

The Dangers of the Tongue

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening everyone. My name is Jonathan, as I said before, and I'll be taking us through this passage. Let me just pray for us before we begin. God and Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the truth that we can find in it.

We pray that you'll bless the reading of it tonight, and we pray that the Holy Spirit will work within each one of us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So tonight we're in James. We're continuing our series.

It'd be great if you could keep it open in front of you and refer to it as we go down. Now, we've had a year of delays, and one of the things delayed is the Olympics.

Now, this is coming supposedly in a few weeks' time. And one of the events I always find amazing is the hurdles. They basically run these extreme athletes. They run full pelt.

They run basically as fast as the people who don't have the hurdles, and they clear them just by millimeters, it seems. And yet when it does go wrong, it goes catastrophically wrong.

[1 : 07] They trip, they fall, and they are out. They're done. And you know, we're going to see tonight that our tongue causes us to do the same. Our tongue causes us to trip, and it causes us to fall.

So a bit of background in case you've not been here, or it's been a few weeks. Well, we are in James. It is named after the author of this book. He was Jesus' brother.

He was also the leader of the church in Jerusalem. And it's only written about 10 or 20 years after Jesus' death. His audience is the early church.

Now, these would predominantly be Jewish people, or people from the Jewish faith who have believed in the Lord Jesus. Now, at this time, they were following an oral gospel.

They were passing the good news of Jesus by mainly word of mouth. And this was causing some issues. This was causing problems in the church, and that is what James is writing to address.

[2 : 07] We've had in the last couple of weeks, we've had testing. We've had listening and doing. We've had favoritism, showing favorites. We've had faith in deeds. And last week, we saw that the dangers of claiming to be a Christian, and yet not living it out in what we do.

And this week, we're going to go a step further, and we're going to see the dangers of our tongue, and the destructive power of it, but also the good that it can do. So, as I've said, our main theme tonight is the tongue, or taming the tongue.

You might have that in your Bible. It might be a heading, and we'll see shortly why that might be a slightly false heading, taming the tongue. Now, the tongue is mentioned five times elsewhere, outside of this passage in this book.

It is one of the key wrongs that James is trying to address in this church. It is one of the key themes throughout James, and it is mentioned and implied throughout.

And we're going to look tonight at this passage in three parts. We're firstly going to look at tripped by the tongue in verses 1 to 6. Tripped by the tongue.

[3 : 19] We're then going to look at the untamable tongue. The untamable tongue in 7 to 8. And then we're going to look at the two-way tongue in 9 to 12.

The two-way tongue. So we're going to start in 1 to 6 with tripped by the tongue. Now, in verse 1, we almost tripped straight away.

This verse seems almost random. It seems out of place. Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

Now, this here is a warning. You could almost say it's a conclusion or a summary to this chapter, this section. You know, in the context, like I was mentioning before, these were people of Jewish background, and it was very easy to teach in the synagogue if you so desired.

We see that where Peter and Jesus in the New Testament, they went and taught in the synagogue. And this caused problems of false teaching. But we see here that those teaching, they are not above the things that they are teaching about.

[4 : 32] They are not above the things that we see in this passage, or anywhere else for that matter. But they are, in fact, more accountable because of the undertaking they have. And what I want us to take from this is that I'm speaking to myself here tonight as much as anyone else.

I've been massively challenged the last few weeks in what I've been studying, the dangers of the tongue and what it can do, both good and bad. And so this applies to us all, so it is important. Verse 2. As Neil said, we all stumble in many ways. You know, my wife gave me permission to tell this story, but she once ran the hurdles, but ran it the wrong direction.

Now, the hurdles are designed so if you hit them, they fall with you. And if you run the other way, you really do fall flat on your face. Now, we do all stumble.

We do all fail. If we're honest with ourselves, we know this to be true. I don't have to convince you of this. In the previous section, we saw the importance of our works.

[5 : 43] Saying we are one thing doesn't make it true or good. We are to live out what we claim to be. But we do all fail. We do all stumble. We do all sin.

And especially with our tongue. Our tongue is more like the steeplechase hurdle, if you've seen that. It's a really big hurdle on a longer distance race. And it's got a big pool of water after it. And you know, it really does slow them down. Every one of them stumbles. Every one of them loses their stride. And that is our tongue. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

Our tongue is our most difficult and most common source of stumbling. And that is why it is so important and emphasized here. We see the disastrous effects that it can have in verses 3 to 6. We have these illustrations that small things can cause big effects. We have the bits in the mouth of the horses. We have these rudders on these great big ships.

[6 : 52] And we have these sparks that cause forest fires. Big things, small things, cause a big effect. And maybe a more modern day example might be the butterfly effect.

It's a sci-fi theory or concept that if you were to go back in time, even if you were to step on a butterfly, that could change the course of history. Now what we say can have far-reaching consequences.

You know, interestingly, horses, ships, and fires, these things can all be used for good. But they can also be used for bad. They can be used for peace or war.

Horses, ships, and fires can be used for travel, for commerce, for industry. They can also be used for destruction and death. Now remember here that they were sharing an oral gospel.

This was word to mouth. So how important were the words that they were using? It was so easy for others to be led astray. There was factions in this church. People were following one person over another.

[8 : 01] You know, a challenge for us is, are we fueling or causing conflict in the church? By what we say, may it be gossip, slander, maybe straight lies.

Are we causing or fueling conflict within the church? You know, we can be so thankful of the Bible. We have it in our hands. We can refer to it.

But this doesn't allow us to be sloppy with our words. It doesn't allow us to be sloppy when we are sharing the good news of Jesus or when teaching from God's word.

Just because we have the Bible, we can't be sloppy. But it does allow others who are hearing to go and read for themselves, and I encourage you to do it. Please be reading up and checking up on what I'm saying and what anyone else is saying.

Go home and study these things. You know, UCCF, which is a Christian Union umbrella organization, they've got a great resource called Uncover.

[9 : 08] And it's such a practical way for people to read the Bible for themselves, to find out whether the claims of Jesus are true. And that's what I encourage you to do. Our words and actions can cause others to disregard the gospel.

Our words and actions can cause others to disregard the gospel. Is there hypocrisy between what we are saying and what we are doing? Are we having a detrimental effect on our witness because of what comes out of our mouth?

Or maybe not quite as serious, but still serious enough. Are we giving a false gospel? Are we watering down what the Bible says?

We were warned of this just a couple of weeks ago. And we've been looking in Job. Alistair has been taking us through and then Archie this morning. We see that the Christian life doesn't lead to happiness, prosperity and joy.

The Christian life is hard. So we aren't to water down what the Bible says in order to make us seem attractive, to encourage people to come to Jesus or to make professions of faith.

[10:24] Our words are important and they cause big effects. In verse 5 we have a specific danger named the danger of pride, which is a major misuse of the tongue.

It says, This might be bigging ourselves up to be something we're not. We may be bending the truth innocently enough just to make our story sound funnier.

You know, in the business world or elsewhere, you hear it's a dog-eat-dog world. Are we putting ourselves above others and putting others down in order to succeed? Are we paying lip service? Are we joining in in the banter culture that puts others down for cheap laughs? And you know these things are serious.

We see that in verse 6. The strong language used. The seriousness of the dangers of the tongue and the effects it can have. In verse 6, The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.

[11:38] It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. In that verse alone we have fire three times.

World of evil corrupts hell. These things are serious. Our tongue is a danger. You know, I was thinking of the phrase, Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. But how untrue is that phrase? Bones heal. Our skin heals over itself, and yet words sometimes go deepest and hurt the most. And nowadays we've got the dangers of online as well.

We've got online bullying, trolling of people. We've got WhatsApp groups. Do we throw things into groups and not think about their consequences? Small things can have big effects.

So we've seen the dangers of our tongue. The small part it is, and yet the dangers it can cause. And now we're moving into our second section. We're going to look at the tamable tongue, or as I've described it, the untamable tongue.

[12:49] In verse 7 we see that all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind.

We know this to be true. We've seen circuses, or maybe we've seen videos of such things. We've seen elephants dancing. Maybe we've seen snake charming. That one always amazes me. Brave people. I've seen YouTube videos of guys in South Africa that have befended wild lions and can go and play with them. You know, just the other day at work, we actually had a hawk that came down, and the idea was that it would fly around and scare off the seagulls.

It worked for about five minutes, but it was amazing to see this thing fly around, and it could have gone. It was away, and yet it came back to its handler. Mankind can tame many beasts, and yet, verse 8, no human being can tame the tongue.

Is that right? Surely. If we can tame hawks, elephants, snakes, something that is part of us, we have no control over it? Well, the tongue is the outward showing of the heart.

[14:04] The tongue speaks the heart. It shows what is inside. The tongue is not some separate entity that we can't be responsible for, but it shows us who we are.

You know, interestingly, just to get a sense of the meaning of this word, tamed, it's only elsewhere used in Mark 5, when Jesus goes and he heals demon-possessed legion who lived among the tombs, who couldn't be shackled, who was described as wild.

So it speaks of control. It speaks of having dominion over, taming the tongue. As we see at the end of 8, it is a restless evil.

It is full of deadly poison. The tongue can assassinate characters, and it can poison minds. Words destroy. Words hurt. You know, this is all very bleak, and this is all very serious.

So it is all lost. Do we have no hope? But this is the point. These things are unattainable. We cannot tame the tongue. Never having fault in what we say is unattainable.

[15:16] No chance. It won't happen. The rudder is broken. It is putting us off course. The bit in the mouth of the horse is squire, and we can't get it to go straight.

The spark is away. The forest is ablaze, and we can't put it out. We can't do it, so we need God's grace. Well, what does that mean?

Well, there was one who never stumbled, who was never at fault in what he said, and he was never corrupted. Jesus lived that life of perfection.

He was fully God, and yet fully man. He was so like us, and yet he was so different. You know, imagine never saying the wrong thing, never wishing you could have taken that thing back, never speaking out of turn.

Jesus lived that perfect life. He was then killed. He took that punishment that we deserved. And he rose again, and he ascended back to heaven.

[16:18] I can't say it better than two of the hymns that we've had tonight, and two of the verses in them. He took my sins and my sorrows. He made them his very own.

He bore the burden to Calvary. He suffered and died for me. We're going to sing after. My chains are gone. I've been set free. My God, my Savior, has ransomed me.

And like a flood, his mercy reigns. Unending love. Amazing grace. So we've seen that we can be tripped by the tongue.

We have seen that it is untamable. And now we're going to look at the two-way tongue in the last four verses of the chapter. We see the two-way tongue in these illustrations of contrast.

There's six of them in these verses. We have praising and cursing. We have fresh water and salt water. We have trees and their fruit.

[17:25] You know, if we have been made right before God, then our talk should reflect our fear, our reverential awe of him. We can use our words and our vocal cords when we're allowed to, to praise our God.

Not just on a Sunday, not just when the person up the front says to do so, but what are we talking about before and after the service? What are we talking about on a Saturday night, on a Monday morning?

What are we using our words to do? Are we giving God the glory? And these things are difficult. Don't get me wrong. I've really toiled with these things over the last couple of weeks.

But the remedy is to pray in wisdom, to pray earnestly for these things. These things are unattainable, to tame our tongue fully, but we are to strive for these things, strive for holiness.

You know, these last few weeks, I've found myself checking myself before saying things. But I have to admit as well, there's times I've looked back and thought, why did I say that? I wish I could take that back.

[18:41] But you know, good words can do so much good. We heard from Proverbs 16, 24, gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

How good are those words? Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. We have that sense of nourishment. We have that from the fruit mentioned in verse 12.

We can be built up from other people's words and we can build others up. Not in an egotistical way, but we can build each other up in our faiths.

We can encourage one another. How great would it be if we came in and when we saw each other, we encourage one another on a weekly basis. Or even randomly during the week, sending each other messages just to encourage one another, to build one another up.

Rather than idle talk. You know, do we just talk about the football, the easy things, what's going on at work this week? Or do we try and encourage one another?

[19:49] Or worse, do we have destructive talk like mentioned at the beginning? Gossip, slander and lies. Instead, we can be praising our God and building one another up.

Finally, in 11 and 12, we have our one or the other section. We have this fresh water and salt water. We have fig trees bearing olives, grapevines bearing figs, a salt spring producing fresh water.

As James says, my brothers and sisters, this should not be out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. Our identity has changed. If we have accepted Jesus, if we have him in our lives, then we have been changed.

Our identity has been changed. Not because of us, not because of who we are, but because of who he is and because of what he has done. We have been made new.

We have a new beginning and we should be different now. You know, I used to play rugby at school and when I left, I changed and I started playing football and I've done so since.

[21 : 01] But you know, during playing football, when the ball came to me, if I picked it up and started running, it would make no sense. People would be quite angry and then they'd probably see the funny side of it later, but it wouldn't make any sense.

The rules have changed. It's different now. We need to live by the new way of doing things. We can't stick with the old. You know, to sum up, we've seen the many dangers of the tongue. We've seen how we can be so easily tripped by it. I've named some of these things and yet we need to flee from these pitfalls. But we probably all have our go-to issues, the things that, when we look at it, we probably know that we struggle with. And it affects us all. It's also not just in person nowadays. We need to be so wary of that. We can't tame our tongue.

It's unattainable. And yet Jesus has taken our place. He was never at fault in what he said. Because of that, we can have our identity changed.

[22 : 18] If we are Christians, we are now in Christ. We can use our tongue for good, for so much good. And it is a struggle, but we can pray.

Pray earnestly. Ask for help from our God and strive for holiness. In the next sections, in the coming weeks, we're going to look at fighting, quarrels, slander, and boasting.

You know, these are heart matters and they are exposed in our actions, but especially in our words. My prayer as we leave is that we would take these things seriously, the serious language that was in this passage.

Perhaps we can do a self-assessment over the next week of what we are using our tongue for. My prayer is that we check ourselves and that we are slow to speak and that we speak in wisdom.

How great would it be to be witnesses to fellow Christians and unbelievers alike by our words, to build one another up, to praise our God and to give him the glory.

[23 : 31] Let me pray for us as we finish. God and Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for all that we can glean from it.

We pray for these things that we have looked at tonight. We pray that you'll continue to speak to us as we go away from here, as we get distracted by the things in our weeks.

But we pray that we will think on these things, that you will continue to work in us and that all of this will be for your glory. And we pray all these things in the name of Jesus.

Amen.