

VII. Taming the Tongue

December 2/4/5, 2019

James 3:1-12

OT: Pr. 16:27; Ps. 140:1-3; Is. 6:1-7

NT: Mt. 15:10-20

Aim: To recognize the sinful damage that we can inflict on others through our speech and to seek grace from God in taming our tongues.

Moo: This section relates to the preceding discussion in the letter in two ways. First, the concern about ‘words’ in this paragraph is loosely connected to the concern about ‘works’ in 2;14-26; as Tasker puts it, ‘words are also works.’ ... A movement from the importance of works to the crucial ‘work’ of human speech is therefore a natural progression. Second, this long section on the problem of the tongue picks up James’s identification of the control of the tongue as one of the clearest examples of ‘true religion’ (1:26; cp. 1:19-20).

Dorani: Control of the tongue is one of the tests of true religion that James lists at the conclusion of his first chapter (1:26)...Almost immediately, James hints that it may be difficult to prove one’s faith is genuine. It is far too easy to offer kind wishes—‘keep warm and well fed’ (2:16)—and do nothing to help. When James describes the man who utters kind words and does nothing, we squirm. But the hints of poor performance in James 2 become a plain declaration of human inability in James 3. James 1 says a religious man must ‘keep a tight rein on his tongue’ (1:26). Yet now James says, ‘No man can tame the tongue’ (3:8).

MacArthur: The tongue is *you* in a unique way. It is a tattletale that tells on the heart and discloses the real person. Not only that, but misuse of the tongue is perhaps the easiest way to sin. There are some sins that an individual may not be able to commit simply because he does not have the opportunity. But there are no limits to what one can say, no built-in restraints or boundaries.

Morgan: What drives James to address the community specifically regarding the tongue? He has already cautioned them to be ‘slow to speak’ (1:19) and to bridle their tongues (1:26). Apparently, this early church, still immersed in a synagogue milieu, was having significant problems with their words and how to control them. And this will not be his last directive regarding the tongue – he warns against slander in 4:11, empty boasting in 4:13, and grumbling in 5:9.... Having just written about wrong actions, James now follows it with wrong talking.

MacArthur: The tongue is of great concern to James, being mentioned in every chapter of his letter (see 1:19, 26; 2:12; 3:5, 6 [twice], 8; 4:11; 5:12). In 3:1-12 he uses the tongue as still another test of living faith, because the genuineness of a person’s faith inevitably will be demonstrated by his speech. James personifies the tongue and the mouth as representatives of the depravity and wretchedness of the inner person. The tongue only produces what it is told to produce by the heart, where sin originates (1:14-15; cp. Mt. 15:9).

A. The Tongue Is Important (James 3:1-2)

Morgan: Christian teachers were needed and apparently were arising in this incipient church. Higher standards were expected of these leaders and the risks were more acute. What James says to the teachers of this early church applies to all Christians in their use of words.

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1. The Responsibility of Teaching (3:1)

a) *The Background of Teaching*

MacArthur: *Didaskaloi* ('teachers') was often used of rabbis and any who functioned in an official teaching or preaching role (cp. Jn. 3:10), suggesting that James was speaking of the teaching office in the church (cp. 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11).

Morgan: 'Teachers' (*didaskaloi*) need not be understood in the technical sense like the office of pastor-teacher (Eph. 4:11). In the Jewish synagogues the role of the teacher was an important and prominent one. Furthermore, wide latitude was granted to Jewish men who claimed to have a teaching ministry. Jesus took advantage of this practice often during His earthly ministry (Mt. 12:9; Mk. 1:39; Lk. 6:6).

Moo: Instead of launching immediately into the main topic of the paragraph – the destructive potential of human speech – James begins by discouraging his readers from becoming teachers. *Teachers* (*didaskaloi*) were prominent in the life of the early church from the beginning. The office of teach was roughly the equivalent of the rabbi in the Jewish community (cp. Mt. 23:8; Jn. 1:38)... The rough equivalent to the rabbi would have meant that a teacher in the early Jewish-Christian church would have had considerable prestige.... We can understand, then, why James might have to admonish believers about seeking too eagerly the role of teacher. Since James may allude again in 3:13 to a certain arrogance among the leaders of the community, we can surmise that the problem actually had arisen among his readers.

Hughes: The church, and especially the Jewish church, to which James was writing, was natural heir to the worship tradition of the synagogue, which highly honored teachers and encouraged congregational participation. The title *rabbi* meant 'My great one,' and those holding that office were accorded the greatest respect.... The problem that developed in the Jewish church was that some of this overweening respect was transferred to Christian teachers, making their positions seem most enviable. This, coupled with the fact that the synagogues and the early church services were places for open discussion, invited a plague of unqualified would-be teachers—ecclesiastical climbers who promoted themselves with loud, uninformed discussions that often led to disruption and dispute.... The problem, in a word, was *ambition*, which has been and continues to be the bane of the church. Often instead of being Christ-driven people, believers are need-driven in public ministry.... James was well aware that evil ambitions were driving some to become teachers, and he also knew that if such people got into teaching positions they were suffer further corruption because teaching offices are fraught with moral dangers of their own.

Dorani: Some have suggested that James addressed this warning to particular problems in his church. Perhaps unqualified men or women sought to usurp church authority. Perhaps vain people sought the honor of the public position....

b) *Warning against Teaching (3:1a)*

¹*Not many of you should become teachers...*

Morgan: The negative 'not' (*mē*) stands first in the sentence for emphasis.... The ministry of teaching must never be discouraged or overlooked, but it can be easily abused.

Moo: Too many were seeking the status of teacher without the necessary moral (and perhaps also intellectual) qualifications. Perhaps, indeed, unfit teachers were a major cause of the bitter partisan spirit (cp. 3:13-18), quarreling (4:1), and unkind, critical speech (4:11) that seemed to characterize the community. James therefore begins his admonition about the tongue with a

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practical illustration of the problem uncontrolled speech can create.... Of course, James is not trying to talk people who have the appropriate call and the gift out of becoming teachers. But he does want to impress upon us the seriousness of this calling and to warn us about entering into the ministry with insincere or cavalier motivations.

MacArthur: By giving the caution ‘Let not many of you become teachers,’ James does not, of course, mean to discourage such people from communicating their scriptural insights. Nor does he want to hinder in any way those who are genuinely called by God to be official teachers of His Word. He is saying rather that those who believe they have such a divine calling should first test their faith to be sure they are saved.... It is God’s will for all of His people to articulate His truth as accurately and thoroughly as they are able.... James’s point is that no believer should begin any form of teaching God’s Word without a deep sense of the seriousness of this responsibility. To sin with the tongue when alone or with one or two other persons is bad enough; but to sin with the tongue in public, especially while acting as a speaker for God, is immeasurably worse. Speaking for God carries with it great implications, both for good and ill. ‘

Doriani: It is true that only qualified people should teach. It is also true that some people get a thrill from standing before an attentive audience. But these points are not the topic of James 3. James’s theme is that we *must* tame the tongue but cannot do so. Teachers make an excellent test case of the issue. Teachers should certainly guard their speech. They are especially vulnerable to failures of speech because their role demands that they speak so much.

Hughes: Now James is not trying to diminish the pool of teachers for the church. The church has never had too many qualified, Spirit-filled teachers or leaders at any time in its history. He is rather discouraging people from taking up the task for the wrong reasons. He also is not promoting ecclesiastical elitism that limits the teaching office to the ordained or super-educated. The church in the United States is dying from a lack of good teachers in its pulpit and Sunday schools, but we need teachers with right motives.

c) Judgment for Teaching (3:1b)

...my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Doriani: Paradoxically, every time a teacher rises to explain this verse, he invites judgment on himself.

MacArthur: My brethren’ indicates that James is addressing those who name the name of Christ, including those whose faith is genuine beyond question, admonishing them to make sure that their own desire to teach is truly according to the Lord’s will, not merely their own.

Moo: James’s shift to the first-person plural – ‘we’ – reveals that he considers himself a teacher. And by identifying himself with those whom he warns, James also creates a more effective platform for his warning. The affectionate address *my brothers* (e.g., James’s fellow believers) has the same purpose....

Moo: The Greek...word *krima*, used here, usually refers to the negative outcome of judgment, for example, ‘condemnation,’ in the NT (cp. e.g., Mk. 12:40; Lk. 20:47; 23:40; Rom. 2:2; 3:8; 5:16). However, the word can also have a neutral sense, referring to the act of judgment without regard to the outcome (Jn 9:39; 1 Cor. 6:7; Heb. 6:2). The translations prefer this alternative because of the context: it would seem overly harsh for James to be claiming that teachers will receive a more severe penalty in the judgment than other believers.... The logic of James’s argument...suggests [this] interpretation of the ‘greater judgment’: teachers, because their

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ministry involves speech, the hardest of all parts of the body to control, expose themselves to greater *danger* of judgment.... Teachers, because they bear so much responsibility for the spiritual welfare of those to whom they minister, will be scrutinized by the Lord more carefully than others (cp. Lk. 12:48).... God has given to teachers a great gift and entrusted to them ‘the deposit’ of the faith (cp. 2 Tim. 1:14). He will expect a careful account of the stewardship.

MacArthur: Because right speech is such a critical mark of true faith, ‘teachers’ are held to a higher standard in what they say, for the obvious reason that what they say exerts a powerful spiritual influence on others. ‘Teachers’ are in special danger of misusing their tongues and thereby incurring ‘stricter judgment’ from God. As James has earlier cautioned, they should be ‘quick to hear [and] slow to speak’ (1:19). In that context, he is referring especially to hearing and speaking about God’s Word.... The Greek noun *krima* (‘judgment’) is neutral and can be either positive or negative. But in the New Testament it is most often used negatively as a warning, and that is clearly the kind of ‘judgment’ James has in mind here.

Morgan: ‘Greater’ could be translated ‘stricter.’ Though James does not say categorically that Christian teachers are measured against a higher standard than that required of other Christians, it appeals that such a solemn emphasis is intended here. Knowledge is required of Christian teachers but so too is character. Anyone aspiring to be a teacher of the Word of God should approach the role with some trepidation because fulfilling such a responsibility means enduring a more rigorous judgment from God. It is no wonder that James, with his emphasis throughout on wisdom for the community, introduces this section on the tongue and speech by referring to teachers.

Hughes: James follows his opening warning with some explicit reasoning as to why one should be careful in assuming the position of a spiritual teacher. The first involves *divine judgment*.... In saying ‘you know,’ James was indicating that the would-be teachers were aware from common understanding that becoming a teacher of the church was a serious responsibility involving ‘greater judgment’ (literal translation). How and why do teachers incur greater judgment? The answer is, if we claim to have a full knowledge of God’s Word for His people, and further claim that we are charged to deliver it, we are more responsible to deliver it clearly and obey it.... Increased responsibility means increased accountability (cp. Lk. 12:48).

2. The Risk of Stumbling (3:2)

a) *We All Stumble (3:2a)*

²*For we all stumble in many ways.*

Morgan: ‘Stumble’ or ‘trip’ (*ptaiomen*) is the same word as in 2:10. The explanatory ‘for’ joins this verse to the preceding one as James justifies the serious warning he has just given.... The tongue is the most difficult member of the body to control; therefore, it is mentioned either directly or indirectly in every chapter in James (1:19, 26; 2:12, 3:1-2; 4:11; 5:12). James does not imply that the tongue holds the *only* potential to sin, for ‘we all stumble in many ways.’ All people trip up spiritually from time to time and James includes himself (‘we’) in this diagnosis.... Yet, we are nowhere more apt to stumble than in our speech.

Moo: Teachers are more susceptible to judgment than others *because* they regularly engage in that activity which is hardest to keep from sin – one’s speech. James begins by acknowledging that *we all stumble in many ways*. The Greek word translated ‘many ways’ in the NIV (*polla*) could also refer to the large number of sins (cp. NRSV: ‘all of us make many mistakes’). But the

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context favors the NIV interpretation, James’s argument requiring reference not to the number but to the variety of sins. The Greek word for *stumble* (*ptaiō*) always has a metaphorical sense in the Bible: ‘be ruined, defeated’ (usually in the LXX); or ‘make a mistake,’ ‘sin’ (in the NT).

Doriani: James does not accuse teachers of being *especially* wicked: ‘We all stumble in many ways.’ *No one* can control his tongue.

MacArthur: James’s statement that ‘we all stumble in many ways’ reinforces the truth that no one is exempt in regard to the dangers of the tongue and other forms of sin against God. ‘Stumble’ refers to any moral lapse, a failure to do what is right.

Hughes: The second reason James gives in urging caution about becoming teachers is that *we are sinners*: ‘we all stumble in many ways.’ ‘Stumble’ means ‘sin’ (as in 2:10), and the present tense suggests repeated stumbling – ‘we all sin many times in many ways.’ ... James is obviously saying: be careful about arrogantly assuming the position of teacher, because everyone regularly sins in many ways.

b) *If Anyone Does Not Stumble (3:2bc)*

(1) A Perfect Man (3:2b)

And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man...

MacArthur: *Teleios* (‘perfect’) has two possible meanings. One carries the idea of absolute perfection, of being without any flaw or error. If that is James’s meaning here, he is obviously speaking hypothetically, since no human being but Jesus would qualify for that sort of perfect speech. But the term can also mean complete, or mature. If that is the sense intended here, the idea is that a person who ‘does not stumble in what he says’ gives evidence of a purified and mature heart, which is the source of righteous speech. It seems probable that James has this second meaning in mind.... The idea is that only spiritually mature believers can control their tongues. To the degree that our holiness approaches that of Christ’s, to that degree we are spiritually ‘perfect’ or mature.

Morgan: The idea of a ‘perfect man’ reiterates the thought of 1:4. This is a Christian who is complete and mature, not sinless. James did not elaborate on this metaphor in 1:26, but he does here.

Moo: As we all know to our chagrin, words have a way of escaping our mouths before they are carefully considered – sometimes with unfortunate results. The problem is one that Proverbs highlights repeated. See, for instance 18:6-7.... Indeed, the ease with which people sin in speech and the dire results of this sin are staple themes in both Jewish Wisdom literature and in Hellenistic moral exhortations broadly. James, then, is hardly saying anything new in claiming that a person (Gk. *anthrōpos*) who did not sin in speech would be perfect.

Hughes: The third point, so logical to the discussion of teaching, naturally follows: *the act of teaching imperils the tongue.*

(2) Bridle His Whole Body (3:2c)

...able also to bridle his whole body.

MacArthur: James then makes a remarkable claim, declaring that a man who can bridle his tongue is ‘able to bridle the whole body as well.’ In this context, ‘body’ seems to refer to the

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person in general, to his whole being. In other words, if we can control our tongues—which respond so readily and limitlessly to sin—then controlling everything else will follow. If the Holy Spirit has control of this most volatile and intractable part of our being, how much more susceptible to His control will the rest of our lives be? That principle also supports the second meaning of ‘perfect’ (mature, complete), which, if it carried the idea of absolute perfection, would have no practical significance here.

Morgan: Repeating the principle from 1:26, James uses the same rare verb applied to the tongue: ‘bridle’ (*chalinagōgēsai*). Here the same metaphor is used. Just as the bit in a horse’s mouth can control its whole body, so also a man who can control his tongue is able to control all the body’s passions.

Moo: Indeed, James adds, that person would surely be able to control the whole body as well. So difficult is the mouth to control, so given is it to utter the false, the biting, the slanderous word, so prone to stay open when it were more profitably closed, that the person who has it in control surely has the ability to ‘keep in check’ other, less unruly, members of the body. The word for *keep in check* here, means, literally, ‘bridle.’ The word both harks back to 1:26 (the only other occurrence of the verb in the NT) and anticipates the metaphor of v. 3 (the word ‘bit’ is cognate in Greek to the word ‘bridle’ here).

Hughes: We get James’s idea that one who never is at fault in his words is ‘perfect’ – that is, he has come to completeness and maturity—not sinlessness. The control of the tongue is evidence of extraordinary spiritual maturity. In fact, the ‘perfect man’ is ‘able also to bridle his whole body,’ says James. It is so natural to gossip and criticize and slander that the person who can control his tongue can easily rule the rest of his body.

B. The Tongue Is Powerful (James 3:3-5a)

Moo: Our words, James has now made clear, have an enormous impact on our spiritual condition. But has not James perhaps exaggerated the issue? Can our speech really have that big an impact? James anticipates this objection and now launches into a series of illustrations to reinforce his belief that a comparatively small ‘member,’ such as the tongue, has influence out of all proportion to its size. James compares the tongue to the bit that controls the horse (v. 3), the rudder that steers the ship (v. 4), and the spark that causes a forest fire (v. 5). Each of these illustrations is found quite widely in the ancient world, sometimes in conjunction with one another. James again reveals himself as a pastor concerned to bring his message home to his readers by selecting images from his world and the literature of the time.

Morgan: James uses illustrations about the potential power of the tongue that were curiously well-known in antiquity.

MacArthur: James uses two analogies to show the power of the tongue to control.

1. Horse and Bit (3:3)

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

Moo: James’s reference to ‘bridling’ in v. 2 may well have suggested to him the imagery of the horse and bit that he uses in v. 3. But the use of the horse to illustrate how something small can control something large was widespread in the ancient world. The fifth-century BC playwright Sophocles has one of his actors say, ‘I know that spirited horses are broken by the use of a small

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bit' (*Antigone* 477)... It is not so much 'control' that James intends to illustrate but 'direction': as the bit determines the direction of the horse, so the tongue can determine the destiny of the individual. Believers who exercise careful control of the tongue are able also to direct their whole life in its proper, divinely charted course: they are 'perfect' (v. 2). But when that tongue is not restrained, small though it is, the rest of the body is likely to be uncontrolled and undisciplined also.

Morgan: Everyone in that context understands the importance of keeping the horse under control; otherwise its power can be destructive.... When the rider or the charioteer turns the mouth of the horse with bit and bridle, its whole body turns in that direction. In the same way James directs us to 'bridle' our mouths with the express purpose of controlling the words that come out. Positively viewed, think of the wonderful service horses have provided for mankind when they are controlled properly. Our words can help, encourage, edify, and bless if we will yield our mouths to the control of the Holy Spirit.

MacArthur: This illustration is particularly appropriate, because the bit lies on top of a horse's tongue, and when attached to the bridle and reins, it is possible for the rider using that bit to easily make the horse obey. Controlling 'horses' mouths' controls their heads, which, in turn, 'direct their entire body as well.' Even gentle horses, which have been ridden for many years, are not controllable without 'bits' in their 'mouths.' As long as they are expected to perform service, whether for riding or for pulling a wagon or plow, they require that control. So, it is with believers. To be useful to God, we will need our tongues controlled, with everything else following in submission.

Hughes: The horse is an awesomely powerful animal.... A horse is a half a ton of raw power! Yet place a bridle and bit in its mouth and a one-hundred-pound woman on its back who knows what she is doing, and the animal can literally be made to dance.

Dorani: The tongue rests in the human mouth much as the bit is in the horse's mouth. In both cases, a small thing moves and controls a large body.

2. Ship and Rudder (3:4)

4Look 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.

Moo: James's second illustration makes exactly the same point as the first: very small things can direct very large things. James invites us to consider ships – not specific ships...but ships in general.... The imagery of the small rudder that steers a huge ship was widespread in the ancient world. Aristotle, for instance, contrasted the small size of the rudder, turned by one man, with the 'huge mass' of the ship it controls (*Quaestiones Mechanica* 5).

MacArthur: The second illustration is that of a ship.... The largest ships of that day were small compared to the gigantic ocean liners and warships of modern times. But the ship in which Paul traveled on his voyage to Rome had a total of 276 persons on board, including the crew, soldiers, and prisoners (Acts 27:37), indicating it was a fairly large vessel. In any case, James's point is that, compared to its overall size, a ship's rudder is very small, yet can easily steer the vessel 'wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.'

Morgan: The reality of a small object controlling a larger body is reinforced with this second illustration. James invites us to envision large ships being driven by rough, powerful winds....

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The ship on which Paul sailed to Malta held 276 people (Acts 27:37), so the readers were familiar with large vessels.... The pilot (from a Greek word that literally means ‘to guide straight’) of a vessel knows the direction in which he wants the ship to go and he determines his course by a very small rudder. The only other New Testament use of ‘rudder’ (*pēdalion*) is in the Acts 27:37 passage mentioned above. The ship may be large, but the rudder still remains small in comparison. ‘Small’ is from *elachistos*, the superlative form of *mikros*. Even when the winds are strong and contrary to the ship’s direction, the rudder continues to hold the ship on its determined course.

Hughes: James observed the same phenomenon in ancient ships, as ships small and large (as big as the 276-passenger ship that carried Paul to Rome—cf. Acts 27:37-44) were steered by an amazingly small rudder. Today it is still the same, whether it be an acrobatic ski boat of the *USS Enterprise*. He who controls the rudder controls the ship.

Doriani: The tongue is like the rudder of a ship. Just as a small part of a ship turns the whole, so the tongue has great influence on the whole person

Moo: First, James explicitly contrasts ships, which are ‘very large’ with rudders, which are *very small* (*elachistou*).... Second, he points out that the rudder controls the huge ship in the midst of *strong winds*. ‘Strong’ translates a Greek word (*sklēros*) that means ‘hard,’ ‘rough,’ ‘cruel.’ ... Applied to winds, the word must mean ‘violent,’ ‘rough.’ Another difference between this image and the first is the explicit reference to the ultimate ‘will’ or ‘impulse’ (Gk. *hormē*) that controls the rudder and hence the ship: the *pilot*. James thus sets up the application that he will make of these images in verse 5, with all three key components in place: the guiding desire (the steersman), the means of control (the rudder), and that which is controlled (the ship), corresponding in turn to human desire, the tongue, and the body.

3. Body and Tongue (3:5a)

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

Moo: James wraps up the opening section of his discourse on the tongue by explicitly applying the illustrations of vv. 3-4.... For the first time in this passage we find the word ‘tongue,’ used by metonymy for human speech. Although the Greek word for *boast* (*aucheō*) is found only here in the NT, the idea of ‘boasting’ is often negative, involving arrogant presumptuousness before God. James’s only other reference to boasting has just this nuance (4:16-17). Here, however, it is used more neutrally: the tongue can legitimately make the claim to have considerable power.

Morgan: The human tongue is like both the bit and the rudder in its smallness, and it far surpasses them in its power to influence, direct, and sway the course of people’s lives.... The tongue’s boasts can be great indeed.... Words are truly powerful. Words affect the course of history. ‘Member’ is from *melos*, an old and common word used for parts of the body. Paul used it frequently when speaking of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. This is the only New Testament use of *aucheō*, ‘to boast or brag.’

MacArthur: Like the bit in the horse’s mouth and the rudder of a ship, the ‘tongue’ has power to control the rest of us. It is a master control for the whole ‘body,’ directing virtually every aspect of behavior.... James gives no specifics in saying that ‘the tongue...boasts of great things.’ But he obviously has in mind man’s natural inclination to boast, to be self-centered, and—contrary to the claims of much popular psychology—to have a high self-image. Whenever and however ‘the

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tongue boasts,' it leaves a wake of destruction. It tears down others; it destroys churches, families, marriages, and personal relationships. It can even lead to murder and war.

Hughes: Never doubt the power of the tiny tongue, and never underestimate it.

4. Heart and Soul

Doriani: Bits and rudders were common in antiquity, if they are not today. Were James writing today, he might use something familiar, like the steering wheel of a car. But his point would remain: the tongue is most influential. As a bit directs a horse and a rudder directs a ship, so the tongue directs human life. What we *do* follows what we *say*. Both our internal speech (our thoughts) and our spoken words direct our action.

Doriani: At first glance, James seems to say the person who controls the unruly tongue can surely control the other, more easily tamed, members of the body. Jesus certainly agrees that control of the tongue is important when He says we will be acquitted or condemned by our words (Mt. 12:37). But we must distinguish the first glance from the final analysis. Notice that James's illustrations *seem* to have two parts: the bit and the horse, the rudder and the ship. Careful review reveals the analogies assume a third part, an agent that exercises its will through bit, rudder, and tongue.

- For the horse, a rider uses the bit to control his mount.
- For the rudder, the pilot expresses his will through the rudder to guide the ship.
- For the tongue, the will of man expresses itself in speech that guides action.

Doriani: So, James agrees with Jesus: the heart moves the tongue. Therefore, we cannot simply *decide*, by a resolution of the will, to control the tongue. For the heart controls our resolutions.

MacArthur: In order for the tongue to control our lives in the right way, we must resist the ever-present inclination and temptation to boast and brag. We should speak only gracious words, kind words, words that build up rather than tear down, that edify, comfort, bless, and encourage. They should be words of humility, gratitude, peace, holiness, and wisdom. Such words, of course, can only come from a heart that is not only indwelt by the Holy Spirit but is also wholly submitted to His control.

C. The Tongue Is Destructive (James 3:5b-6)

1. Forest Fire (3:5b)

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!

MacArthur: James's next point focuses on the tongue's tremendous potential to corrupt and destroy. Whereas the tongue's power to control is neutral, being capable of working either for good or for evil, the emphasis here is entirely negative.... Although the verb *eidon* literally means simply 'see,' the imperative mood and middle voice used here (*idou*) almost give it the force of a command. Consequently, this form is often rendered 'behold.' ... James is here calling attention to the great destructive power of hateful, false, heretical, or simply careless words.... The smallest match or spark can grow exponentially into a conflagration that destroys thousands of acres of forest, killing countless animals and often destroying human life and property.

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Moo: The imagery of the spark and the forest fire in the last part of v 5 provides a further illustration of the ‘great boasts’ that small things can make (v. 5a). At the same time, the point being illustrated shifts slightly, since the nuance of destruction is now added.... What James wants us to consider is *what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark*. Impossible to convey in English translation is a striking rhetorical feature of this sentence: the words ‘great’ and ‘small’ translate the same Greek word. The word in question (*hēlikos*) expresses magnitude in either direction. By giving it contextually marked opposite meanings, James accentuates the contrast between the small initial ‘fire’ (NIV *spark*; the Greek word is just the usual word for ‘fire’ [*pyr*]) and the huge resulting conflagration.... A raging, out-of-control fire is a natural way to illustrate disastrous consequences. We speak of a disease, for instance, ‘spreading like wildfire.’ In the ancient world, the rapid and damaging spread of fire was frequently used to convey a warning about the effect of unrestrained passions. Some authors apply just this imagery to human speech. The OT compares the speech of a scoundrel to ‘a scorching fire’ (Pr. 16:27).

Morgan: We derive our prefix *pyro* from the Greek word for ‘fire.’ ‘Set ablaze’ is from *anaptein*. Its only other New Testament occurrence is in Luke 12:49 where Jesus wishes that the fire He came to set on earth were already kindled. James compares the tongue’s destructive power to a wild fire out of control, a fire that can char people’s lives and reputations.... Whereas the first two illustrations, the bit and the rudder are passive, waiting to be used, this imagery of the fire moves into the blatantly active – a fire forces its own way in the most destructive manner.

Hughes: James’s concern about the destructive power of the tongue is a most provocative statement (vv. 5b-6).... The tongue has the awesome potential for harm, as the forest fire analogy suggests.... The tongue has that scope of inflammatory capability. James is saying that those who misuse the tongue are guilty of spiritual arson. A mere spark of an ill-spoken word can produce a firestorm that annihilates everything it touches.

Doriani: The tongue is like a spark of fire in the woods. Even as a small spark can start a great conflagration, so the tongue can set fire to relationships or communities.... Put in the woods, a little carelessness with fire can cause enormous damage. If a gust of wind blows over the embers of a dying fire and lifts a spark into dry trees or brush, an entire hillside may soon be ablaze. A moment of carelessness can cause terrible damage. The tongue is like a fire when rumor and gossip spread, as we say, like wildfire.

2. Tongue Fire (3:6)

6And 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.

MacArthur: In verse 6, James gives what is doubtless the strongest statement in Scripture on the danger of the tongue. Using the figure of fire, this overwhelming declaration presents four major elements of the tongue’s danger.

Moo: James now abandons simile – the tongue is *like* the bit, the rudder, the spark – in favor of straightforward metaphor: *The tongue also is a fire*.... How we are to translate the continuation of this assertion is not clear. The difficulty is that James uses a series of five nouns, all in the nominative case, with only one indicative verb. Interpreters and translators have to decide just

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how to combine these words in a way that makes the best grammatical and logical sense. And, since every conceivably combination has difficulties, the choice among options is not easy.

Morgan: James now abandons simile and states the truth metaphorically, ‘The tongue is not *like* a fire; it *is* a fire.’ To make matters more difficult, James mixes his images. He moves from a fire to a ‘world.’ The translation problem is that James uses a series of five nouns, all in the nominative case, with only one indicative verb. Every combination has difficulties and deciding on the best translation is not easy. But we need not delve neck-deep into the minutia of language, for James’s intent is maintained despite the problems with the grammar.

a) *The Tongue’s Impact (3:6a)*

°And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.

MacArthur: First, it is the ‘very world of iniquity.’ *Kosmos* (‘world’) does not here refer to the earth or universe but rather to a system, scheme, or arrangement. In this case, it is a system of ‘iniquity,’ of evil, rebellion, lawlessness, and every other form of sin. It is the source of unrighteous, ungodly behavior within sinful man. It breeds and gives vent to every sort of sinful passion and desire.

Morgan: ‘World’ carries a wide range of meanings in the New Testament. It may mean the ‘world’ of humankind as in John 3:16, or the created order as in 1 John 2:15, or ‘adornment as in 1 Peter 3:3. The best view is to see ‘world’ here as the sinful, fallen world-system that is in rebellion against God, as this is the use of the word everywhere else in James (1:27; 4:4). The tongue is a world of evil among the parts of the body (3:6). James seems to mean that every sort of unrighteousness found in the world finds an ally in an uncontrolled tongue.

Hughes: *Kosmos* is translated here as ‘world’ and means ‘sinful world system.’ The tongue contains and conveys all the world system’s wickedness. It is party to every evil there is, and it actively obtrudes its evil into our lives.

Moo: The world translated ‘world’ (Gk. *kosmos*) can also mean ‘adornment’ (as in 1 Pe. 3:3).... The most common meaning of *kosmos* in the NT is ‘world,’ often with the nuance of the fallen, sinful world-system. This is the meaning the word has in its three other occurrences in James (1:27; 4:4). The word ‘unrighteousness’ or ‘evil’ will then be added to make clear this negative nuance of the word; we can translate ‘the unrighteous world.’

Dorani: *Its character.* The tongue is a microcosm, a concentration point of this world’s evils. James says the tongue is ‘a world of evil among the parts of the body.’ The tongue is not necessarily more evil than other members of the body, but speech is involved in almost every form of wickedness.

b) *The Tongue’s Character (3:6b)*

The tongue is set among our members...

Morgan: The author posits four aspects of the fiery potency of the tongue. *First*, he speaks of the *character* the tongue possesses. ‘Being placed’ is from *kauthistatai* and can be either passive voice or middle. Does James intend that the tongue ‘is placed’ by another or that it ‘places itself’ because that is its nature - aggressive and uncontrollable? This may very well be what the author had in mind. ‘Members’ is the same word as in verse 5, *melos*. It is the member that is the most inflammatory, doing its utmost to make the rest of the organs a ‘world’ that is hostile to God.

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Moo: James uses the same for of [‘is appointed’ (*kathistatai*)] in a similar construction in 4:4, where it is middle and has the meaning ‘makes oneself.’ This interpretation fits perfectly the idea of the tongue’s arrogant boasting (v. 5). Though a small member of the body, it ‘appoints’ itself as the ‘unrighteous world’; that is, the tongue, by virtue of being the most difficult of all parts of the body to control becomes the conduit by which all the evil of the world around us comes to expression in us.... Jesus made similar claims about the tongue (Mt. 15:11, 18-19).... No other ‘member’ of the body, perhaps, wreaks so much havoc on the godly life.

c) *The Tongue’s Influence (3:6c)*

...staining the whole body...

MacArthur: Second, ... the system of evil spreads out and contaminates the rest of ‘the body.’ To modify the metaphor somewhat, the destructiveness of the tongue is like smoke that penetrates and permanently contaminates everything that is exposed to it. Whatever the fire itself cannot destroy, its smoke will permeate and ruin.

Dorani: *Its influence.* It corrupts ‘the whole body,’ that is, the whole person.

Morgan: *Second,* the author speaks of the tongue’s *influence:* ‘corrupter of the whole body.’ ‘Corrupter’ is a participle from the verb *spiloō*, found elsewhere only in Jude 23 (the noun from ‘spot, blot’ is found in Eph. 5:27 and 2 Pe. 2:13). The pervasive power of the tongue is that it can defile, corrupt, and besmirch the whole body so that every member is affected. Jesus taught this: ‘that which proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the person’ (Mt. 15:11).

Moo: By ‘corrupting’ or ‘staining’ (*spilousa*) the whole person, the tongue destroys ‘true religion’ – which, James has told us, requires that we keep ourselves from being polluted, or ‘stained’ (*aspilon*) by the world. ‘Person’ is a good rendering of Gk. *sōma* here, which refers in this context not just to the physical body but to ‘our whole being’ (TEV).

d) *The Tongue’s Extent (3:6d)*

...setting on fire the entire course of life...

MacArthur: Third, the evil tongue ‘sets on fire the course of our life,’ expanding the principle still further. Like physical fire, the destructive effects of evil speech expand, not only contaminating ourselves, but also everything we influence throughout ‘the course of our life.’

Morgan: *Third,* James notes the *evil force* of the tongue. It ‘sets fire on the course of human existence.’ ... James’ concern is to show the magnitude of the tongue’s destructive potential, but his language is nevertheless unusual. The verb is from *phlogizō*, ‘to ignite, to set ablaze,’ and ‘course’ is from *trochon*, a cycle or wheel. A paraphrase might cut through the fog here to show us James’ meaning: ‘The tongue sets on fire the entire complex of human existence in all its varied activities and relationships.’ The verb tense indicates that the tongue perpetually, habitually causes human firestorms.

Hughes: ‘Course of life’ is literally ‘the wheel of our genesis,’ ‘genesis’ referring to our life or existence.

Moo: The NIV’s ‘whole course of his life’ translates a Greek phrase that means literally, ‘the wheel of origin, or existence.’ The same phrase was used in certain ancient pagan religions to describe the unending cycle of incarnations from which one could seek deliverance by adherence to the religion.... The phrase ‘wheel of existence’ itself may, like so many originally technical expressions, have become fairly widespread as a way of describing the ‘ups and

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downs' of life. ('Existence' translates the same word [*genesis*] that James used in 1:23 to qualify 'face').... The NIV translation *the whole course of life* therefore captures the sense of the phrase quite well. Not only does the tongue corrupt the whole person; it also 'sets on fire,' wreaks havoc, throughout one's life.

Dorani: Thus, the tongue sets the whole course or cycle of life on fire. Throughout the changing circumstances of life, the tongue continues to create evils. When young, we whine; when old, we criticize. When we fail, we excuse ourselves and blame others. When we succeed, or our children succeed, we foul it by boasting. Through every turn of life, the tongue promotes evil. Jesus said, '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"' (Mt. 15:11). So, our mouths corrupt us.

e) *The Tongue's Affiliation (3:6)*

...and set on fire by hell.

MacArthur: Fourth, and most horribly, the sinful tongue 'is set on fire by hell.' The present active form of the verb *phlogizō* ('is set on fire') indicates a continuing state.... That it is said to be 'set on fire by hell' indicates that the tongue can be Satan's tool, fulfilling hell's purposes to pollute, corrupt, and destroy. It is unbelievably dangerous and destructive.

Dorani: *Its allegiance.* In one sense, the evils of the tongue flow from the heart. In another sense, James says Satan himself gives the tongue its destructive power. Hell sets the tongue on fire. If we wonder why the tongue generates so much trouble, James answers that it is set on fire by hell.

Moo: Where does this enormously destructive potential come from? From *hell*, says James. 'Hell' translates the Gk. *Gehenna*, which is a transliteration of two Hebrew words that mean 'Valley of Hinnom.' This valley, just outside Jerusalem, gained an evil reputation in the OT and intertestamental period. Pagan child sacrifices were carried out there (Jer. 32:35) and trash was often burned in it. Jesus used the word to refer to the place of ultimate condemnation. James again betrays his connection to Jesus, since only in the teaching of Jesus do we find this word elsewhere in the NT (11 times). The power of Satan himself, the chief denizen Hell, gives to the tongue its great destructive potential. James does not elaborate the ways in which the destructive power of the tongue can make itself felt. But he undoubtedly would have thought of those sins of speech that are enumerated in Proverbs: thoughtless 'chattering' (10:8; cp. 12:18; 29:20); lying (12:19); arrogant boasting (18:12); gossiping (10:18).

Hughes: Here the present participle means *continually* set on fire by Hell. James used the same word for Hell that his brother Jesus used—Gehenna—derived from the perpetually burning garbage dump outside Jerusalem, a place of fire and filth where, as Jesus said, 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched' (Mk. 9:48). Can anyone miss the point? The uncontrollable tongue has a direct pipeline to Hell! This pipeline is reciprocal. Fueled by Hell, it burns our lives with its filthy fires.... Taking James' words seriously, we recognize that the tongue has more destructive power than a hydrogen bomb, for the bomb's power is physical and temporal, whereas the tongue's is spiritual and eternal.

Morgan: Fourth, we see the tongue's *affiliation*.... Hell is *Gehenna*, the term that originally denoted the valley of the sons of Hinnom, a ravine south of Jerusalem. There, according to later Jewish popular belief, the last judgment is to take place. In the Gospels it is the place of punishment in the next life (Mt. 23:33), the fiery destination to which the ungodly will be

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eternally condemned at the last judgment (Mt. 5:22; 18:9). The fact that this is the only place outside the Gospels where *Gehenna* is used underscores the terrible source of the inflammatory power of the tongue.

MacArthur: That idea is reinforced by the term James uses for ‘hell.’ Except for its use here, *Gehenna* (‘hell’) is not found in the New Testament outside of the synoptic gospels, where, in each case, it is used by Jesus. The word literally means ‘valley of Hinnom,’ a deep gorge southwest of Jerusalem, where trash, garbage, and the bodies of dead animals and executed criminals were dumped and continually burned. The location had originally been used by Canaanite and even some Israelite worshipers to sacrifice their children as burnt offerings to the pagan god Molech. When that heinous practice was permanently halted by the godly King Josiah of Judah (see 2 Kings 23:10), the place was considered to be unclean and wholly unfit for any decent usage. It therefore came to be used as a garbage dump, where all the filth of the city of Jerusalem and surrounding areas was taken to be burned. Because the fire burned all the time and maggots were always present, the Lord used *Gehenna* to represent the eternal never-ending torment of hell.

D. The Tongue Is Untamable (James 3:7-8)

Moo: Having established the considerable and potentially destructive power of the tongue in vv. 3-6, James goes on in vv. 7-8 to remind us that the tongue is extremely difficult to bring under control.

Dorani: By this we know the tongue is enflamed by hell: mankind can tame *anything* but the tongue.

MacArthur: James’s point in these two verses is simply that the human tongue is innately uncontrollable and untamable. It is wild, undisciplined, irresponsible, irrepressible, and savage. In what might be called its primitive or intrinsic evil, it combats every effort to control and direct it.

1. Tamable Beasts (3:7)

7For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind...

Morgan: ‘For’ ties this verse to what precedes and elaborates on the wild and untamed nature of the tongue. ‘Species’ is from *phusis* and refers to kinds; the ‘all’ means ‘all kinds; all you can think of.’ James’ fourfold list may be based on Genesis 1:26 and 9:2. ‘Beasts’ (*thēriōn*) referred to undomesticated animals or to quadrupeds in general. ‘Birds’ is from *peteinōn* and signifies all kinds of flying animals. ‘Reptiles’ (*herpetōn*) is from the verb ‘crawl,’ thus ‘crawling, creeping things.’ This is the only occurrence in the New Testament of ‘sea creatures’ (*enalion*), literally, ‘things in the sea.’ James uses the present tense here: ‘is being tamed.’ ... The ancient world took pride in the fact that humans were superior to animals. In fact, the Greeks believed that human reason overcame the strength and speed of animals. It has always been God’s design that man should rule over the created order. The nature of the animal has been domesticated by the nature of humanity. For example, humanity has expressed its ability to tame in dancing bears, trained seals, talking dolphins, acrobatic birds, and snake charming.

Moo: James sets up this point by way of a contrast, commenting first on how human beings have been able to train *all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and creatures of the sea*. ‘Animal’

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translates a Greek word that can refer to virtually any kind of animal, but often, as apparently here, specifically to a quadruped. Although the words are not exactly the same, this fourfold division of the animal kingdom clearly reflects the Genesis creation account (cp. Gen. 1:26)... This way of summarizing the non-human creaturely world became common in Jewish (e.g., Philo, *Special Laws* 4.110-116) and Christian (e.g., Acts 11:6) writings. Allusion to creation shows that James is making a general theological assertion about the nature of the world. Human ability to ‘tame’ the animal world, suggests James, is inherent to the image of God and the divine mandate to ‘subdue’ the world.... The verse begins with a reference to every ‘species’ (NIV *kind*) of animal and concludes with a reference to the ‘species’ of humankind. The ‘human species,’ James is saying in brief, is subduing every animal ‘species.’ Moreover, James uses the verb ‘tame’ twice; once in the present tense to stress the continuing process by which human beings are subduing creatures, and again in the perfect tense – *have been tamed* – to show that this process is rooted in the state of affairs created by the divine mandate.

MacArthur: ‘Every species’ includes animals that walk and fly, ‘beasts and birds,’ as well as those that crawl and swim, the ‘reptiles and creatures of the sea.’ Animals from each of those categories are being tamed and have ‘been tamed by the human race.’ The wildest, smartest, fastest, and most powerful, and most elusive creatures are subject to man’s taming.

Dorani: At an aquarium, we may behold whales, dolphins, and seals heeding human commands. At the circus we see birds, horses, camels, elephants, and even tigers perform their routines. If an animal fails to perform, the trainer barks a command to bring it back into line. But who can force the tongue back into line? ... *Humankind* subdues every *kind* of animal, but it cannot subdue itself.

Hughes: I have seen whales playing jump rope...at Sea World or some other great aquarium, as their trainers hoist the rope high and the whales sailed over it. I have seen African lions cowed and submissive to the wizardry of Gunther Gebal Williams. I have seen eagles kill their prey and humbly lay it at their master’s feet. I have seen a woman obediently kissed on the lips by a deadly cobra. But I have never seen a man or woman who in their own power could tame the tongue.

2. Untamable Tongue (3:8)

a) Untamable (3:8a)

⁸*but no human being can tame the tongue.*

MacArthur: ‘But no one,’ that is no human being in his own power, ‘can tame the tongue.’ Even in believers, the tongue can easily slip out of its sanctified cage, as it were, and do great harm. Its work can be so subtle that it sometimes escapes notice until the damage is done....

Morgan: Not so with the tongue – it is a one-of-a-kind ‘animal’ that no one can tame. The change in subjects, ‘no one’ makes the application here very personal. Even though mankind can tame the wild beasts, an individual faces quite a different proposition when it comes to taming his own tongue.

Moo: In the Greek of this verse, *the tongue* comes first for contrast: human beings may subdue animals – but *the tongue* no one can tame.... James does, indeed suggest that the ultimate taming of the tongue is impossible. Should this lead us to abandon all efforts to bring our speech under control? Of course not. The realization that perfection is something unattainable should not

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dampen in the least our enthusiasm to become as good at it as possible. We may never reach the point where the tongue is perfectly controlled; but we can surely advance a long way in using our speech to glorify God.

b) *Restless and Poisonous (3:8b)*

It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Morgan: The last part of verse 8 is especially strong. Most translations insert predicate nominatives: ‘*it is a restless evil; it is full of deadly poisons.*’ But the Greek text suggests that these phrases be taken as exclamations: ‘Restless evil! Full of deadly poison!’ The adjective ‘restless’ (*akatastaton*) characterizes the tongue as being fickle and inconsistent; it cannot be trusted to stay in place. The picture is of a caged animal, pacing back and forth. It is full’ (*mestos*) of death-dealing poison.

MacArthur: ‘Restless’ translates *akatastatos*, the same word rendered ‘unstable’ in 1:8. In this context, the meaning goes well beyond that of ‘restless,’ suggesting the idea of a wild animal fighting fiercely against the restraints of its captivity. This ‘evil’ chafes at confinement, always seeking a way to escape and spread its ‘deadly poison.’ Its ‘venom’ is more deadly than a snake’s because it can destroy morally, socially, economically, and spiritually.

Moo: The word ‘restless’ translates the same word that James used in 1:8 to describe the ‘double-minded man, *unstable* in all he does.’ The LXX uses the same word with reference to sins of speech in Pr. 26:28: ‘A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works *ruin.*’ ... James concludes the verse with a description of the tongue taken directly from the OT: *full of deadly poison.* See, for instance, Ps. 140:3 (cp. Rom. 3:13).

Hughes: Like the deadliest poison, those that are most effective are tasteless and odorless: subtle criticism and slander, verbal venom which has done its work long before the victim can react.

3. Taming the Tongue

Dorani: James says two things: The tongue has vast influence, so we ought to control it. Yet no human *can* tame the tongue. This is a paradox. James says we must do something that we cannot do. There are two ways to approach this problem. First, we can soften James’s message. He means it is *almost* impossible to tame the tongue, therefore we must redouble our efforts. This view says: *Since the tongue is the key to holy living, we must bend every effort to control it, for it we do, we control all.* James’s illustrations seem to support this view. Just as a bit turns a large horse, just as a rudder turns a large ship, so the tongue the lives of men.

Dorani: The second view interprets James rather literally. It says: *It would be good to tame the tongue, but James says we cannot. Therefore, we must turn elsewhere for help.* No one has sufficient self-control to govern his tongue: ‘We all stumble in many ways’ (3:2). ‘No one’ – no mere human – ‘can tame the tongue’ (3:8).

E. The Tongue Is Contradictory (James 3:9-12)

MacArthur: Finally, the tongue is characterized by what might be called its perfidy to compromise. Perfidy refers to deliberate breach of trust, or treachery, and the unbridled tongue is frequently guilty of such evil. The tongue is not just wild and raging like an animal, but clever, plotting, and subtly deceptive. It is hypocritical and duplicitous, eagerly willing to deceive in order to achieve its own advantage.

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Moo: James brings his critique of the tongue to a conclusion by attributing to it the ‘doubleness’ that he so frequently deplores in his letter. The ‘double-minded man’ (1:8; cp. 4:8), inconsistent in his faith, trying to please both God and the world at the same time, epitomizes the concern that James has for his readers. Such a person tries to combine faith in Jesus Christ with denigration of Christ’s people (2:1-13). They claim to have faith in God while failing to exhibit the works that true faith always produces (2:14-26). And now, we find, they use the same tongue both to *praise our Lord and Father* and to *curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness*. This matter of the doubleness of the tongue is the theme of vv. 9-12.... The inconsistency of the tongue is a very clear indication of the ‘restless evil’ (v. 8) that it is.

1. Our Speech Is Contradictory (3:9-10)

a) *What We Do* (3:9)

(1) Bless God (3:9a)

⁹*With it we bless our Lord and Father...*

MacArthur: Every believer should use his tongue to ‘bless our Lord and Father,’ just as God desires and expects of those who belong to Him. The Jews the whom James wrote were accustomed to pronounce blessings on God at the end of each of the eighteen eulogies, or benedictions, they prayed three times a day, saying, ‘Blessed be Thou, O God.’

Hughes: Evidently James had observed a contradictory phenomenon in his church. Jewish Christians were perpetuating the beautiful old Hebrew custom of saying, ‘Blessed be He’ after each utterance of God’s name, so that their worship times were continually punctuated by choruses of praise.

Moo: The NIV’s *praise* could also be rendered ‘bless’ (Gk. *eulogeō*). The blessing of God was a basic part of Jewish devotion. ‘The Holy One, blessed be he’ is one of the most common designations of God in rabbinic literature, and the ‘eighteen benedictions,’ a liturgical formula cited daily, concluded each of its sections with a blessing of God. The early Christians, of course, were equally concerned to bless God in prayer and praise (cp. 2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:13; 1 Pe. 1:3). The exact combination ‘Lord and Father’ as a designation of God occurs only here in the Bible, but in several places, we find these two titles used closely together.... Blessing, or praising, God is one of the most important and positive forms of human speech. James might be thinking specifically of the worship of the community, in which believers united their voices in singing and asserting the praise of God.

Morgan: ‘We are blessing’ (*eulougoumen*, from which we derive ‘eulogy’) is present tense, apparently indicating the pattern or continual practice of these hypocrites who express pious platitudes about God yet curse others. The Lord chided His people often in the Old Testament about how they honored Him with their words, yet their hearts were far from him. The combination of ‘Lord and Father’ is unique in the New Testament, the closest parallel being in 1 Corinthians 8:6.

(2) Curse Man (3:9b)

...and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

Moo: But if praising God is one of the highest forms of speech, cursing people is one of the lowest. The opposing nature of ‘blessing’ and ‘cursing’ is rooted in God’s own speech. In the

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most famous biblical example of such speech, God repeatedly set before Israel these two alternatives as the result of its reaction to His law (see, e.g., Dt. 30:19)... The ancient curse was far more than abusive language; it called on God in effect, to cut a person off from any possible blessing and to consign that person to Hell. Jesus prohibited His disciples from cursing others; indeed, they were to ‘bless those who curse you’ (Lk. 6:28; cp. Rom. 12:14). As James emphasizes, what makes cursing especially evil is that the one whom we pronounce damned has been made *in God’s likeness*. James has already alluded in this context to God’s creation utterance, as he designated the various kinds of creatures over which God has given man dominion (v. 7; cp. Gen. 1:26). Here he alludes again to the same passage (see also 1:27) to remind us of the special likeness that human beings bear to God Himself.

MacArthur: But with the same tongue with which we bless God, James continues, ‘we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God. That is its perfidy, its treachery. Even unredeemed mankind retains the ‘likeness of God,’ which, though utterly marred by the Fall, nevertheless is indestructible. Men continue to be like God in many ways—in intelligence, self-consciousness, reasoning, moral nature, emotions, and will.

Morgan: Curse is parallel to ‘bless,’ both in the present tense. Even unredeemed mankind retains an ‘image of God.’ The literal reading is ‘being begotten in the likeness [similitude] of God.’ It is this image which sets us apart as being superior to animals. When we assassinate the character of others with our tongues we trample God’s image within them! James says the duplicity of the tongue is wrong because *first*, it *desecrates the image of God*.

Hughes: Yet these same people, with the blessings still on their lips, would sometimes, after leaving worship, actually curse someone who had angered them! This was a shameful sin, and James would not tolerate it!

b) *What Ought Not to Be So (3:10)*

¹⁰*From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.*

Moo: James now draws the moral from v. 9.... In the passage thus far, James has referred to the ‘tongue’ as the organ of speech. His shift in this verse to ‘mouth’ and the language, natural to this metaphor, of ‘come out’ probably reflects his dependence once again on the teaching of Jesus (Mt. 15:11, 17-20)... James’s bottom line is: ‘it is not necessary that these things should happen this way.’ (a literal rendering). This assertion wonderfully captures the moralist’s sense of outrage at what ‘ought not to be.’ Christians who have been transformed by the Spirit of God should manifest the wholeness and purity of the heart in consistency and purity of speech.

Morgan: *Second*, our double talk *disobeys God’s will*.... James condemns the dual deceit of the tongue. But here he changes the culprit to the ‘mouth’ (*stoma*). Most commentators think that the switch is due to the fact that the mouth is simply the place where the tongue is located, and in this way, James can parallel the words of His Master, ‘what comes out of the mouth defiles a person’ (Mt. 15:11, 20). ‘Should not be’ translates *ou chrē*, ‘it is not right, needful.’ The verb is from *chran*, ‘to give what is needed,’ and is found only here in the New Testament. There can be no excuse for it; no reason can be concocted to justify it.

MacArthur: How tragically inconsistent and hypocritical, therefore, that ‘from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing.’ ... ‘My brethren,’ James implores, ‘these things ought not to be this way.’ *Ou chrē* (‘ought not’) is a strong negative, used only here in the New Testament. The idea is that there should be no place in a Christian’s life for duplicitous speech. It is an

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unacceptable and intolerable compromise of righteous, holy living. When God transformed us, He gave us the capacity for new, redeemed, holy speech, and He expects us, as His children, to speak only that which is holy and right.

Doriani: Notice that James chides our inconsistency, even though he knows no one can consistently control the tongue. He rebukes us because the duty of watching our words remains. Since a small statement can cause great harm, we must guard our speech. We must strive to bless God and mankind with our tongues. We must, yet we cannot. No human can tame the tongue. We must admit that James does not solve this riddle in this passage. For the moment, he leaves us in tension, which he relieves some time later, in 4:6-10. In this, James follows the pattern of Jesus, who was also willing to let his teaching dangle without the kind of resolution we like.

2. Nature Is Not Contradictory (3:11-12)

Hughes: James concludes here by passionately denouncing this terrible inconsistency.... His overpowering point is, whatever comes out of the mouth unfailing reveals what is on the inside.

Moo: James hammers home the point that a pure heart and impure and ‘double-tongued’ speech are incompatible with three illustrations (vv. 11-12). The first two are cast in the form of a rhetorical question that expects a negative answer (explicit in Greek with the use of the particles *mēti* and *mē*); the third is a straightforward negative statement. Each points out how absurd it would be for one thing to produce something of a completely different kind. And each exhibits James’s pastoral ability to put truth in a form understandable to his readers by using some of the most common of all ancient Near Eastern objects.

Morgan: James turns to nature once again to draw a fifth verbal image of the tongue. In so doing he illustrates three contradictory phenomena.... James argues his point with two rhetorical questions because he wants to carry his readers along with him in his argument. And in all of these illustrations we find the central truth, that *root* determines *fruit*; *source*, is revealed by the *nature* of what it produces.

a) *The Fresh Spring (3:11)*

¹¹*Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?*

MacArthur: James explains this truth using three illustrations.... The obvious answer is no. The same spring, or fountain, does not issue two vastly different kinds of ‘water.’

Morgan: Fresh water and bitter water do not flow from the same spring or fountain. James’ readers knew the importance of a ‘spring’ to a dry Palestinian village or town. In fact, communities developed around such fresh water supplies. ‘Source’ is from *opē*, a crevice or open place in the ground. The word is found only here and in Hebrews 11:38 in the New Testament. The point is that the spring pours forth water in keeping with its nature. It is unthinkable that the same spring would give fresh water one day and bitter, brackish water the next. The *source* determines the *nature* of the water. Fresh water does not purify the bitter, but the opposite is true – a little bitter water can spoil the whole.

Moo: The importance of the *spring* (*pēgē*) in dry Palestine can hardly be overestimated. Many a village owed its origins to the discovery of a spring and depended on its reliable production of potable water for its continuing existence. It was obviously vital that a spring continue to yield *fresh* (or ‘sweet’ [Gk. *glykos*]; cp. Rev. 10:9-10) *water*.... Springs did not pour forth fresh water

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one day and salt water the next. Such a thing just did not happen. And so, James implies, it is also inconceivable to think of a mouth pouring forth praise to God one moment and curses against fellow human beings the next. The word that the NIV translates ‘salt’ is...from a Greek word that means ‘bitter’ (*pikros*). We might have expected James to use the common Greek word for ‘salt’ here (*alykos*), as he does in v. 12. Perhaps James employs the more unusual term because it is found in several OT and intertestamental Jewish texts as a description of the wrong kind of speech (Ps. 64:3; Pr. 5:4; Sir. 29:25). By comparing the tongue to a spring that produces bitter water, James reinforces his warning that the tongue is, indeed, ‘full of deadly poison’ (v. 8).

b) *The Fig Tree (3:12a)*

¹²*Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs?*

Moo: James’s next two illustrations, drawn from the agricultural world, not only touch on the everyday life of his readers, but also resonate with ancient moral teaching. For the idea of a plant producing according to its peculiar nature was widespread.... Even more relevant...may be the famous saying of Jesus about good trees producing good fruit and vice versa. See especially Mt. 7:16.

MacArthur: Doubtless alluding to the Lord’s words—‘Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they?’ (Mt. 7:16)—James asks [his second rhetorical question]. Again, the obvious and expected answer is no. Such a thing is utterly contrary to nature and cannot happen.

Morgan: The *second* contradiction James cites is a fig tree that produces olives.... James’ pastoral heart shines through in the address ‘my brothers.’ The key here is the word ‘can,’ which requires a ‘no’ response. The root of the tree determines its fruit – fig trees produce figs and olive trees produce olives. The writer once again borrows from His Master in recalling His teaching that a good heart produces good fruit and an evil heart bears evil fruit (Mt. 7:16-20; 12:33-35; Lk. 6:43-45).

Morgan: *Third*, James asks rhetorically, ‘or can a vine [produce] figs?’ The fruit of the vine conforms to the nature of the vine, and vines do not produce figs – trees do! Vines produce grapes. The fruit of the lips reveals the root condition of the heart. It is inconsistent for a Christian to bless God with one breath and to criticize others with the next.

c) *The Salt Pond (3:12b)*

Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

MacArthur: He then states emphatically, ‘Nor can salt water produce fresh.’ This also is clearly impossible, and no rational person would think twice about believing anything to the contrary.

Moo: In the last part of v. 12, James returns to the imagery of fresh and bitter water from v. 11, but now makes a slightly different point.... The phrase ‘salt spring’ in the NIV translates a single Greek word (*alykos*) that means ‘salt.’ (It is a different Greek word from the one translated ‘salt’ by the NIV in v. 11).... James’s point is obvious: bad things don’t produce good things. And so, a person who is not right with God and walking daily in His presence cannot consistently speak pure and helpful words. One who is double and inconsistent with regard to the things of God in his heart (*dipsychos*, 1:8 and 4:8) will be double and inconsistent in his speech.

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3. Resolving the Contradiction

Doriani: In 4:10, James resolves his riddle when he promises that God will exalt all who humble themselves before Him. That is, if we humbly admit our inability, He will graciously forgive us. Even before we reach that moment, other Scriptures teach us this about our inability: We cannot control the tongue, but God can. Even with the Spirit's help, the taming is only partial. Yet it is real and more potent than our efforts at self-mastery. Once we realize that God can control what we cannot, we can properly face the failures of speech that reflect the failures of the heart... First, let heart and tongue admit that God is holy and that we should aspire to holiness. Second, since God is not satisfied by mere aspirations, we should ask God to forgive our failings and meager achievements. Third, let us believe in Him and receive the loving mercy of God. He loves us as a father loves his children, flaws and all.

Hughes: In view of all this, what are we to do? First, *we must ask God to cauterize our lips*, confessing as Isaiah did (Is. 6:5)... Then we need to submit to the cleaning touch.... Second, hand-in-hand with the first step there must be *an ongoing prayerfulness* regarding our tongues—regular, detailed prayer. This, coupled with the first step, will work a spiritual miracle. Third, we must resolve to *discipline ourselves* regarding the use of the tongue—not to criticize, not to give or receive gossip, not to belittle or demean or falsely flatter, not to lie, not to boast.

Morgan: We would do well to yield our tongue to the Holy Spirit and ask Him to help us apply a threefold test to our words. *First*, is what I am about to say *true*? Many people possess a 'keen sense of rumor,' and much of what they say is not really true or accurate. Much gossip would die in its tracks if we asked whether it is true. *Second*, is it *necessary*? Many times we fail 'to cover a multitude of sins' by repeating things about others that are not necessary to tell. Granted, a matter may be true, but is there any use in repeating it just to make idle chatter? *Third*, is it *kind*? How do the words I am about to speak fit with the second greatest commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself?'

MacArthur: A hateful heart cannot produce loving words or works. An unrighteous heart cannot produce righteous words or works. 'A good tree cannot produce bad fruit,' Jesus explained, 'nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.... So, then, you will know them by their fruits' (Mt. 7:18, 20)... There is an almost constant tension in the book of James between what is and what ought to be. At one point he says, 'This is how it *will be* if you are a true believer,' and at another point he says, 'That is also how it *ought to be* if you are a true believer.' Because we have been *made* righteous by Jesus Christ, we *ought to live* righteously and speak righteously, according to His will and by His power.

Hughes: Offered on the altar, the tongue has awesome power for good. It can proclaim the life-changing message of *salvation* (cp. Rom. 10:14b-15)... It has power for *sanctification* as we share God's Word (cp. Jn. 17:17)... It has power for *healing* (cp. 2 Cor. 7:5-7)... It has power for *worship* (cp. Heb. 13:15).

For next time: Read James 3:13-18.