent to drill for this oil. And the point Gordon Brown was well aware of was whoever controls this tiny little island, controls the waters, controls the oil fields around it, tiny piece of rock, but of enormous significance.

And James says in verse 2 that if we are able to bridle our tongues, this tiny little piece of flesh in our heads, then we are able also to bridle our entire bodies.

Mastering the tongue is the secret to mastering ourselves. And to illustrate this, he gives us two examples. The first is of a horse. Now I have ridden one horse once, but last year I did go on a dray ride in Pollock Park, highly recommended, it was free, and it was great fun, with these enormous drays, about 15 hands high, with powerful names like Baron and Duke.

And they are controlled by a bridle, just this little bit of metal, and you put it in their mouth. If you quite literally control the tongue of a horse, you control its whole body, and its powerful body.

[10:59] And a second example, verse 4, look at ships. Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder, wherever the will of the pilot directs.

When I was courting Helen, I suppose, she lived in Dennis, then I lived in Broom Hill. And so we spent a lot of time driving up and down the expressway. And when I was driving back home, I would often see in the governor or the shipyards these enormous warships, weighing quite literally thousands of tons.

And yet I have it on very good authority that the rudders for these ships are maybe three meters high, one meter wide, and maybe a couple of feet thick. Tiny little rudder, great big ship.

If you control the rudder, you can direct it wherever you want it to go. The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. It has great power.

And if you have power over your tongue, you have power over your whole body as well. Alec Matier writes this, the tongue is the key factor in controlled living, the key factor in consistent living.

[12:09] He goes on to say, the control of the tongue is more than an evidence of spiritual maturity. It is the key to it. And we probably agree in practice, don't we?

We probably say, oh yes, of course, you control the tongue, you control the whole person. But we don't often see it in practice. It's very encouraging when we do. I just picked up this week Don Carson's book about his father, *Memoirs of a Andre Pastor*.

And although Don Carson is a worldwide sort of famous professor, his father pastored a small church in Canada for many years, faithfully pastoring. And he wanted to set a church plant.

And so he wrote to the denomination, he got their support, and they provided him with money and gave him the green light. But around this time there were a few problems in the denomination.

And the man in charge was getting a little bit too big for his boots, we're told. And Tom, in conversation to a friend, mentioned this to someone. And somehow word got back to the boss.

[13:12] Immediately the plans were cancelled, the money was withdrawn, and Tom Carson was publicly ridiculed for what he was trying to do. He was left, therefore, with a young family with his building he couldn't afford to pay for.

And he, in fact, resigned and had no salary. He was put in a very difficult position. And yet, Don Carson never learned of this. He grew up and his parents spoke glowingly of the man who had done this to them.

They commented about the books he'd written, which they'd read. They spoke about the sermons he'd preached, which had edified them. And it was only in a church history lecture, some years later at Bible College, that Don Carson actually understood the whole event and the role his father had played in it.

And he went home that night and he said, these were big events, why did you not explain them to us? And his father said this, Marge, that is Don's mother, and I decided we needed to protect our own souls from bitterness.

So we took a vow that neither of us would ever say an unkind thing about the man in question, and we have kept our vow. They wanted to protect their souls from bitterness, so what did they do?

[14:30] They never spoke an unkind word against the man that had caused them such pain. If we do not stumble in what we see, the man is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body.

The secret of self-control is control of the tongue. But that, of course, is far easier said than done. And the tongue has great power for harm.

James goes on to say, verse 5, how great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire. Something very small can control something very big, but it can also destroy something enormous.

the great fire of London, which destroyed 80% of the city of London. Thousands of houses began because the king's baker forgot to put the oven off that evening.

A small spark can destroy an entire forest. He goes on to say, the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness, set on fire by hell.

[15 : 34] He heaps up illustrations to make the point the tongue is small, but it is deadly. It is a fire. It is a deadly poison. It causes tremendous harm, not just to the individual, but to their reputation, to their character, to their family, and to society.

It is a world of unrighteousness. And we see the irony in verse 7. James says, every kind of beast and bird of reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind.

But no human being can tame the tongue. James is alluding to Genesis, where after the creation of the world and of animals, mankind is given dominion over it.

He's commanded to rule over it. And James is saying he can rule over everything. Mankind can rule over the seas and the skies and the land, but he cannot rule over himself. He cannot master the small piece of flesh inside his mouth.

It is a restless evil full of deadly poison. And that was expressed in many ways in the congregation.

[16 : 46] We saw that they were speaking evil of each other. And we've probably experienced that ourselves. We probably know the pain and the harm that slander and gossip and confrontation can cause.

They were boasting. We probably ourselves know that the pain and justice and pride can cause. No doubt they were gossiping, belittling each other, speaking against each other.

The kind of thing we see and experience every day in the world. The kind of thing we've probably done ourselves. Things of which we are guilty of speaking. It is a restless evil.

But in particular in verse 9 there was a problem within this congregation. With it we bless our Lord and Father and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

There was an inconsistency in their conversation. And this inconsistency seems to have been endemic in everything. You remember in chapter 1 James accused them of being double-minded.

[17 : 50] They were praying to God on one hand but they weren't really praying in faith. They doubted him. And he says, well you're being inconsistent. You're being unstable. And then in chapter 2 they were being unstable and inconsistent with relation to each other.

Rich people were coming into the church and they were saying, oh have a seat over here by the window. And poor people were coming in and they were putting them at the back of the church. And the same word is used.

They were being inconsistent. And later in chapter 2 of course they were saying, well we believe these things and we believe in Christ and oh yes, wonderful. we love our doctrine. But it made no difference to their lives.

They said one thing and they did another. Inconsistency. And here they were being inconsistent. They were blessing God but then they were cursing people who were made in the likeness of God. Inconsistent in their attitude to their creator. In Thailand, the king's head is on the coin if you drop a coin in the street and if you step on the coin it is a major offence because if you tread on the image of the king it is a reflection on your attitude to the king itself.

[19 : 09] These people were blessing the king of heaven and with the next breath cursing people who were made in his likeness. And James says this is a very serious problem.

It goes very deep. Verse 10. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?

Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. Another two illustrations and the point is clear.

Verse 11. Can a spring pour forth fresh and salt water? Well, the answer to that question and I'm no water scientist is no. You know what kind of spring it is by the kind of water that comes out of it.

If it's fresh water it's a fresh water spring. If it's salt water it's a salt water spring. J.C. Ryle said our words are evidence of the state of our hearts.

[20 : 14] As surely as the taste of water is an evidence of the state of the spring. Jesus described it like this. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good.

And the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks. If your mouth is full of cursing says James it is because your heart is full of cursing.

And there is a problem not just with your tongue but a deeper problem with your heart. It is what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart says Jesus.

Out of the heart come evil thoughts murder adultery sexual immorality theft false witness slander these are what defile a person.

The water tells you about the spring and the words tell you about the heart. And his second point is the same. Can a fig tree yield olives?

[21 : 22] Well I'm no botanist but I don't believe it can. Can a grapevine produce figs? And we say no James it can't. Why? Because as Christ taught us a tree is known by its fruits.

Every tree every good tree bears good fruit every bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

Teachers are known by their fruit. These people wanted to be teachers and yet coming out of their mouth was cursing and coming out of their mouth was bad fruit and James is saying don't you see the inconsistency?

No man can tame the tongue. And verse 8 is very interesting when James says to them no human being can tame the tongue.

I did a little word study and I think that combination of words only occurs in one other place in the New Testament. And we remember the story of Legion in Mark chapter 4 Jesus and his followers across the lake the end of the end Gerasenes or Gadarini and they meet this man with an unclean spirit and we're told he comes out he's a wild man he's probably screaming and shouting and wailing he had often been bound with shackles and chains but he wrenched the chains apart and he broke the shackles in pieces and Mark says to us no one had the strength to subdue him.

[23 : 04] No one had the strength to tame him. No human being was able to do it. But of course in Christ he did not meet a normal man.

He met in verse 2 the perfect man the man who committed no sin and in whose mouth was found no deceit. He met a man who was the image of the invisible God and this man was able to subdue him and to tame him and after Christ had spoken a word to him they found this man sitting this legion sitting clothed and in his right mind and he sent him home saying go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and how he has had mercy upon you and this man went away and began to proclaim how much Jesus had done for him and everyone marvelled. It's a wonderful picture isn't it of Christian conversion something no man can tame and then they encounter Christ and a mouth formerly full of cursing and blasphemy and slander is then taken and used as an instrument of righteousness filled with good news and sent away to tell others how much the Lord had done for them.

I love the story of the pit ponies in the time of the Welsh revival these miners and these guys would beat the ponies and swear at them and after they got converted they put away their swearing and their cursing and their foul language and they used to give their instructions to the ponies and the ponies wouldn't respond because they didn't recognise the lack of swear words.

When somebody comes to Christ their mouth is cleansed Paul was formerly a blasphemer the sneering and the slander and the strife are washed away a new song is put into their mouth a hymn of praise to God and a mouth which formerly despised the things of the Lord will now sing his praises proclaim his gospel and speak words of love to the saints.

[25 : 22] Paul makes this very clear in Ephesians 4 Therefore having put away falsehood let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbour for we are members one of another turning away from darkness of deception to the light of truth.

Verse 29 of Ephesians chapter 4 Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths but only such is good for building up as fits the occasion that it may give grace to those who hear.

Previously people would belittle and chastise and ridicule others and Paul says now that you've come to Christ no corrupting talk only what is good for building up your brothers and sisters.

Very challenging isn't it as we look at this and we ask ourselves the question well what is our language like? what is our conversation like? Have we turned away from truth and slander and cursing?

Have we bridled our tongues and given ourselves instead to blessing God speaking the truth with our neighbour and building up those we meet? How do we talk to people when they're in our company?

[26 : 42] It seems to be a very Scottish thing doesn't it to belittle and make fun of people we know well. Is that helpful? How do we talk to people when we're angry with them?

When we're frustrated with them? How do we talk to people when they say unkind things to us? But perhaps more importantly how do we talk about people when they are not here?

When their backs are turned? When they've walked off down the street? I was challenged a few years ago by somebody saying if the person you were speaking about was standing right in front of you now would you say the same things?

Would I say this if this person was sitting by my side? It's a very helpful question isn't it? Is my language good for building up or is it only any good for tearing down?

Zephaniah prophesied that one day the Lord would change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord.

[27 : 48] Are we a people of pure speech? Have we come to Christ and allowed him to tame our tongues? Well we need help and James makes very plain in verse 13 to 18 finally two kinds of wisdom.

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. Once again James is saying it is not simply your words which matter. these people who wanted to be teachers they might have had all that wonderful world and crystal clear doctrine. But he is saying the words are one thing but if you want your wisdom and understanding to be seen it must be visible.

Let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. Did their lives reflect the teaching they were hoping to teach? And he draws a distinction between two kinds of wisdom.

One characterized by self-interest and pride. Verse 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts do not boast and be false to the truth for this is the wisdom that does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

[29 : 01] And he contrasts that with a heavenly wisdom which is from above which is pure and peaceable, gentle, open to reason. The contrast between the wisdom of the earth and of the below and the wisdom which is from above.

In 18th century France, Voltaire, François-Marie Abot, I think his name was, but everyone knows him as Voltaire, he was a great enlightenment thinker of course and he said, a hundred years from now, there will not be a Bible in the earth except one that is looked upon by an antiquarian curiosity seeker.

He predicted in his arrogance that the Bible would be done away with. I think somewhere he predicted his books would take its place. This was the age of enlightenment where they turned their back upon the wisdom of God and replaced it instead with the wisdom of men.

Reason. And in fact some people went so far as to create a goddess called Reason and they used to go into churches and install the statue and people would worship the goddess Reason, the wisdom of men having turned their backs upon the wisdom of God.

But it was a terrible century for violence. His writings were formative in the French Revolution tens of thousands of people killed fighting depravity, fear, the great terror it was called.

[30 : 19] And James says turning your back on the wisdom of God leads to that. Bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, tribalism, sectarianism. He says that is not from God.

Disorder and every vile practice will follow it because it is the wisdom of demons. But says James, the wisdom from above is pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. True wisdom, evidenced in people's lives, is characterized by purity, peace, mercy, righteousness, good fruits. Blessed are the meek, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers, said Jesus.

This, says James, is the true wisdom from above. The true wisdom which transforms our speech and allows us to take control of our tongues.

[31 : 32] The secret of self-control to win the battle which we all face. The wisdom is from above. He says in chapter 1, verse 5, if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given him.

You want to be a teacher, says James, show me your life. You want to master yourself, well, master your tongue. And you want wisdom to do that, you need to ask God.

and he will give generously without reproach. If you humble yourself, confess your sins, come to him and ask for help. Christ can tame your tongue.

God, let's pray together. Father, we thank you so much that you are a God who gives generously without finding fault.

Lord, we acknowledge that we all stumble in many ways and that we have not bridled our tongues. We pray this week that you will give us wisdom, give us power, Lord, to say only that which is fitting and upbuilding, that our conversation might be seasoned with salt, that we might be able to speak gracious words to one another and give a reason for the hope that is within us with gentleness and with respect.

[33 : 01] We pray, Lord, that by your Spirit we might be that people of pure speech, that we might sing your praises, we might bless your name, and we might proclaim the good news of Christ who came to tame our tongues and to tame our spirits.

And we ask all this, Lord, in his precious name. Amen.