

Doubletalk (James 3:1-12)

By David Feddes

We continue our study of the book of James by turning to chapter 3, and our theme is double-talk. Let's read now from God's Word:

¹ Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ² We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. 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. 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 person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸ but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. (James 3:1-12)

James has been talking about big mistakes that people make—the mistake of believing that as long as you have the right ideas in your head, you will be saved. James says, “Suppose someone claims to have faith but has no deeds. Can such faith save him?” (James 2:14). He goes on to explain that faith without works is dead. That kind of teaching can send people to hell if they are taught wrongly.

Faithful, careful teaching

So who should be teaching? Because if you teach wrongly, you not only lead yourself to ruin but cause others to fall into ruin. Jesus said of the Pharisees that they were blind guides leading the blind, and both would fall into a pit (Matthew 15:14). We need to be very careful about trying to teach other people. James says, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1). To whom much is given, much will be required (Luke 12:48). If you have a position of high responsibility, then the standard of judgment is higher.

The Bible says, “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16). There's that double responsibility—for yourself and for your hearers. When I become a teacher, my life and my doctrine are a serious matter, and I ought not to get into that lightly. It's been said that if you can do anything else, do that; but if the calling of God is on you so strongly that you must preach, then be a preacher. Not many should presume to be teachers, except those whom God has called.

So the Bible says, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands” (1 Timothy 5:22). Don’t be quick to ordain somebody to the ministry. The apostle Paul says, “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me... Guard the good deposit entrusted to you... Entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 1:13-14; 2:2). “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

Teaching is not just something you do if you have the gift of gab or if you like to spout off. You need to correctly handle the Word of truth—to work for God as someone whom he approves. Faithful people guard the precious deposit of the Scriptures and of God’s truth. If you can’t do that, don’t become a preacher. Don’t become a preacher just because you can drum up a following or because you like the sound of your own voice. Be faithful and careful.

Tongue troubles

blab (1:19)	boast (3:5)
insult (2:6)	curse (3:9)
blaspheme (2:7)	slander (4:11)
dismiss (2:16)	grumble (5:9)
mislead (3:1)	swear (5:12)

After James talks about the fact that not many of us should get into preaching unless God calls us to do so, then of course, he goes on to talk about talk in general—about the tongue. He says, “We all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2). We stumble. It’s very hard to walk well with your foot in your mouth. Our mouth causes us to stumble. Sometimes it’s one of those silly “put your foot in your mouth” moments. I know I still do that all too often.

I remember when I was a young pastor. I went up to somebody after church and saw that she had been sitting with a family from our church, but I had not met her before. So I walked up to her and said, “Oh, are you Barb’s mother?” And she said, “No, I’m her sister.” A lady who is mistaken for a mother when she’s actually a sister doesn’t appreciate my estimate of her age. It’s not very smart to walk up to someone and say, “Oh, are you pregnant?” If they don’t tell you they’re pregnant, don’t ask—because maybe they just put on some extra pounds.

We all stumble in many ways, saying dumb things. But it’s even more serious—much, much more serious—when it’s not just something silly but downright sinful. We all stumble in many ways that go beyond simply putting our foot in our mouth.

James details various tongue troubles, and these aren’t all the troubles mentioned in the Bible, but he lists quite a few: blabbing—running off at the mouth and not being able to listen quietly; insulting the poor; blaspheming the name of Jesus; dismissing people by saying, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but not helping them (James 2:16); misleading people by teaching when you don’t know true doctrine and aren’t called to preach the gospel; boasting; cursing; slandering and speaking against others; using your words to destroy people, tear them down, verbally abuse them, or crush them; or being someone who grumbles—who whines,

moans, and groans. It's all gloom and doom whenever you talk, and there's nothing to be thankful for.

We misuse our mouths when we swear or misuse God's name. You're not a very truthful person if you sell yourself by using God's name to make people believe you more. Sometimes, people are very careless with God's name. It's very common to say "Oh God" or "Oh my God," and those are not words spoken in prayer. Sometimes you even hear Christians saying "Oh my God" as a filler or an exclamation. That's a problem. We shouldn't misuse the name of God. Some people also use the name of Jesus Christ as a swear word, misusing God's name.

We misuse our mouths to attack others. There are so many ways our tongues can get us in trouble and cause trouble for others.

Pictures of tongue

stumbling	wild animal
bridle & horse	deadly poison
rudder & ship	unnatural tree
spark & fire	polluted spring

One of the wonderful things about James is that he's very detailed and very practical. He gets right into life as it is. When he speaks, he often uses pictures—word pictures. In this brief passage, he gives at least eight pictures of the tongue.

We've already seen the picture of stumbling, and he goes on to use the picture of a bridle and a horse, of a rudder and a ship, and of a spark and a fire. In those three pictures, he shows how something little can have a very, very big impact. Then he compares the tongue to a wild animal—only this animal is so wild it can't be tamed. The tongue is like deadly poison. It's like a freaky, unnatural tree that's one kind of tree yet producing a totally different kind of fruit. Or it's like a spring that's been polluted or producing two different kinds of water out of the same source.

He uses all these pictures and piles one on top of another to help us take to heart the importance of controlling the tongue. Earlier in the epistle, he already told us the importance, and now he says that we need to be able to bridle our tongue.

In chapter 3 verse 2, the English Standard Version (which is more literal here) says, "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body" (James 3:2 ESV). Earlier, James said, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless" (James 1:26 ESV).

There you have James's very strong way of saying things. It's all or nothing. If you can't control your tongue, your religion is worthless. If you can control your tongue, you are perfect. Again, the word "perfect" sometimes means "fully mature." If you can control the way you speak and speak only in right ways, then you are perfect, because controlling your speech is the hardest thing in the world. If you've managed that, you've reached the level of Christian perfection. If

you haven't even begun to control your tongue—if there's no bridle whatsoever—then your religion is worthless. But if the bridle is at least starting to work and taking more control, and the Holy Spirit is enabling you to control your talk, then the bridle is beginning to take effect.

When I grew up in Montana, we sometimes went to rodeos, and one of the events was barrel racing. Young women would ride superbly trained, very strong horses. These horses, of course, were much stronger than the women riding them, but because the horse had a bridle and a bit in its mouth, the expert riders were able to control these powerful animals, race them, and handle them in amazing ways.

James says, “When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal” (James 3:3). A horse is very big and strong, yet something very small can steer and control it. On the other hand, if you're not managing that little thing, that big horse can get away from you and cause lots of trouble.

I remember my tenth birthday. I've told this story before. On my tenth birthday, I thought I was too big to ride a pony anymore, so it was time to ride a horse. My dad and brothers advised me not to, but I decided I would do it anyway. So I went out, saddled the horse, and put the bridle in Ladybird's mouth. I rode off, feeling so good about myself, riding high on a real horse.

But then I noticed that the horse was going faster and faster. I was short, and my feet couldn't reach the stirrups, so the stirrups of the saddle were hitting the horse's sides. A horse understands that to mean “Go faster! Go faster!” So she was running faster and faster. I lost hold of the reins that controlled the bridle in her mouth. I couldn't steer her anymore. I couldn't slow her down or stop her. She was running full speed until she tripped over something and fell, and I flew over her head.

My inability to hold that bridle and control the horse nearly killed me. That's true of the tongue. It's little, but if you can't control that little thing, you're in for a terrible runaway disaster. That's what James says.

We can control horses if we control the bit—something little can control something big. “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. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts” (James 3:4-5). It's little, but it steers the whole deal. If you can't control your tongue, then everything else you do is affected. If you can steer your tongue, you are, in effect, steering your life.

Much of our life is determined by the promises we make, by the words we speak, and by the lies we tell. When we tell lies, we have to tell another one, and then another one. They pile up on each other. We get ourselves in terrible fixes when we make promises we can't keep or promises we shouldn't have made. We get ourselves down difficult paths that the tongue is steering.

It could be steering our life in a direction where it's smooth sailing—but all too often, it's steering our life directly onto the rocks that will smash our ship and ruin our life. James says,

don't say that your words are no big deal. That little rudder steers the whole ship, and that little tongue steers your life.

Not only is the tongue little, but it has great power. Think of a spark: "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark" (James 3:5). It doesn't take anything big—just a throwaway little cigarette in the middle of a dry forest, or a campfire you forget to put out during a dry season—and you'll see what a little spark can turn into. What a great forest is set on fire by a small spark!

Again, you may think a few little words are nothing, but when you speak the wrong words to a child—words of insult, words that degrade—you can consume that child's life. They may remember it thirty years later, and it will still be devouring and burning. "The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body" (James 3:6). A small spark can set off a forest fire. A little bit of gossip can get a fight going. It can turn into a quarrel. It can ruin a family and set people at odds with each other for years. It can ruin a church when people talk against each other, poisoning relationships and setting on fire the whole range of evil emotions.

The tongue is a world of evil among the parts of the body. It's a fire. Notice that phrase: "a world of evil." You may have wondered why I called this message "Double-Talk." Well, what does "world" mean in the Bible? The world of evil has gotten right into a particular part of your body—the tongue. Instead of that tongue speaking words guided by God, the world is in you, and it's spouting its evil through you. You're talking like the world. When you get into a quarrel, you don't bite your tongue and back off—you've got to say something! You've got to let the fire fly! That world of evil is poisoning and setting on fire yourself and your relationships—sometimes your church, sometimes the office or business where you work.

Words burn things up. "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:5-6).

If you thought it was bad that the tongue is a world of evil—that the world and all its malice come out through your tongue—what about a tongue set on fire by hell itself? When you lie, you are doing the work of hell. Satan is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). When you attack somebody with your words, when you commit verbal abuse against your children, your spouse, or someone else, you're doing the work of Satan. You're doing the work of hell. It's the fire of hell flaming out of your mouth when you verbally abuse, insult, or slander. When you spread gossip, all these things are the fire of hell spouting out of a human mouth. That's how seriously the Scriptures—the Word of God—take sinful speech.

James gives another picture: "All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue" (James 3:7-8). It's tough to tame a tiger, and very dangerous. There are lots of other animals that are dangerous and difficult to tame, but at least a few people manage to find ways to tame them. Yet nobody has figured out—on their own, with their own wisdom, strength, or effort—how to tame their own tongue, or how to tame anybody else's. "No man can tame the tongue."

Does that mean there's no hope? When all our attempts at taming, bridling, and channeling have failed, we need to turn to God as the one who can take control of our mouths, who can give us the kind of heart we need before we can speak the kind of words we ought to speak. We need a new heart and God's words to be coming out of our mouths. But if you're going to rely on yourself to tame your tongue, I've got a suggestion: go tame a tiger instead—you'll have better luck.

"No man can tame the tongue." And nowadays it's even harder, because it's not just you talking to another person or a group of people. You can talk to hundreds of your "best friends" at once and say terrible things. You can use social media. You can use your phone. You can text, post, or tweet. You can use all these different avenues—and all that does is help the spark turn into a forest fire even faster, help the poison spread more quickly, and ruin even more lives when you speak stupidly or sinfully. No one can tame the tongue, and social media has not helped the process. Many people are even meaner when dealing with their keyboard than when controlling their mouth.

"The tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:8). That's another picture James gives us, and he picks up on some words from the Psalms: "They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's; the poison of vipers is on their lips" (Psalm 140:3). It doesn't take much poison to do a lot of damage. If you get bit by a cobra, just a few droplets of that venom in your system and you're dead. That's the kind of killing power that words can have.

The old saying, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me," is a lie. Words have the power to bring life, but they also have the power to deal out death. "The tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:8).

James uses two other word pictures: an unnatural tree and a polluted spring. Both of these are a way of picturing a mixture of different things that don't belong together. In short, they depict doubletalk.

Doubletalk

Now, double-talk comes from double-think. I'll explain a little more what I mean. In James 1:8, he refers to someone who is "a double-minded man, unstable in all he does." The Greek word he uses there is *akatastatos* (ἀκατάστατος), translated "unstable." That word comes up again in chapter 3: "The tongue is a world of evil... a restless evil" (James 3:6, 8). The word "restless" and "unstable" is the very same word—*akatastatos*. Restless, unstable, double. You've got two things going on at once.

If you're a person trying to be religious, you've got a little bit of that religion in your mind. But you've also got the world in you, and you want to do what the world does. You're unstable. Your mouth is controlled by that world of evil. It's pouring out worldly stuff, but you also want to be kind of religious. Yet you don't bridle your tongue, so your tongue is restless and unstable. It keeps going back and forth—back and forth—between religion and the world, between God and the devil.

James says, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be” (James 3:9-10).

What a sad spectacle—people singing hymns, praise, and worship to God, and then cursing people made in God’s image. Blessing the name of God while cursing those made in God’s image. That’s double-talk. The same mouth pours out both praise and cursing.

Cursing was a very powerful and terrible thing in the time that James was writing, and it still is today. There was strong belief in the power of words. If you spoke words of blessing, they could really improve somebody’s life. If you spoke words of cursing, it was a way of trying to bring them down. Various peoples throughout history have tried to use curses to bring terrible things on their enemies. In our language, people will sometimes say, “Damn you,” or “Go to hell.” That’s cursing. That is invoking the worst possible curse in the universe: I want God to send you to hell; I want God to damn you; I want you to burn forever. Is that what you really want to say? If that is what you really want to say, then you are so unbelievably full of hate and wickedness that it’s almost beyond belief—that you want somebody else to go to hell. If you don’t really mean it, then why are such words coming out of your mouth? Do you think hell is nothing? Do you think damnation is not important? Do you think hell and damnation are trivial?

That’s the kind of double-talk when Christians use words like “damn” and “hell.” They’re cursing, and they’re either treating the terrible destiny of the wicked as something light and unimportant, or they’re wishing the worst possible fate on people whom they should be praying for and seeking to bless. “My brothers, this should not be.” You’re made in God’s image. Other people are made in God’s image. Are you going to curse God’s image and damn it to hell? That’s double-talk. James again and again warns against being double-minded and being double in various ways—part in the world, part with the Lord. Let the Spirit of Christ guide you and empower you. Do not let the world, and do not let the devil himself, set your tongue on fire and cause you to curse others and then think that God really enjoys your praises.

“Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?... Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water” (James 3:11-12). James is saying that this double-talk has no place in the believer’s life. En Gedi is a wonderful spot in Israel. It’s a spring of water that cascades down. It’s cool water; it’s clean water; you can drink that water, and it’s in the middle of a very dry and hot area. If you’ve been walking there and you get to En Gedi, it is so wonderful to drink that fresh, clean water. I’ve been there. Not far away is the Dead Sea. Do you want to know why it’s called the Dead Sea? Because it’s dead. The water is so salty, such heavy water, that you can sit in it without even paddling; you just float. But if you want to drink that stuff—if you were out in that dry, hot desert area and you had to get your water from the Dead Sea—you would be dead. But if you go to En Gedi, you can drink that fresh, clean water.

Now, if you went to En Gedi and out came a big gusher of hot, salty, almost poisonous water, would you be pleased? What a disappointment! You can’t have a fresh spring like that spitting out salt water that nobody can drink. James says that’s what the tongue is like. It’s crazy to think you can spew all kinds of junk and rotten water while at the same time you’re supposed to be pouring out fresh water from a heart full of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. Don’t double-talk.

Don't try to have it both ways, with fresh water and salt water flowing out of the same spring. "My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?" (James 3:12). A tree produces the kind of fruit that matches what it is, and a vine produces the kind of fruit that matches what it is. You can't get figs from a grapevine; you can't get olives from a fig tree. It just doesn't happen. There is no freaky plant that does that. James says it's a pretty freaky plant if you're bearing evil fruit when your identity is supposed to be a tree planted by streams of water, drinking from God's Word and producing fruit. "My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?" (James 3:12).

Echoing Jesus

So we've got all these tongue troubles described in James: blabbing, insulting, blaspheming, misusing God's name with "Oh my God" or "Jesus Christ," or speaking against the things of God; dismissing people; misleading them by bad and false preaching; boasting and bragging and puffing yourself up; cursing people—using words like "hell" and "damn"; slandered people and tearing them down; verbal abuse that destroys children and can destroy spouses. You know that more than half of women who've been physically abused say they were injured more by the verbal abuse than by the physical abuse. The hard, terrible words spoken against them were as bad as the physical assaults on them. So don't slander. And grumbling—making everybody else's life miserable by your grumbling and poisoning your own spirit by your lack of gratitude. And swearing—using God's name in vain, using God's name because you can't let your "Yes" be yes and your "No," no (Matthew 5:37).

All these things are areas in which James is teaching the truth of Jesus Christ himself, echoing many things that Jesus said. He uses powerful pictures—let me remind you of them again: stumbling; little things with a big impact; the tongue is little but has a big impact—like a bridle on a horse, like a rudder on a ship, like a spark lighting a great forest fire; like that terrible wild animal that's worse than a tiger and more untamable; a deadly poison like the venom of a cobra; a freaky, unnatural tree that's not producing what it actually is as a tree; a polluted spring where somebody hoped for cool, clean, fresh water and all they got was a mouthful of salt water they can't drink. Those are the powerful pictures of a tongue that is not being controlled by the Holy Spirit of God.

James is echoing our Lord Jesus himself. Jesus said, "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit" (Matthew 12:33). Same picture as James uses. So if the fruit's bad, you need a different kind of tree. And then Jesus goes on to say that if the mouth is running off wrongly, you need a different kind of heart: "You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him" (Matthew 12:34-35). There it's like the spring—the spring is welling up, and if the heart is bad, then out is going to gush that bad water.

"No one can tame the tongue"—no man can tame the tongue; no woman can tame the tongue—and that's because working on the tongue alone won't get it done, since the tongue is doing the work of the heart. The heart is overflowing. "But I tell you that men will have to give account on

the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:36-37). That’s how seriously our Lord Jesus Christ himself takes the matter of words and the way we use our tongue.

If your words are spoken from the Lord and they give evidence of a heart that’s been reborn, then on the day of judgment those words will be the evidence of what your heart was like. Just as James earlier argued that actions are very important in living faith, so now he’s saying that words—and here he’s echoing Jesus—are evidence of whether you have a living faith and a heart that’s been made right with God. You’re going to be judged on the basis of the words you speak and the actions you do, because all of them flow from the heart. Is it a heart of faith? Is it a heart in which Jesus lives? Is it a heart controlled—bridled—by the Holy Spirit? These are questions each of us needs to look at and ask very closely.

James is not the most comfortable book of the Bible to study because he doesn’t let us get away with airy talk and pious platitudes. He confronts us with reality and urges us to ask ourselves: Do I have the kind of living faith that is expressed in the actual words I speak—where I praise God, where I confess Jesus as my Lord and Savior, and where I also speak in a way that brings encouragement, blessing, truth, and proper teaching to the people around me? May God give each of us the grace to have a tongue that—although we can’t tame it—he does, when he gives us a new heart through Jesus.

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Faithful, careful

Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me... guard the good deposit entrusted to you... entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also... Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman ... who correctly handles the word of truth. (2 Timothy 1:13-14; 2:2, 15)

Tongue troubles

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Pictures of tongue

stumbling	wild animal
bridle & horse	deadly poison
rudder & ship	unnatural tree
spark & fire	polluted spring

Bridled or unbridled?

And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. (3:2 ESV)

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. (1:27 ESV)

Small rudder

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.

Set on fire by hell

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 person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸ but no man can tame the tongue.⁸ It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's; the poison of vipers is on their lips. (Psalm 140:3)

Doubletalk

Doubletalk comes from doublethink.

ἀκατάστατος = restless, unstable

- He is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. (1:8)
- The tongue is a world of evil...a restless evil. (3:6, 8)

Doubletalk

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stumbling
bridle & horse
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wild animal
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Tree and fruit

Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. (Matt 12:33)