

The human tongue James 3:1-12

I want to share **three interesting facts** about the human tongue.

Number 1: Did you know that because the tongue comes in different shapes and has a variable number of taste buds, it is as unique as a fingerprint.

Number 2: Thomas Blackstone holds the record for the strongest tongue. He lifted a 24 lb 3 oz weight (11kg) that was hooked through his tongue.

Number 3: The hardest tongue twister in the English language, according to the Guinness World Records, is: "The sixth sick sheikh's sixth sheep's sick."

Without doubt these are **fascinating facts** about the human tongue. However, they are **not life changing**.

They may help us in a **family quiz** but they won't help us in **daily life**.

However, what we are presented with in **James chapter 3** is completely different.

This section of the Bible confronts us with two incredibly important facts about our tongues. If we take them to heart our lives will never be the same again

- Our tongues have big consequences (Vs 1-6)
- Our tongues must be tamed (Vs 7-12)

First, our tongues have big consequences (Vs 1-6)

Look at verse 1. **Read verse 1.**

At first sight this topic seems to be **out of place**.

The letter of James is **practical Christianity on steroids**.

So far we've seen...

- How to deal with trials of many kinds
- Led to us considering the importance of listening to and living out God's word, which is important all the time but particularly in seasons of trial.
- Then we had a particular example of living out God's word. This was to avoid showing favoritism to the wealthy over the poor.
- Then we saw that this kind of practical deeds are evidence of a genuine faith in Jesus.

So far so good. But then we get to chapter 3 verse 1 and then out of the blue we are confronted with this warning about becoming a teacher in the church.

Where did this come from?

This is the introduction to another topic in practical Christianity – the proper use of our tongues in daily life.

This has been hinted at before. Back in **chapter 1:26**, "Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves and their religion is worthless."

How we use our tongues is another way of discerning if our faith in Jesus is genuine.

In this section James begins to unpack what this means.

He starts with a caution to those who want to use their tongues to teach others the faith. He says, be careful. Don't rush to the microphone and instruct others.

The reason is because we who teach will be judged more strictly.

Why? It's all because **our tongues** have **big consequences**.

This is true whatever we talk about but **how much more** when we dare to claim that the words on our lips are the words of God.

We need to be quick to listen. And listen in the place where God has promised to speak. The Bible. Teachers work hard to discern God's intention for the words he has inspired.

Do pray for those who teach the bible in whatever role they have. Pray that we have a desire to take it seriously and get it right.

We don't always achieve this. This is why I find verse 2 so comforting. **Read verse 2.**

If we could keep our tongues in check then we'd be able to keep our whole body in check, such is the tongue's power. What we talk about fuels our imaginations and controls our desires. These impact so many of our decisions.

It's a right aspiration to watch our conversation, however, for the Bible teacher, there is grace in our failure and weakness.

You don't need to get a constant A* to make the grade!

We will need more teachers at Trinity Church if we are to see the word ministries expand – both for outreach and discipleship. Could that be you? It is such a privilege. But it is also a serious endeavor that requires us to rightly handle the word of God. If this is something you're considering then I want to say, great, brilliant and fantastic. We need more teachers. But I also want to say, make sure you are teachable. Be a person who humbly accepts the word planted in you.

Words with big consequences aren't the sole reserve of Bible teachers so in verses 3 to 6, James expands his point to the rest of the church.

Look at verse 3. **Read verses 3 and 4.**

James starts with two illustrations about the powerful effect of small things.

The **first example** we are to imagine is a large powerful horse, capable of doing so much for good or so much damage. How can it be controlled? You can't push it in the direction you want. You can't pull it in the direction you want. You can't wave flags at it and direct it forward like an aircraft. None of these things will work. But all you need is tiny bit placed in its mouth and the whole animal can be controlled. Or in other words, something tiny has big consequences. In fact, it ends up controlling it!

The **second example** is similar. Think of a large ship and consider being given the task of guiding this round the sea? How can this be done? You can't push it. You can't stroke it. You can't speak nicely to it. However, put a small rudder on a large cruise ship and you can move it wherever you want. It's that same truth again. Something tiny controls something big.

What's James' point? Look at verse 5. **Read verses 5 to 6.**

The tongue exerts great influence on us.

What we say to others controls how they respond to us. The words I use determine if someone treats me as a friend or as an enemy.

What I say to a person or about a person actually has an impact on what I think and how I live from that point onwards.

This tiny tongue actually controls the shape of our life. Often this is bad news.

This is because the tiny thing often causes a lot of damage.

A small spark can devour acres of forest. Likewise, the tiny tongue can cause huge damage to others and huge damage to ourselves.

It's the damage to ourselves that is emphasised here

First, we're told that the tongue corrupts the whole person. It leaves its mark on our souls like a dirty stain.

Second, the tongue sets the whole course of a person's life on fire. That is, the words that we speak can lead us to continually walk in destructive paths.

Third, the tongue can result in a person spending eternity in hell. I think that is what James means when he says the corrupt tongue is set on fire by **hell**. That is, a person can use their tongue to commit sins that are rightly punishable by God. And unless we receive forgiveness by Jesus for these sins, our tongues will join the rest of our bodies in the fires of hell.

Put all this together and we are being told that the tiny tongue powerfully controls us in a negative way. It may be small but it has big consequences.

And not just on us. What we say leaves an imprint on other people.

Sticks and stones may break my bones
But words shall never hurt me.

In light of this here are **four questions** for us to consider before we speak

- Do I need to say this?
- Do I need to say it now?
- Do I need to say it in this format?
- Do I need to say it to this person?

Or more **positively**, imagine using our tongues positively. For prayer. For encouragement. For wisdom. For celebration.

This is the community we are longing to build here at Trinity Church.

Who wouldn't want to be part of this?

This is all good in theory but let's think about how we can control what we say.

Second, our tongues must be tamed (Vs 7-12)

Look at verse 7. **Read verses 7 and 8.**

Notice that it says no human being can tame the tongue.

Humans have managed to tame all sorts of powerful land animals and ocean creatures. But the reality is that although we know how to tame a tiger we are not able to tame our tongues.

And yet we all need to because inside us there is this small but deadly little device that can ruin our lives.

What are we to do? Look at verse 9. **Read verses 9 to 12.**

My brothers and sisters, this must not be!

A fig tree doesn't bear olives. Freshwater and salt water don't flow from the same spring. Can you imagine how useless that kind of tap would be? It is one thing or the other.

One day this will be true for us as Christians. We will only use our mouth to praise and bless.

However, before we see Jesus face to face there will be a double output from our lives. However, we mustn't just accept this. We must battle for purity in what we say.

We can't do it on our own but Christians have the Holy Spirit living in us. He can begin to change us from the outside in.

Our hearts control our tongues.

Here's the good news. All followers of Jesus have new hearts and new motivations. Let's be engaged in the battle to clean out our mouths for the good of everyone and the glory of God. **Let's pray.**