James 3 *Faith that Works: Consider the Tongue*

***Aesop***You have probably heard of Aesop’s fables. Aesop is a character from Ancient Greece. Whether he was or was not a real person is uncertain, but the story goes that he was an exceptionally ugly slave who by his cleverness and wisdom acquired his freedom and became an advisor to kings and rulers. His wisdom is passed down in a series of stories and riddles that demonstrate common sense and lessons for everyday life. Here is one such fable:

Aesop, a slave to Xanthus on the island of Samos, was ordered one day to arrange the meal for a large banquet. He was to provide the choicest dainties that money could buy.

When the guests arrived they were treated to a starter of tongue, served with a variety of excellent sauces. The guests of course made a few jokes about this. But when the next course was tongue too, they were puzzled. And when the third and fourth courses turned out to be tongue too puzzlement turned to perplexity. Xanthus was embarrassed and turning to Aesop angrily demanded an explanation.

‘Didn’t I tell you to provide the best meat you could find?’

‘What could be better than the tongue?’ said Aesop. ‘It is the tongue – that can lull a baby to sleep, that can fill the ears and the heart with love and delight, that can make peace between two warring armies and can lead the world into truth. Truly it is the best thing of all.’

The guests liked what Aesop said and good feeling was restored to the meal.

Xanthus spoke up: ‘Well, perhaps all of you could do me the favor of coming again for another meal tomorrow?’ And turning to Aesop he added, ‘This time could you arrange a meal with the worst meat you can find?’

The guests liked the idea and returned the following evening. And, to their confusion, nothing but tongue was served again.

Xanthus seemed angry. ‘How,’ he said, ‘can you serve up tongue as the best possible meat one day, and then the worst meat the next?’

‘What,’ replied Aesop, ‘can be worse than the tongue? What evil is it not involved in? Violence, injustice and fraud are all debated and resolved upon and communicated by the tongue. It is the ruin of empires, cities and friendships.’

The guests were pleased by what Aesop had said, and pleaded with Xanthus to appreciate the wisdom of his slave.

The “tongue” is indeed powerful. By it great good can be done. But it can also be the source of great evil. As we make our way through the book of James, we are going to come now to one of James’s favorite topics: how we use the power of our speech. James is a very practical book—it’s been called the “Proverbs” of the New Testament—and it is very concerned with challenging Christians to make sure our walk matches our talk. Now, in James 3, he is going to challenge us to consider the way we talk.

James 3 is the longest sustained discussion in the New Testament about watching the words we speak. James uses the word “tongue” to stand for the many ways that we communicate with words. He uses all kinds of word-pictures and metaphors to describe the trouble the tongue can get us into. “This passage is a warning to **take the tongue seriously and to do something serious about it**.” (Matt Mitchell, *The Fearsome Tongue*, April 7, 2013, <http://matt-mitchell.blogspot.com/2013/04/matts-messages-fearsome-tongue-james-31.html>)

So, what I’d like to do is go through the passage verse by verse. As we do, we’ll find 5 truths about the tongue. Then, at the end, we’ll pull back and look a little more fully at what James has to say about words throughout the book, and see if we can’t find some ideas to apply to our lives.

***Not Many of You***

First, **our Tongues have power.** Speaking is a huge responsibility. Here’s how the passage starts, **James 3:1**:

1Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

This verse is a sobering reminder for someone like me that what I do most Sundays is a weighty responsibility. Teaching people the Word of God is a tremendous privilege, but it comes with its own set of pitfalls. Not only will I be judged for the things I do in my own life, I will also be judged for the things that I have taught. If I obscure God’s truth, if I bend or mis-represent it, if the people who learn from me are mis-instructed, I will bear responsibility for that.

It’s not that James is trying to discourage people from teaching God’s Word. Not at all. The church always needs more gifted men and women to pass on what they’ve learned to others. But what James wants us to see is the power that our words have. When we teach it’s not just our lives that are affected, but the lives of those who listen as well.

Now, it might seem like James is going to spend some time talking about the qualifications for being a teacher of the Word. You can find such qualifications in the books of 1 Peter and Titus, among others. But, as we’ll see, James is not primarily interested in teaching specifically so much as he is interested in speaking in general.

And so, I think there is a principle at work in this verse that applies to all of us, regardless of whether we are in a teaching position: our tongues have power. When you speak, you affect those around you. Be careful of the words you speak, because you will be judged by those words.

***Keep the Whole Body in Check***

The second point: **Our tongues set the direction.** If we can control our tongues we’ll be able to control the rest of our lives. **Verse 2:**

**2**We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

When I was a kid, whenever I went to the doctor’s office I’d be asked to stick out my tongue (come to think of it, that was the only place it was considered socially acceptable to do that!) Apparently, a doctor can tell a great deal about our physical health just by looking into our mouths.

And now, James is saying something similar, spiritually. He’s saying that if you can keep your tongue in check, it is an indicator of your overall spiritual health. People who can master their mouths usually have mastery over other aspects of their lives as well.

James paints a couple of word pictures in **verses 3 through 5:**

**3**When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. **4**Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.

**5**Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

James takes these huge things: a 1,000 pound horse, a sea-going vessel capable of sailing in great winds—and he points out that they are actually controlled by very small items.

“Kent Hughes says, “A horse is a half-ton of raw power.” (Hughes, 137).  Think about all the power of a horse running at full speed.  But a little 75 pound girl who knows what she is doing can make a horse dance if she has a bit in his mouth.” (Mitchell, Ibid)

One of our aircraft carriers in the ocean is as big as a city with a city-full of servicemen on it. Proportionally, the rudder of that ship is tiny. Just a fraction of the ship’s overall size. And yet, the rudder steers the whole thing.

In the same way, the tongue, even though it is a relatively small part of the body, controls the direction of our lives.

This is really profound. Our tongues “turn” and “steer” our lives. In our marriages, in our parenting, in our workplace, in our church, in our friendships: the words we speak set the direction.

Just think about how our words can change the temperature of a room. There are things we can say that can warm a room right up: “I love you.” “I’m so proud of you.” “You bring so much joy into my life.” There are things we can say that brighten a room and set everyone at ease.

But there is a flip side to that. There are ways we can use our words to drop the temperature in the room: “I can’t stand you.” “You make me sick.” “I don’t know why I have to put up with you.” As Aesop said: What can be better than the tongue? What can be worse?

Our tongues are small but mighty.  They have great power. They have great effect in determining the direction of our lives–and the lives of the people around us.

***The Tongue is a Fire***

Which leads to our third point, which is a strong warning: **Our Tongues can cause great problems.** Our tongues are dangerous. **Verses 5 and 6:**

 Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. **6**The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

We’re still talking about the disproportionate power of the tongue. It’s just a small part of the body, but it is so influential. In this case, the word picture James paints is of a small spark starting a huge fire.

Think about the coverage we have seen of wildfires in the west. Think about the devastation of the Camp fire a couple of years ago; and the periods of time when our weather has been affected by smoke coming out of Canada.. And then consider what a small spark started those huge blazes: a lit cigarette thrown out of a car window, an untended campfire, a lighting strike on the top of some remote mountain. It doesn’t take much to do huge damage.

And the tongue, James says, is like that. “A fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.”

The power that the tongue possesses is all too often a fire that destroys thing after thing in a person’s life.  Job after job.  Decision after decision.  Church after church. And worst of all: relationship after relationship.

You know this is true. You’ve experienced it.

* How many arguments have you gotten into that, in retrospect, boiled down to a careless word?
* How many times have you had to scramble to set things right just because you stretched the truth? One lie demands another lie demands another until your whole forest is on fire.
* How often have you been made to feel about “this” big because of someone’s unfiltered criticism?
* How many times have you had to go back and repair the damage done because of some rumor that has floated around about you?
* How often has a little joke, some light teasing, a bit of sarcasm, come out of your mouth wrong and seriously wounded someone you care deeply about?

“The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.”

Instead of directing the body, the life, the person towards righteousness, “it corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”

This is scary. Frightening. My friend Matt says: “So often, the tongue is a doorway into hell. Hell’s priorities and hell’s smoking stench is on the effects of the tongue.  Destruction, decimation, and devastation.” (Ibid)

Sinclair Ferguson writes:

The tongue that sets on fire is set on fire itself by hell. James uses the biblical term *Gehenna* — the background reference being to the Valley of Hinnom on the southern outskirts of Jerusalem. It served as the city dump — hence the reference to fire — which presumably constantly burned there to destroy garbage…Was this the place to which our Lord’s body would have been taken were it not for the thoughtfulness of Joseph of Arimathaea? If so, it is difficult not to share with James a sense of disgust. It is from such a hell that destructive words arise. Remember that imagery whenever similar words seek to force their way out of your mouth. (http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-tongue-the-bridle-and-the-blessing-an-exposition-of-james-3-1-12)

***A Restless Evil***

Point number 4: **Our Tongues are very hard to control.** Our tongues are un-tameable. **Verses 7-8:**

**7**All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, **8**but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Another word picture. James mentions all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures that have been tamed by mankind. I think of a circus, with elephants dancing in a line and the lion tamer using a chair and whip to lead the big cats through a hoop. I think of Sea World, with dolphins jumping and twisting in the air and killer whales standing on their tales. Humanity has found a way to tame all sorts of wild animals.

But James’s diagnosis of our speech problem is very pessimistic: “No human being can tame the tongue.” We can train hawks to hunt for us and we can hypnotize cobras, but when it comes to controlling our tongues we are helpless.

The tongue is “a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” The tongue roams the wilds, quick to defend itself, swift to attack others, anxious to prove a point, always marked by evil. The Bible says that the devil is like a roaring lion, always seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8). And the tongue is like that. It has an inbuilt need to guard its own territory, to destroy rivals, to be the king of the beasts.

When it comes to our tongues, in fact, James sees little hope. “No human being can tame the tongue.” On our own, we are unlikely to get our tongues under control.

But, perhaps, that is where our hope lies. No “human being” can tame the tongue. But there is someone who can. What we need to do is surrender our speech to the Savior.

You want to change, but you feel like you can’t.  That’s because you can’t… on your own.  Only Jesus can do it IN YOU and THROUGH YOU.  No self-effort program will do it.  He alone can tame your tongue.  He alone can stop the trouble that your tongue is getting you into.

Surrender Your Speech to the Savior.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, God can tame our tongues as we turn them over to Him.

***Change the Spring***

Which leads to my fifth point: **Our tongues reveal our hearts**. If we want to tame our tongues, then we need to let Jesus change our hearts. **Verses 9-10:**

**9**With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. **10**Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

Our tongues are forked. They often point in two different directions at the same time. We sing praise for God, then we go and curse human beings who have been made in God’s image. We worship and we wound. Out of the same mouth. Our tongues are forked.

James says, in the strongest way possible, “This should not be!”

Change is required here. We need to tame the un-tame-able tongue. We need to watch our language. We need to set a watch over our mouths. Our tongues should not be divided. We need to change. But how? James gives a clue in **verses 11 and 12:**

**11**Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? **12**My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Another word picture. Fresh water and salt water flowing from the same spring. Olives coming from a fig tree, figs growing on the grapevine. That’s not how it works. That’s not going to happen.

So, if you are getting salt water out of your fresh water spring, the problem is probably with the spring. If you get figs where you were expecting olives, you better go back and check the tree, because chances are pretty good it’s not an olive tree. James is saying you need to check the source.

If your tongue is producing poisonous fruit, the problem probably isn’t with your tongue nearly as much as it is with your heart. Because that’s the source.

In the next few verses, James appears to have switched topics. My Bible inserts a new section heading. The NIV labels these next few verses as “Two Kinds of Wisdom.” But I think James is still on the same topic. He’s talking about what’s in our hearts; the source of the words we speak, the kind of wisdom we live by. **Verses 13-16**:

**13**Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. **14**But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. **15**Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. **16**For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

There is a source problem for our tongue problem.  What comes out of the mouth begins within the heart. Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks. If there is bitter envy and selfish ambition in our hearts, it will come out in our words. This is what James calls earthly, unspiritual, demonic wisdom.

But the answer is heavenly wisdom. **Verses 17 and 18:**

**17**But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. **18**Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

If we want to tame our tongues, if we want to go from people whose speech is destructive and damaging to peace-loving and pure; then we need God to work on our hearts. We need to make sure our hearts belong to Him.

We can’t just work on our tongues.  We can’t just surrender our speech to the Savior. Something even more fundamental is required: heart change. We need God to replace the salt-water springs of our heart with fresh water. We need God to replace the thornbush of our hearts with a healthy, productive grape vine. We need to go from earthly wisdom to heavenly wisdom.

***The Whole Book of James***  
There, then, are five truths about the tongue from James 3. A pretty good explanation, I hope, of why James takes the words we speak so seriously.

But, I will freely admit, there is not a lot of practical help here. James explains why the tongue is so dangerous. He lets us know how important it is. But these 18 verses don’t say much about how we can put our tongues to better use.

As I was researching this message, however, I came across a sermon by Sinclair Ferguson in which he gives a broader overview of the entire book of James. Widening the camera lens, so to speak, he points out that the entire book is, in fact, full of suggestions for improving our speech.

So, at the risk of looking like a Buzzfeed post, I’d like to give you another list. Here are 10 practical things, pulled from all over the book of James, that we can all seek to do with regards to our tongues:

1) **Be quick to listen and slow to speak.**

James 1:19:

**19**My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,

2**) Speak with an awareness of the judgment**.

James 2:12:

**12**Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,

3) **Never speak in a way that demeans, despises, or causes despair.**

James 2:15-16:

**15**Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. **16**If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

4) **Never speak evil of another.**

James 4:11:

**11**Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.

5) **Never boast in what I will accomplish.**

James 4:13-14:

**13**Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” **14**Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

6) Rather, I will: **Speak with an awareness of God’s providence.**

James 4:15:

**15**Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”

7) **Never grumble against or judge others.**

James 5:9:

**9**Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

8**) Always speak with integrity.**

James 5:12:

**12**Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple “Yes” or “No.” Otherwise you will be condemned.

9) **Bring our problems to God in prayer.**

James 5:13:

**13**Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray.

And 10): **Bring our joys to God in praise.**

James 5:13:

Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.

It is remarkable how much our tongues set the direction of our lives. Such a small part of the body, but such a large influence. So, knowing that we can only tame our tongues as we surrender our hearts to Jesus, let’s resolve to be a church that watches what we say.