A Disciplined Faith
James 3:1-12
SS Lesson for 02/11/2018

Devotional Scripture: Prov 18:2-13

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson reviews the context and purpose of James’s instruction concerning the tongue and why we need to have A Disciplined Faith. The study’s aim is to call attention to the universal problem of improper and ungodly speech. The study’s application is to challenge each of us to guard our speech at all times, realizing that what we say affects every relationship we have in family, church, employment, and social contacts.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: James 3:8

But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

Another measure of spiritual maturity is a believer’s speech. James devoted a good portion of his letter to attacking a careless and corrupt tongue. He appealed, however, not only for controlled tongues (3:1-12) but also for controlled thoughts (3:13-17). The mouth is, after all, connected to the mind. Winsome speech demands a wise source. Both controlled talk and cultivated thought are necessary. From his discourse on idle faith, James proceeded to discuss idle speech. The failure to bridle the tongue, mentioned earlier (1:26), is now expanded. As disturbing as those who have faith with no works are those Christians who substitute words for works. One’s tongue should be controlled. Small though it is, the tongue is powerful and all too prone to perversion and pollution.

3:1. Again addressing my brothers, a sign that a new topic is being considered, James suggested moderation and restraint in the multiplication of teachers. Obviously too many of the new Jewish Christians aspired to teach and thereby carry some of the rank and admiration given to Rabbis. It is doubtful that the reference here is to official teachers of the apostolic or prophetic status. These are the unofficial teachers (didaskaloi) in the synagogue meetings of the church family where much latitude was given for even strangers to speak. Paul frequently used this courtesy given visitors. James’ complaint was simply that too many believers were overly anxious to speak up and show off (cf. John 3:10; 9:40-41). Teaching has to be done, but those who teach must understand their responsibility, as those who teach will be judged more strictly. A teacher’s condemnation is greater because, having professed to have a clear knowledge of duty, he is all the more bound to obey it.

3:2. James did not point a finger at the offenders without including himself: We all stumble in many ways. Nothing seems to trip a believer more than a dangling tongue. If a believer is never at fault (lit., “stumbles not”) in what he says (lit., “in word”), he is a perfect, fulfilled, mature, complete person (teleios anēr). He is able to “bridle” his whole body. Spiritual maturity requires a tamed tongue.

3:3-5. The tongue may be small but it is influential. Three illustrations make this point clear: the bit and the horse, the rudder and the ship, and the spark and the forest. James’ use of imagery drawn from natural phenomena is similar to the Lord’s. It is likewise characteristic of Jewish thought. The Greek used in this passage is both ancient and eloquent. James was both steeped in Jewish tradition and well-versed in Greek classics. The argument is clear. Just as little bits... turn grown horses, small rudders guide large ships, and a small spark consumes an entire forest, so the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. The tongue is petite but powerful!
A Disciplined Faith

3:6. The tongue is not only powerful; it is also perverse. It is small and influential but, worse by far, it can be satanic and infectious. The tongue... is a fire (cf. Prov. 16:27; 26:18-22), a world of evil. The tongue sets itself up (kathistatai) among the members, or parts of one’s anatomy, corrupting, spotting, or staining (spilousa; cf. aspilon, “spotless,” in James 1:27) the whole body and inflaming the whole course of... life (lit., “the wheel of existence” or “wheel of birth,” ton trochon tēs geneseōs). It is as though the tongue is at the center or hub of the wheel of nature and, like a fireworks display, the wheel is set on fire at the center. The more it burns, the faster it revolves until the whole wheel spins in a blaze, spitting fire in all directions. But the tongue is only the fuse; the source of the deadly fire is hell itself (lit., “Gehenna,” a place in the Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem where human sacrifice had been offered [Jer. 7:31] and where continuous burning of rubbish made it a fit illustration of the lake of fire).

3:7. The tongue is not only like an uncontrolled fire. It is also like an untamed beast. Every kind, or all nature (physis), of wild beasts—birds of the air, reptiles on land, and creatures of the sea—all are being tamed and have been tamed by man (lit., “human nature,” physis; thus “beastly nature” is tamed by “human nature”). But no human is able to tame the tongue!

3:8. No one can tame the tongue because it is a restless evil, an unruly, unsteady, staggering, reeling evil (like the “unstable” man of 1:8). Worse yet, the tongue is full of deadly poison (cf. Ps. 140:3). Like the poison of a serpent, the tongue is loaded with the venom of hate and death-dealing gossip.

3:9-10. Similar to the forked tongue of a snake, man’s uncontrolled tongue both emits praise and spews out curses. “Praise,” or “saying a good word” (eulogoumen) of our Lord and Father (this is the only place where the NT uses this title of God) is polluted by a “curse,” or “wishing evil” (katarōmetha) on men... made in God’s likeness (cf. Gen. 1:27; 9:6; Col. 1:10). That both praise and cursing should come from the same mouth is incongruous. My brothers, this should not be.

3:11-12. Again James turned to the natural elements to illustrate his point. Anticipating a negative response, James asked, Can both fresh (lit., “sweet,” glyky) water and salt (lit., “bitter,” pikron) water flow, or “bubble up,” from the same spring? Can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Of course not. Neither does salt (halykon) make water sweet (glyky). The point is clear: a believer’s tongue should not be an instrument of inconsistency. Small and influential, the tongue must be controlled; satanic and infectious, the tongue must be corralled; salty and inconsistent, the tongue must be cleansed.

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

"Bite your tongue!" Did anyone ever tell you this? During my childhood, it was always, "I am going to wash your mouth out with soap and water!" I heard this admonishment when I had said something unkind or inappropriate. I just could not seem to stop myself from saying a certain wrong thing, even though I knew I should not. I lacked the self-control to stop myself. Sadly, this is not an uncommon occurrence. As believers, we are called to have a disciplined faith. We are admonished to demonstrate self-control as part of an obedient walk. It is one of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23)—proof of a maturing believer—fruit that we are called to cultivate. However, so many of us fail to practice self-control. It seems like an easy thing. We are believers, so we should be able to control whatever we say and do. While it would be great if life worked that way, it often does not. Acquiring and practicing discipline is an ongoing process of hard work. This process requires dedication and a daily death to our own selfish passions and desires. We are called to live in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25), not in the flesh. When we received salvation, our old selves were crucified with Christ; we became new creations and received a new nature. However, the remnants of our old nature still desire to reign over us. We must continually strive to live in the new, not the old. That is why we must ask ourselves what our speech is like. Do our words build up, or do they condemn? Are our words helpful or hurtful? Are they necessary, or are we just spreading rumors? What about our actions? Do they reflect a sense of restraint and prudence, or do they reflect carefulness? Do we consider the consequences of our actions? If actions are consistently impulsive and done without thought, then we are not practicing a life of self-control. We are not thinking about how our actions will affect others. So how do we gain a sense of restraint? God's Word tells us that it is given to us through His grace (Titus 2:12). But we have a responsibility to use what we are given. Discipline is one of the tools in the believer's toolbox. If we do not learn how to use it through practice, it does us no good. We have to develop skill in using this tool. If we allow that tool to sit and rust, then we waste it. We are not appreciating the gift as we should. Leading a disciplined life draws us closer to God. As we dedicate ourselves to regular study of His Word and a consistent walk, He is training and molding us into His likeness. As we bathe ourselves in His Word each day and spend time speaking with Him, His will for our lives will unfold ever more clearly. Are you
demonstrating discipline in your life today? Are you doing a good job? Or are there areas that need a little more discipline? I would encourage you to take these questions to God in prayer, knowing that He will answer you. When He does, ask Him what to do next. How do you practice the disciplined life He calls you to? Remember that this is a process, but if you are faithful, He will help you become what He calls you to be.

Lesson Introduction and Background
From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, more and more advocates of the “It’s not your character; it’s your chemistry” school of thought have emerged. This is the next round of the old “nurture vs. nature” debate, also known as “environment vs. heredity.” The question is why we behave as we do. One side says behavior is learned (this is the character/nurture/environment side). The other says behavior is hardwired from birth (this is the chemistry/nature/heredity side). This issue has profound implications. For example, researchers on the chemistry side of the debate argue that most addictions are caused by a deficiency in dopamine, a natural “feel-good” brain chemical. Therefore the preferred treatment, they say, is to change one’s chemistry rather than build one’s character. The issue is complicated, and there is evidence for each position in various contexts. But the idea that behavioral issues do not stem from a lack of learned self-control tends to lessen responsibility for doing or saying what we should not. But James points to another, deeper cause.

Figures of speech add interest and excitement to writing, and chief among these are metaphors. A metaphor takes an idea and imposes it on an unrelated but familiar idea to help explain the qualities of the original. An example from the ancient world is the assertion “Achilles is a lion.” This does not mean the Greek hero literally had a shaggy reddish-orange mane, sharp claws, large teeth and walked on all fours. It means, rather, that Achilles was a brave, courageous warrior in battle. Metaphors abound in our speech, so much so that we don’t always notice them. Rather than refer to a particular car’s color as “gray,” we might say it is “battleship gray.” This does not mean the car has any of the size or armament of a warship. The use of the word battleship as a metaphor for a shade of gray helps us visualize how the car appears: it is neither nearly black nor nearly white (two possibilities for gray). An emotional element is also present, as battleship gray suggests drabness. James uses a variety of word pictures, including metaphor. These are drawn from life experiences shared with his readers. This style of writing is vivid, and James chose his figurative language carefully to help the readers better understand the urgency and importance of his topic.

Major Theme Analysis
(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)
NOTE: The detail points and cross-references of this lesson came from a previous lesson dated 02/23/2014.

Disciplined Faith Related to Teachers (James 3:1)

1 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

Consider the decision of being a teacher

Because there is only one true Teacher and that is Jesus (Matt 23:8)

8 But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for one is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren.

Because as a teacher we should speak what we know and have seen from God (John 3:10-12)

10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? 11 Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.
Because to be a teacher, one must have first been taught himself (Rom 2:17-21)

Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, 18 and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, 19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. 21 You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?

Because God appoints true teachers (1 Cor 12:28)

28 And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.

Consider the accountability of being a teacher

Accountability to warn and tell others about God's requirements (Ezek 3:18-19)

18 When I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. 19 Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul.

Accountability of doing God's will when we know it (Luke 12:47-48)

47 And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. 48 But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.

Accountability of faithfulness (1 Cor 4:2)

2 Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.

Accountability of having to give account of those we teach (Heb 13:17)

17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

Consider the judgment of being a teacher

Judgment of pride (Luke 20:45-47)

46 "Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, 47 who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation."

Judgment of not understanding what we say or teach (1 Tim 1:5-7)

5 Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith, 6 from which some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm.

Judgment of not teaching sound doctrine (2 Tim 4:3-4)

3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

Judgment of not maturing in the Word (Heb 5:12)

12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.
Judgment of being a false teacher (2 Peter 2:1)

1 But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.

Judgment of being a stumbling block (Matt 23:15)

15 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

Disciplined Faith Related to Tongue’s Power (James 3:2-8)

2 For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.
3 Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body.
4 Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires.
5 Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!
6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.
7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind.
8 But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

Don't let the tongue make us stumble

Stumble into condemnation (Matt 12:37)

37 For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

It is better to lose our tongue than to let it make others stumble (Matt 5:29)

29 If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

Stumble by living according to the flesh (Rom 8:13)

13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Stumble by not disciplining our body and bringing it into subjection to God (1 Cor 9:27)

27 But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Power of the tongue

Power to be like a sword (Prov 12:18-19)

18 There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, But the tongue of the wise promotes health. 19 The truthful lip shall be established forever, But a lying tongue is but for a moment.

Power of life and death (Prov 18:21)

21 Death and life are in the power of the tongue, And those who love it will eat its fruit.

Power to take advantage of others (Jude 16)

16 These are grumblers, complainers, walking according to their own lusts; and they mouth great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage.

Power to defile oneself (Matt 15:11)

11 Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man."

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Power of poison and deceit (Rom 3:13)
13 "Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit"; "The poison of asps is under their lips";

Taming the tongue

Tame by keeping our tongues from evil (Ps 34:13)
13 Keep your tongue from evil, And your lips from speaking deceit.

Tame by guarding our tongues and ways (Ps 39:1)
1 I said, "I will guard my ways, Lest I sin with my tongue; I will restrain my mouth with a muzzle, While the wicked are before me."

Tame by ensuring our tongues are guided by God (Prov 16:1)
1 The preparations of the heart belong to man, But the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.

Tame by guarding our mouth (Prov 21:23)
23 Whoever guards his mouth and tongue Keeps his soul from troubles.

Tame by bridling our tongues (James 1:26)
26 If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.

Disciplined Faith Related to Purity of Tongue (James 3:9-12)

9 With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God.
10 Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.
11 Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?
12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

Purity of tongue by rejecting sin

Rejecting sin because sin makes the tongue cause one to be unclean (Matt 15:11)
11 What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'"

Rejecting sin because speaking rashly causes ruin (Prov 13:3)
3 He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.

Rejecting sin because it keeps one from keeping control over their tongues (James 1:26)
26 If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

Rejecting sin by not allowing our sinful natures to rule (Rom 3:12-14)
12 All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." 13 "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." 14 "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

Purity of tongue by committing to guard speech

Commit to seek God to guarding our lips (Ps 141:3)
3 Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.
**Commit to God guarding our mouths** (Prov 21:23)

23 He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity.

**Commit to muzzling our speech** (Ps 39:1)

1 I said, "I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence."

### Conclusion and Other Thoughts

**Concluding Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh**

**A Word of Warning to Would-Be Teachers (James 3:1-2a)**

As we can see from verse 1, James is aiming his words of warning toward those I would call “wanna-be teachers.” His words of warning are usually softened in translation so that the force of the imperative is played down, as though he were giving a word of advice. The King James Version puts it as strongly as it should be, in my opinion:

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

I believe that James is speaking primarily to those who want to teach, who assert themselves as teachers, and yet should not be teachers at all. Let us consider why James would see this as a very serious problem, which he felt obliged to address.

*First of all, adversity seems to attract many counselors and teachers who wish to instruct us as to why we are suffering.* We see this in the Book of Job, where his three friends persist in trying to convince him that he is suffering because of some unconfessed sin, and not because of righteousness. In the end, God rebuked these men for not speaking what was true of Him (Job 42:7-9). Many are those with words of counsel and advice when we are suffering some kind of adversity. Many of these folks should give heed to these words of warning from James.

*Second, there will always be those who seek to be teachers in order to promote their own interests.* In Acts 20, we find Paul warning the elders of the church at Ephesus that even some of them will become false teachers, in order to gain a following:

30 Even from among your own group men will arise, teaching perversions of the truth to draw the disciples away after them. 31 Therefore be alert, remembering that night and day for three years I did not stop warning each one of you with tears. 32 And now I entrust you to God and to the message of his grace. This message is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:30-32, emphasis mine).

*Third, there was a particular problem with “wanna-be teachers” within Judaism:*

6 “They [the scribes and Pharisees] love the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues 7 and elaborate greetings in the marketplaces, and to have people call them ‘Rabbi’” (Matthew 23:6-7, emphasis mine).

17 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relationship to God 18 and know his will and approve the superior things because you receive instruction from the law, 19 and if you are convinced that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 an educator of the senseless, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the essential features of knowledge and of the truth . . . (Romans 2:17-20, emphasis mine).

5 But the aim of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. 6 Some have strayed from these and turned away to empty discussion. 7 They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not understand what they are saying or the things they insist on so confidently (1 Timothy 1:5-7, emphasis mine).

Jesus knew it and exposed it for what it was: The scribes and Pharisees were eager to be teachers because this was a place of status, and they were status-seekers. Paul points out the same problem. In Romans 1, Paul demonstrated why Gentiles are sinners, rightly under divine condemnation: they had the revelation of God in nature and they rejected it, choosing to worship creation rather than the Creator (Romans 1:18-23f.). The Jews
were probably saying “Amen” throughout chapter 1, assuming that they were not Gentile sinners (see Galatians 2:15). But Paul has a shockingly different assessment of the Jews. Because they had been privileged to be the custodians of the Law, they felt that they had mastered the Law. They considered themselves the scholars, the experts in the Law, who should teach the ignorant what the Law was all about (see John 7:47-49). Paul found them guilty of failing to practice that which they taught (not unlike our Lord did in Matthew 23).

It did not take long for false teachers to begin to emerge in the New Testament church. A good portion of this false teaching came from Jewish false teachers, who seemed to feel that they had a higher level of understanding. They did not abide within sound doctrine, but were constantly engaged in speculation and word wars (1 Timothy 1:4-7; see also 2 Corinthians 11:3-5, 13-15, 22; Titus 1:4; 2 Timothy 2:23; 4:4).

Among those Jews who were dispersed abroad were those who felt that they were superior in knowledge, especially knowledge of matters pertaining to the Law, and so they were inclined to teach the ignorant. James tells them – indeed, orders them – to be very hesitant to teach, knowing that the judgment of teachers is more severe (James 1:1). Why would it be a more severe judgment? There are at least two reasons that James does not give in his epistle that we find elsewhere:

First, those who are teachers should have a greater knowledge of the truth, and thus they become more accountable.

“From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more will be asked” (Luke 12:48b).

Second, we all will be judged according to our words, so teachers, whose work involves many words, will be more accountable.

36 “I tell you that on the day of judgment, people will give an account for every worthless word they speak. 37 For by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:36-37).

Wishful Thinking: If the Tongue Could Only Be Tamed (James 3:2b-4)

If someone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect individual, able to control the entire body as well. 3 And if we put bits into the mouths of horses to get them to obey us, then we guide their entire bodies. 4 Look at ships too: though they are so large and driven by harsh winds, they are steered by a tiny rudder wherever the pilot’s impulse directs.

James has instructed “wanna-be teachers” that they should be hesitant to teach, because the judgment of teachers will be more severe. He has also indicated that all of us stumble in many ways (2a). James will now focus on a particular form of stumbling. He turns to the topic of stumbling in one’s speech, a timely topic for teachers. If a man does not stumble in what he says, then that man is perfect. If a man can perfectly control his tongue, then he would also be able to control every other part of his body as well. What a glorious thought! I fear that some would-be teachers might actually believe that they have mastered their tongues because they are able to master others with their tongue.

James has said that if a man can control his tongue, he can control his entire body. He now sets out to illustrate this tongue/totality principle, first with a horse, and then with a ship. In 1:26, James has already used the term “bridle,” and now he takes up the same term. Once the bit is in the horse’s mouth, the rider can control the entire body of the horse. One controls the entire horse by controlling its mouth. Next, James turns to the illustration of a ship. A ship is very large, and strong winds propel it; but when the captain has control of its very small rudder (comparatively speaking), he has control of the entire ship. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the tongue could be controlled? If a man could bring his tongue under control, then he could bring his whole body under control. But this will never happen, as James is about to show.

The Tongue Is Powerful, But Deadly, and Out of Control (James 3:5-8)

5 So too the tongue is a small part of the body, yet it has great pretensions. Think how small a flame sets a huge forest ablaze. 6 And the tongue is a fire! The tongue represents the world of wrongdoing among the parts of our bodies, that pollutes the entire body and sets fire to the course of human existence and is set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and sea creature is subdued and has been subdued by humankind. 8 But no human can subdue the tongue; it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

It took me a while to see the strong contrast James is making here. In the previous section (2b-4), James engaged in a little wishful thinking: If only the tongue could be tamed, then the whole body could be brought under control. Now, in verses 5-8, we see the ugly reality of the matter: The tongue cannot be controlled, and
there is a devastating result for the whole body – it is corrupted by the tongue. The key to our body’s control is also the key to our body’s destruction.

Like the rudder of a ship, the tongue is a very small member of the body, and it is powerful, but not in the way we would like to think. The tongue, James tells us, does “talk big.” It boasts, he says, of great things. The tongue is powerful, but often in a most destructive way. The tongue of man is like a fire, which sets a whole forest ablaze. My wife and I were driving through Montana this past summer, and we drove through one of the many forest fires which devastated that part of the country. A friend told us the story of how one of the many forest fires was started this summer. A grasshopper was somehow attached to the exhaust pipe of a car and caught on fire. The grasshopper sprung from the car and onto the ground, where this burning bug set a whole forest ablaze. A small flame can ignite a great fire.

The tongue, James tells us, is a fire, ignited by hell itself. The last part of verse 6 is very difficult for translators, but the sense of it is relatively simple. The tongue is a “world of evil,” which adversely impacts the rest of our bodies. If the tongue could be controlled, we could control the whole body. But since the tongue is a deadly fire and out of control, it wreaks havoc with the rest of the body. The whole gamut of humanity and society is set ablaze by the tongue.

How ironic it is that man is able to harness the power of a raging river, to prevent flooding, and to produce hydroelectric power. Man has learned to harness the power of the atom, for destructive and productive ends. Man has been able to subdue every kind of creature, from a parrot to a killer whale, and yet with all his success in bringing things under his control, man is powerless to control his own tongue. In verse 8, James switches from the imagery of fire to that of poison. The tongue is a restless evil, and its poison is deadly.

If the tongue could be controlled, the whole body could be controlled. But the fact of the matter is that the tongue – like a raging forest fire – is totally out of control and uncontrollable. And its great power is the power to destroy and corrupt. Isn’t it interesting that man can control the creatures of nature, but not himself? The one thing that distinguishes man from beast – the tongue – is the one thing that man cannot control. And if things are not bad enough, James goes on in verses 9-12 to give us even more bad news.

Worst of All, It Is Deceptive (James 3:9-12)

9 With it we bless the Lord and Father and with it we curse people made in God’s image. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. These things should not be so, my brothers and sisters. 11 A spring does not pour out fresh water and bitter water from the same opening, does it? 12 Can a fig tree produce olives, my brothers and sisters, or a vine produce figs? Neither can a salt-water spring produce fresh water.

Not only is the tongue destructive and completely out of control, the tongue is also deceptive. When I was growing up many years ago, I used to watch old-time western movies about “cowboys and Indians.” The Indians would sometimes say of the white man, “He speaks with forked tongue.” Today we would say, “He talks out of both sides of his mouth.” Unfortunately, this assessment is true. Once again, James will show us how completely unlike nature man is. In nature, “what you see is what you get.” A spring will either produce fresh water or bitter water, but it does not produce both. A fig tree produces figs, and not olives, and a vine does not produce figs. A salt-water spring does not produce fresh water. What something is by nature determines what it produces – and what it produces doesn’t change.

Man’s tongue is different. Sad as it may be, the tongue is capable of producing both blessing and cursing, as different as these things may be. At one moment, my tongue may speak words of truth and blessing, with absolute sincerity. Just moments later, it may speak something terrible, something corrupt. We can see this truth illustrated by the tongue of Peter:

13 When Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 They answered, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” 17 And Jesus answered him, “You are blessed, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven! 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on the earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.” 20 Then he instructed his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. 21 From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid, Lord! This must not happen to you.” 23 But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a
stumbling block to me, because you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but on man’s” (Matthew 16:13-23, emphasis mine).

Within the space of a few moments (and a few verses), Peter has changed from being a spokesman for God to speaking for Satan. This is exactly what James is saying: the same tongue can both bless and curse. We cannot trust the words of the tongue because they can so quickly change to something completely different.

(Adapted from URL: https://bible.org/seriespage/taming-tongue-james-31-18)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

At the beginning of my ministry, a wise associate and friend told me that when I wanted to unload on someone verbally out of frustration, I should write that person a letter. Then I should put the letter in my desk for several days. After that, it would be best to destroy the letter and move on. In my hotheaded youthful days, I actually did this several times. To put it as a double negative, I have never regretted not sending those hurtful letters! Today I am more likely to rehearse a conversation I want to have with a thorn-in-the-flesh person I think I need to confront. These conversations often happen in my car as I drive alone. They are often quite loud and intense, but once I have said my piece to my ever-listening automobile, I am done and can move on. I’m not sure if James would fully approve of either practice, but they have often kept my tongue from uttering hurtful and malicious words. Social media postings cause great problems for many today. Hot-tempered messages result in lost jobs and irreconcilable breaches in relationships. An often repeated word of advice is “think twice before you hit ‘send.’” When you rethink the fiery, flaming posting, think strongly about hitting “delete” instead of “send.” You may be controlling your fingers rather than your tongue, but I think James would approve. On a scale from 1 to 10, how do you rate on how well you have tamed your tongue? This further counsel from wise Solomon may help: Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. (Ecclesiastes 5:2). We will never regret harsh or hurtful words if they are never spoken.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

1. Christian leaders must always consider the example they provide for others (Jas. 3:1)
2. Many who are disciplined in other ways fail to control their tongues (vs. 2)
3. Never underestimate the benefit of our words or the damage they can cause (vss. 3-5)
4. Satan uses the uncontrolled tongue to destroy your life and the lives of others around you (vs. 6)
5. Believers depend on the power of the Holy Spirit to control their tongues (vss. 7-8)
6. The words we speak reveal our true character for the world to see (vss. 9-12)