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Taming the Tongue
James 3:1-12
November 8th, 2015, Jeff Germo

“I so wish I could take that back!” Have you ever said that to yourself? And I'm not talking about the bread maker you bought — that broke down — a day after the warranty expired. I mean those times when you say something you regret in the heat of the moment and your words stabbed someone in the heart. You see the pain it caused. And you wish you could grab those words, pull them back and shove them back in your mouth from whence they came. But, it's too late. You can't do it because they've already done the damage.

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The tongue is the ultimate barometer of maturity. If someone has a loose, uncontrollable tongue it is a sure sign of an immature person.

It's usually a lot easier to control our tongue when we are with people we aren't close to, isn't it? We have our guard up. We're careful. When we are at home, though, with our spouse, or kids, or parents, or with a very close friend, it's a lot harder. But that is where real maturity is tested. It's with those we are supposed to be close to.

We may have just come home from a hard day at work or school, and we have guarded our words very carefully up until that point, and we then get home and let our guard down. And the first little misunderstanding that comes up we snap, and we say something we regret. Can anyone relate?

We hold so much power with our tongues. Our parents used try to make us feel better by telling us that “sticks and stone may break my bones, but names will never hurt us.” It was little consolation. We soon found out that words can actually do severe damage to us. They hurt. They sting, and they can have lasting impact.

That's why Jesus used some very strong words about how we use our words.

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Matthew 5:21-22 (ESV)

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.

How we use our words is very serious. Jesus places a huge value on people. And when we disparage others, for whom Jesus died, with our words, we are committing a very serious sin. Sometimes we say deprecating comments to someone and veil them in sarcasm and then say, “I was just joking,” as if that makes it hurt less. It doesn't.

How many of you remember watching the Bugs Bunny cartoons when the Tasmanian Devil was one of the characters?

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He was the character that spins out of control and is feared by everyone. In real life he is actually a little fury creature with an out of control temper.

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I read this article about the Tasmanian Devil in National Geographic a few years ago.¹ The island of Tasmania is where the famed Tasmanian Devil hails from. It seems that for the last twenty years or so there have been increasing reports of these little ferocious creatures with disgusting cancerous growths on their mouths.

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This photograph on the screen is so disgusting that it's hard to look at. Prior to 1996 there were about 150,000 of these little devils roaming the wilds of the island, which was a thriving number, far from extinction. Today the disease has spread rapidly and biologists report that few animals evade it long enough to live into an old age, which for a Tasmanian devil means about five years. As of 2005, over 40% of the population had been wiped out. And in 2008 the devils were officially placed on the endangered species list.

It wasn't until recently that scientists discovered how the disease was spreading. It's common knowledge that these little animals are very ferocious and feisty. It turns out that the way the disease is being spread is from mouth to mouth combat – with each other. They are literally killing themselves off by their infighting. It's a pretty sad story, isn't it?

When I read that it reminded me of Paul's words in Galatians 5.

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Galatians 5:13-15 (ESV)

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Paul, also wrote to the Ephesians about this.

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Ephesians 4:29 (ESV)

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

How we use our words is so important, whether it's on Facebook, or email, or verbally. Jesus, Paul and James have some very strong words about how we should use *our* words. A few weeks ago we took a look at some Proverbs about the use of our tongues and we also looked at some about allowing anger to get the best of us. Proverbs is replete with verses like this because words and how we use them are very important to God.

Here are a few more examples.

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Proverbs 12:18 (ESV)

¹http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/02/0227_060227_tasmanian.html

¹⁸There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

We have numerous choices every day to use our words to either bring life or death to a person. The choice is ours. We can build up, or tear down.

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Proverbs 10:19 (ESV)

¹⁹When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.

That's the ESV. I like NLT. It's a little more to the point.

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¹⁹Too much talk leads to sin. Be sensible and keep your mouth shut.

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Proverbs 11:12, 13 (ESV)

¹²Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent ¹³Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered.

Take a run through Proverbs sometime in your quiet time and notice all the references that relate to how we use our words. You will get the idea that this is very important to God.

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James says that how we use **our tongue is one of the best barometers of maturity**. So, let's take a look at what he has to say now. He begins by targeting those who teach; those in leadership over others.

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James 3:1 (ESV)

¹Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Teachers have great responsibility. They use their words to impart knowledge into the minds of others, and sometimes people will just blindly receive what the teacher says without checking it out in Scripture first. We've seen many teachers and preachers who started out well, but began to believe their own press and ended up leading people astray. Or they were put on a such a tall pedestal that they eventually fell off due to moral failure.

It's a huge responsibility that one should not take lightly, because, James says, **"we who teach"** (including himself) will be judged more strictly. The greater the responsibility the higher the standard used.

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James 3:2 (ESV)

² For we all stumble in many ways, (and, again he includes himself) *and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.*

There is nobody who is perfect at controlling their tongue. We may do ok for a while, but when we are backed into a corner what is on the inside will come out. If you have a full cup of something and you want to find out what's in it you can give it a little push and it will spill over the side. And it's the same way with us. We may be able to control our tongue and act the part for a while, but whatever is on the inside will come out when we are pushed, or backed into a corner.

And that's why we need the Holy Spirit to transform us into the kinds of people who can control our tongues. But, none of us is perfect and always able to do this. It will be a life long process. Self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit that God wants to grow in us, and it is another important barometer of maturity.

James then goes on to give a few illustrations.

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James 3:3 (ESV)

³ *If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.*

I used to own a horse, and I was amazed at how, as long as I had a bridle on him he could be controlled. I was about 150 pounds back then and I could control a horse that weighed over a thousand pounds – usually.

One time I didn't have a bridle with me so I fashioned one out of a rope and went riding. One side fell off the muzzle and my horse decided that he no longer needed to be controlled by me, so he started to gallop full speed towards a barbed wire fence. And I did everything that I could to try and stop him. I pulled on the one remaining rein. I was reaching around his head trying to tie it back on.

But he was bound and determined that he was in charge right then. And I knew that as soon as he got to the fence he was going to stop short and I would go flying over the top and into the fence so I decided that it was best that I bail out instead.

As long as a horse is bridled its whole body can be controlled. And James says if we can control our tongue, the hardest part of us to control, we can control our whole selves.

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James 3:4 (ESV)

⁴ *Look at the ships also: 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.*

This is a similar illustration as the horse one. A small child could conceivably control a huge ship weighing hundreds of tons, simply by manoeuvring a tiny rudder.

So, James is alluding to what the tongue is capable of. It is a very small muscle, but capable of doing so much damage.

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James 3:5 (ESV)

⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

When we feel like we have accomplished something worthwhile it's hard not to draw attention to ourselves, isn't it?

Socrates said,

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“Well I am certainly wiser than this man. It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of; but he thinks that he knows something which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate it seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.”

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Francis Bacon said, ***“The less people speak of their greatness the more we think of it.”***

Ralph Waldo Emerson said,

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“There is this benefit in brag, that the speaker is unconsciously expressing his own ideal. Humor him by all means, draw it all out, and hold him to it.”

James continues with his diatribe about the tongue.

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James 3:5b-6 (ESV)

⁵...How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

Pretty strong words aren't they? I don't think we know just how much power we have in this little muscle in our mouth. The potential of countless people has been destroyed by careless words. I would dare to say there have been more people destroyed by stray words than by bullets and bombs in all the wars put together.

“You're stupid.” “You'll never amount to anything.” “You can't do it.” “You're ugly.” “You're no good.” “I hate you.” These are damaging words that suck the life out of people who are made in the image of God. These kinds of words should never come out of the mouths of Christ-followers.

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James 3:7 (ESV)

⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

How many times have we seen stories in the news about a young person who has been bullied by words by their peers and finally can't take it any more and they end up taking their own lives? And I think we tend to see it more now with the rise of social media.

The chances are that a good portion of the people in this room, maybe most of us, have been the victim of some pretty damaging words.

When I was in Bible college I was extremely shy and very insecure. I was so insecure that I couldn't look anyone in the eye. I had a terrible stutter that would pop up when I was nervous, which was always. For one of our assignments we were to go to a ministry leadership conference and take part in the various sessions. I went with a friend and classmate. The facilitator of one of the sessions we went to on youth leadership asked everyone to share with the rest of the class some ideas of events we had used with our youth groups.

I was shaking in my seat waiting for my turn to speak up and it took me a very long minute or two to get one short sentence out of my mouth. I was sweating profusely and stuttering and stammering and everyone's eyes were on me, I'm sure feeling my pain. My friend, who was sitting right in front of me, turned around in his desk, looked straight at me and laughing uncontrollably. It was a terrible experience for me.

While we were walking to our car after the seminar he was still laughing and he said, "Jeff, you will never be a pastor. You don't have what it takes." I walked and listened as he continued to tell me about the pastors of his very large church and how they all had panache, and charisma, and exuded confidence. And with each word he spoke I deflated a little more. "You will never be a pastor."

Within just a few months those three pastors of that large church, the pastors he held up with high esteem, all had moral failures and had to step down from ministry. My friend became so disillusioned that he has barely stepped foot into a church since. That was thirty years ago.

I have no idea how or why God called me to be a pastor. It certainly isn't because of me or my great abilities. I have had to learn to cling to the sufficiency of God's grace while I stumble along.

The tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. It has such potential for harm.

And maybe some of you have used your words to damage someone else. Maybe you've been careless, and you thought, "What does it really matter? They're just words." It does matter.

If you have used your words to tear someone down instead of build them up, you need to go to them, ask forgiveness and tell them they did not deserve to be treated that way because they

are created in the image of God. There is no room whatsoever for careless words, slander, gossip or damaging the character of another human being in Jesus' kingdom kind of living.

We already read the strong words from Jesus against this kind of reckless use of words. We have the power in this little muscle called the tongue to build others up or to destroy them. And many times a day we have choices like that to make. Am I going to use my tongue to bless, or am I going to use it to curse?

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James 3:9-12 (ESV)

⁹ With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

In the Sermon on the Mount, just before Jesus told the parable about the wise and foolish builders, in which he said that the wise person is the one who actually *does* what he says, Jesus gave another illustration similar to what James has just said.

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Matthew 7:15-23 (ESV)

¹⁵ “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

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²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

This is exactly what James has been saying all the way through this letter. If the seed of the gospel has been planted in a soft heart there will be good fruit produced by the Holy Spirit as a result. And one of the evidences of that good fruit is the use of our words to bless others. How can we praise God one minute, and in the next minute, make deprecating comments *about* someone or *to* someone who has been created in the image of God?

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James says, ***“These things ought not be so.”***

If someone comes up to you and starts to tear someone else down with their words, humbly and gently stop them in their tracks. Do not participate. Stay away from that kind of person or you will become like them. None of us is immune to this kind of behaviour. James admits this himself. But, it is not the kind of life to which God has called us. He has called us to

encourage one another with our words, to build each other up, and to praise others, and bless them, not to curse them.

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We have only one life to live. Hebrews 9:27 says that ***“We are destined to die once and after that to face judgement.”***

One day we are going to have to stand before God and account for every stray word that has exited our mouths. He is going to ask us how we used our words. What are you going to say? I do not want to get to the end of my life knowing that I haven’t dealt with these things.

I read of a tombstone in an English country churchyard that bears an epitaph not easily seen unless you stoop over and look closely. The faint etchings reads:

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Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, lies Arabella Young, who on the twenty-fourth of May, began to hold her tongue.

Friends, we don’t have to wait until the day we die to hold our tongues. James says that ***“no man can tame the tongue.”*** And that is very true. But, praise God, he has given us the Holy Spirit who can transform us into the kinds of people who can — if we will allow him access to our hearts.

And if we have a true faith, if the seed of the gospel has taken root in our soft hearts, then we will begin to see some fruit. We will see people from God’s perspective. We will see how much our toxic words hurt them. And we will gain an ever increasing desire to bless instead of curse, to use our words to build others up, to encourage and to give life. We have a choice - always.

Paul’s words to the Ephesians are worth repeating.

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Ephesians 4:29 (ESV)

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

The real test will be how we treat those closest to us.

Can I give us all some homework this week? Can we all pause right now and have a minute of silence before the worship team comes up. Ask your Heavenly Father, right now, in the quietness of your heart, to increase your sensitivity to how your words affect those around you. Ask him to open your eyes to see the hurt, and the damage your wayward words inflict on innocent bystanders.

And then ask him to help you to feel their pain. Think about what a powerful force of good your words could be to others. Someone right now needs a word of encouragement from you. Pray that God will show you who to bless.



Taming the Tongue
James 3:1-12
Week of November 8th, 2015

Objective of this study: To give control of our tongues to Jesus so we use our words to bless others.

[Remember, the main goal of each Growth Group is to allow God's Word to change your heart so that others would see Jesus in you and be likewise changed to be like him. He wants to change the world through us]

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.
2. Spend five minutes in silence asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
3. After the five minutes have someone interrupt the silence and read Ephesians 3:14-21 meditatively to the group. Pause after each phrase letting God speak to you.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

How have you experienced the power of words?

Word/Work(60-90 minutes)

Sermon Quote: **"The tongue is the ultimate barometer of maturity."**

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read James 3:1-12.
3. What imagery does James use to describe the effect of the tongue or words? There are eight metaphors. How is the tongue like each?
4. Each of the following passages has contrasting ways to use our words. Read them and paint a picture in your mind of the two different ways of using words. Galatians 5:13-15; Ephesians 4:29; Proverbs 12:18; Proverbs 10:19; Proverbs 11:12-13.
5. What are some "powerful words" from your past that affected you deeply? Give some examples of both positive and negative.
6. What are some reasons people sometimes use their words negatively?

Sermon Quote: **"How we use our words is very serious. Jesus places a huge value on people. And when we disparage others, for whom Jesus died, with our words, we are committing a very serious sin. Sometimes we say deprecating comments to someone and veil them in sarcasm and then say, "I was just joking," as if that makes it hurt less."**

7. How does sarcasm, and claiming to be "just joking" actually affect people?
8. In what situations do you find it hardest to control your words?

9. Pause right now and have a minute of silence. Ask your Heavenly Father, right now, in the quietness of your heart, to increase your sensitivity to how your words affect those around you. Ask him to open your eyes to see the hurt, and the damage your wayward words inflict on innocent bystanders. And then ask Him to help you to feel their pain. Think about what a powerful force of good your words could be to others. Someone right now needs a word of encouragement from you. Pray that God will show you who to bless.
10. What is your vision for how you would like to purposefully use your words in the future?