

# The Tongue

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] James chapter 3 we are really looking at the entire chapter as a whole on the subject of the tongue but as we looked at with the children we take verse 3 as just a text to work with behold we put bits in the horses mouths that they may obey us and we turn about their whole body behold also the ships which though they be so great and are driven of fierce winds yet are they turned about with a very small helm whithersoever the governor listeth even so the tongue is a little member and boasteth great things behold how great a matter a little fire can breath and the context of this chapter is that James is seeking to teach or the Lord is seeking to teach through James that those who lead those who teach those who may be a means of instruction or guidance to others have greater responsibility and the tool which so often we use in terms of our witness to others is speech it is the word and whilst we might think yeah okay but you know very few of us are actually teachers in the things of the Lord and this is what James begins this chapter with my brethren be not many masters that doesn't mean master as opposed to master and slave or servant and ruler it means master in the sense of the old fashioned word for a school teacher we used to talk about school masters and school mistresses and the one who was in charge of all the others was the head master from which we get the term or head mistress and so on so that's the sense of it be not many masters do not seek many of you all of you to be teachers right away or teachers in congregations or whatever knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation why is there greater condemnation condemnation for those who teach it means that we will be judged more stringently because each of us having a responsibility and I don't just mean each of us who may be the teaching elder or the minister in any given place but each of us as a Christian will be responsible for the influence or for the witness or the teaching that our life that our speech gives to others the reason that some teach and others perhaps learn is because as we'll see in the context in a moment these are they who may either have been gifted or set apart from the Lord for that purpose or those who are reasonably mature in the faith and everybody sooner or later becomes more mature in the faith than somebody else

I still remember and I've used this illustration before so apologies for it and I remember my first day in primary two at school and having spent an entire year as the littlest class of the tiniest people in a huge big school and everybody was older than us finding to my amazement on the first day of primary two there was a little class of primary ones that came in under us and we were big children by comparison and they were weirder than us there was somebody that we were bigger than and this was just amazing it was fantastic we're people we could talk down to instead of being the bottom of the heap we were one up and of course that just continues as you go through school more and more people come in under you you become more and more senior but of course as the teachers would always tell you as you become more senior in the school you're expected to exercise an example and to show the younger children how they ought to behave to an extent it's like that in the faith it's not so much to do with the years that we are whether we're 80 or 60 or 20 or whatever our age may be it's more to do with how mature we are how far we've gone in the faith brethren be not many masters knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation those who have the responsibility to teach or lead others which sooner or later and somewhere along the line we all have that responsibility because we may well be the only Christian in our workplace or in our family or amongst our circle of friends others may for all we know subsequently come to the faith and if and when they do we may have been the only Christian with whom they interact to begin with they will take their example of what a Christian looks like sounds like behaves like from what they see their Christian friend or colleague or family member doing therefore we are even unconsciously teaching others not only what we believe but how we live it out it's one thing to talk the talk it's another thing to walk the walk and to live it out and the tongue of course has the power not only to say terrible things as well as good things but also can demonstrate all too easily a horrific inconsistency whereby we can be sweetness and light in church or on the Lord's

Day or in a Christian gathering and then go outside at the car park and gossip our little lives away or else seek to slander somebody's reputation or criticize somebody with a narcy spirit or whatever and we bring forth as James says further on in the chapter both bitter water and sweet from the same phantom so be not many masters don't seek many to be teachers the reason that the apostle James is saying this is because as Paul points out elsewhere the teachers that they had in the church who had a huge responsibility after the apostles and prophets they tended to move around the different churches they planted churches and then they moved on and the responsibility for staying in one place and building up the church rested on or fell to the teachers the teaching elders and the elders themselves and this is what means by masters means teachers now of course not everybody would necessarily have taught faithfully or well

Paul speaks about those who perhaps shouldn't have been teachers or perhaps didn't teach as they ought 1st Timothy chapter 1 verse 5 the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart and of a good conscience and of faith and faith from which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling desiring to be teachers of the law understanding neither what they say nor will they affirm teaching they really don't believe or they don't know or they don't understand themselves but they just want the position of teaching others now of course that can happen in any age in the church that people may be in a position of teaching or preaching but they don't actually believe they don't actually believe the stuff that they're meant to be meant to be speaking and of course to turn a couple of pages in Timothy 2nd Timothy chapter 4 Paul warns Timothy that this will happen in subsequent years chapter 4 verse 3 for the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine that after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers having itching ears and they shall turn away their ears from the truth and shall be turned unto fables but there were those who would just tell them whatever they wanted to hear they've got itching ears let's scratch that itch let's tell you what you want to hear let's tell you that yeah it's good to just follow the way of the world let's just pretend that all the particular social trends nowadays in all the different countries of the world this is good this is positive

God agrees with this even though his word says something different but no he's a loving God he wants to affirm us in everything we choose to do he doesn't believe in sin anymore or if he does then it's certainly not you that it applies to and so on having itching ears they shall turn away their ears from the truth and shall be turned unto fables something that suits them better than the truth as it is in Christ Jesus in Romans chapter 2 Paul mentions to the Jews at Roman the reason he focuses his attention upon the Jews there is not because he's being anti-Semitic he's a Jewish person himself but rather because in the Christian context remember that when Gentiles converted to Christianity they were coming from Greek paganism they were coming from something completely alien so when they converted and joined the church they were mixing Jews and Gentiles together in an environment in which the Jewish believers would have a ready-made advantage because they would have been steeped in the

[ 9 : 01 ] Old Testament scriptures they knew about the prophets they knew about the law they knew about the background into which Jesus had been speaking so they had if you like a ready-made advantage so often those who would be teachers in these mixed congregations would tend to be Jewish believers for obvious reasons they had the background they had their knowledge they were already equipped as it were with half of the tools that people would need so he says in Romans chapter 2 behold thou art called a Jew and retest in the law and makest thy boast of God and knowest his will and approve of things that are more excellent being instructed out of the law and art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind a light of them which are in darkness an instructor of the foolish a teacher of babes which has the form of knowledge and of the truth of the law and this is the bit that he's coming on and says that's fine you're teaching all these things but thou therefore which teachest another teachest thou not thyself thou that preachest a man should not steal dost thou steal thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery dost thou commit adultery thou that abhorrest idols dost thou commit sacrilege thou that makest I boast of the law through breaking the law dishonest thou

God this is the problem that every one who is to teach or witness the gospel of Christ must face that our witness our walk our life has to be consistent not only with what we believe in our heart but with what we speak outwardly now James is not advocating oh the tongue is a really dangerous thing you should just seal up your lips and become a travest monk and never say a word that way you won't do anything wrong but you will because God is giving you your tongue for a purpose it's there to be used it's meant to be used it's you know if people had for example an armed forces to defend the country and you inspected the armed forces and there was the aircraft carriers sort of rusting in the port and all the personnel just sitting around playing cards whatever they were getting flabby they weren't keeping fit their equipment was all getting rusty and dirty and so on they've got it all but they're just not using it so it's decaying and it's the same with the tongue it has been given to us to do good with it's meant to do good it's meant to praise the Lord it's meant to serve the Lord it's meant to speak good it's meant to speak truth and words of kindness and encouragement and perhaps rebuke at times it has to be faithful to the Lord who has created it and this is the thing that James is saying here don't all of you seek to be teachers because whoever's going to teach is going to be judged more stringently we shall receive the greater condemnation but the point here is don't just oh I've had an ordinary person in the pews

I'm fine no you're not because you should be a witness a teaching example to those around you in your daily life not all of them are going to be Christians you might be the only Christian in the place as we say so you will be effectively more senior in the faith than anybody else because you're the only one if anybody subsequently converts you'll be more senior than a Christian than they are you'll be the primary two to their primary one they will look to you for wisdom for example for guidance because you're more senior in the faith than they are we all have to become teachers to some extent to those who become believers after us they look to us because they expect that we who have walked longer in the faith will have more knowledge of it more experience of it more ability in it acquired over the years they look to us and you may think oh well I'm just a child in the faith I'm just so helpless and weak and what can I do and so on you can't do anything but the

Lord can do anything he wants through you in many things we offend all and when it says offend the word means we slip up we fail it's the sense of a banana skin you know it's not maybe a deliberate way of transgressing but it's a slip up that's the sense we offend all of us it doesn't mean we offend everybody it means all of us offend all of us slip up all of us fail if any man offend not in word the same as a perfect man unable to bridle the whole body it doesn't mean sinless the word perfect it means fitted for the purpose if you're able to control your tongue then you'll be able to control the rest of your body and your actions and so on focus on that little thing sounds easy to do but it's not an easy thing to do behold we put bits in the horse's mouths that they may obey us turn the ships on a tiny little helm and so on and of course that helm as somebody's pointed out of course if you think of a rudder on a ship you think of a huge ship perhaps but it will be turned by a rudder and it will be turned ever so slightly you don't you don't turn it violently so the ship will start to keel over you have to do it gently and it turns gradually modern day example of course we can say you think of the steering wheel in the car

I was always amazed to me why when I was a wee boy and I'd sit in the back seat and watch my dad how the steering wheel it would always move slightly you know as he turned it but it didn't go this way or this way we sat behind the car as little child we did this but of course nobody drives like that he'd go all over the road but if you see an adult driver they're always moving it slightly just a little bit and only when they're turning a corner do they really turn it hard it's always just being adjusted keep the car just on the straight and now on the road it's a tiny little movement on the wheel and yet that is arguably the most one of the most important pieces of equipment in the entire car you turn it gradually and so likewise the tongue you use it gently use it carefully the ships likewise the tongue is under to the member and boast of great things behold how great a matter a little fire can lift now of course the Jews would be familiar with and the first century Christians would be familiar with the fact in Palestine and many dry countries where the shrub and the stubble and so on becomes tender dry in the dry season and a little spark can just start it off we know ourselves like you know heather burning moor burning and so on once the fire is going you haven't really got an awful lot of control over it but in our climate you know it's comparatively a moist climate you know if a fire is raging a fair chance it's going to rain the next day to put it out you don't have that in Palestine so if it's dry it's tender dry all the shrubbery all the grass all the dry tundra and so on that's just going to rage right across the plain and there's nothing you can do to stop it and it starts from a little tiny spark we know ourselves in forest fires in our own countries or in Australia whatever it starts sometimes with what somebody throwing away a cigarette now a cigarette you know the tiny little glowing orange end of it it's a tiny minute it's not even an open proper flame it's just this tiny little orange glow and you can start a whole forest fire through it and we know ourselves how much damage can be done by the tongue how much damage can be done by what we speak

[ 16 : 33 ] I suppose we could translate that into modern terms now in terms of how much damage we can do at our keyboard just sitting there and typing away into cyberspace especially when so much that people contribute now to the internet can be anonymous and yet we have the internet is replete with what are called trolls people who will just write nasty stuff out there attacking people they don't even know and saying terrible things about them and perhaps making people suicidal or cyber bullying or whatever and it's the same principles the use of the tongue even if it may not be physically spoken at the time to the person right there with the tongue you can somebody once said in ancient times a tongue although if somebody attacks you with a weapon they're right there you can defend yourself but the tongue is like an arrow shot from a distance because you can say something about somebody a hundred miles away and they can still be damaged by it and still be hurt by it the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things behold how great a matter a little fire can lift and the tongue is a fire a world of iniquity now the word translated world there means cosmos it implies the fallen world the unbelieving world a world that is hostile to God and the tongue by its nature desires to speak that just which it feels sometimes we speak things before we even think about it they're out because that's how we feel that's what we want to say and then we think oh I shouldn't have said that but it's out before we know it and it's part of this world that is hostile to God part of the nature of cosmos the world of iniquity so is the tongue among our members it defileth the whole body and setteth on fire the course of nature and it is set on fire now when it says the course of nature the sense there is of a wheel going round and round of the way that nature you know if you infect one bit then it brings it all the way round to infect the whole thing it's like again if you think of a vehicle if it goes through a whole pile of mud or something worse then it doesn't just stay on the bit that hits it it goes right round the wheel and it wraps its way right round the whole wheel and spreads up into the whole hub and so on and the archway so anything it touches it infects the whole the whole course of nature the cycle of nature the wheel of nature is the sense there and it is set on fire of hell words are powerful things particularly in the mouths or the lips of those who may be in a position of authority it is one reason why those of us who are ministers or teaching elders have to make sure that everything we say is anchored in the word of God so that if anybody were to come back and say well actually you know

I didn't quite understand that that you said to my mind the Bible seems to say this but you took a different take on that could you explain that to me and not say oh well if you don't want to agree with me that's up to you you know but I think it's this and after all I've been trained to teach and so who do you think you are you can't do that because it's if it's what the word of God says then it's not about me it's not about the person it's not about the man it never can be our only purpose any of our purposes is to make known the word of God it's like the amplifier you plug it in to play your music or whatever the music itself will not change but the amplifier makes it louder spreads it out to more people but the amplifier can't actually change the record or the CD or whatever it is that's been downloaded it can't actually choose the music it can't change the content of the music it can only amplify it or not as the case may be and so likewise the mouthpiece that the Lord may choose to set in any place hasn't got the authority to just make it up as he pleases hasn't got the authority to say this is my interpretation therefore it's right unless he can back it up and say because this is what the word of God actually says this is what it says and this is what we should do it's not the case of

I say it so it must be right somebody else may take a different view but if their view isn't consistent with scripture or if my view isn't consistent with scripture then we have to go by the word of God because our words are powerful things most people will take first of all what they hear spoken and then only perhaps will measure it up against the actual evidence or the actual content Jesus said of course Matthew 12 verse 36 I say unto you that every idle word that men shall speak they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment for by thy words thou shalt be justified and by thy words thou shalt be condemned be not many masters knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation our words will be judged more narrowly more precisely God of 25 we read by long forbearing as a prince persuaded and a soft tongue breaketh the bone the power of words but again if we go just a couple of chapters earlier we see in chapter 16 we see about the power of the burning tongue an ungodly man diggeth up evil chapter 16 verse 27 of Proverbs and in his lips there is a burning fire this is the power of the tongue this is what it has to be controlled by every kind of beast and of birds and of serpents and of things in the sea is tamed and hath been tamed of mankind but the tongue can no man tame it is an unruly evil full of deadly poison potentially so potentially full of deadly poison therewith bless we God even the Father therewith curse we men which are made after the similitude of God now the reason he said bless we God that a devout Jew had certain prayers he was meant to pronounce

I think it was three times a day and it always began with the prayers were blessed be thou O God who does this or that and the next thing blessed be thou O God and therewith bless we God God wants to be blessed by the devout in every age in every place we bless God with our tongues that's what they're meant for if we have to if we have to disagree or to point out error in somebody than it can only ever be that the brother or sister or person look this is what God's word says and this is how we should be therefore if our walk is not consistent with that then we should be bringing it into line with that it's not I'm saying to you you should do this therefore you should do it you take a different view you must be wrong we have to in all humility seek to conform our life our witness our walk into line with what God has revealed in his word and our tongues are simply to be used to live that out to witness that out to further that cause and it must always be consistent with that or else it's just our own battle it's just our own manly opinions the tongue can no man think it is an unruly evil yes the sense of it being chaotic but it has the power to do good you know as we said the solution is not simply to bite your tongue and say nothing the solution is to use your tongue for that which is right that which is good that which is

God honouring now obviously it follows that somebody who claims to be a Christian ought not to be using profanity they ought not to be using swear words even if they're avoiding blaspheming they should be avoiding uncleanness in their speech they should be avoiding undue anger or cursing or you know bitterness in their speech their speech their life their living is that which believe you me people will see they will see it they will witness it and if it simply confirms their own prejudices about Christians then it gives them more than an excuse to be hardened in their own unbelief now your witness may not convert them but they may be compelled to say well of course I don't agree with what so and so does but you know you can't deny that they're a consistent witness they're faithful to what they believe credit to them for that I don't believe it myself but they believe it that's fine if that's the most you can do it's only God who can convert a soul but don't let your witness your walk your speech be that which will give any support or ammunition to the evil one the tongue must be changed like all the rest of our lives it must be changed those who deal with addicts with those who then alcoholics or drug addicts or whatever they say you know where so much of their life before has been concerned focused upon simply getting the next fix their whole life is about say getting the money together to be able to get their next hit to find their dealer or the person who supplies their alcohol their drugs or whatever then they get their fix and then they're just out of it for the next wee while and then they're coming down off it and then the next thing is getting the next fix and that's all they're bothering about that's all their life is it's getting the next fix and so when they come off and if they are able to be free from that addiction it's not just the addiction itself which has to be dealt with suddenly what do I do with my life here I am sitting in the house twiddling my thumbs before I had a purpose

[ 26 : 42 ] I had to get to my dealer I had to get money I had to get the fix I had to get the thing I needed what do I do now what am I meant to do with my time and then they sort of get bored and then they oh no I'm going back to my old life so if the person is going to be free of their old addiction it's not just enough to take that single thing out and leave everything else in place they're going to need a whole new life they have to focus on say well now you're not addicted you can go on exercise you can get a job you can work you can drink water instead of drinking alcohol drink coffee or whatever instead of anything you drank before you focus on filling your life now with that which is positive different new helpful to you that which will benefit you your life has to change not just remove the single item from its pigeon hole not just remove the addiction it's not enough for us just to say I'm just going to bite my tongue that's it now I won't say another bad word your life has to change and your life is only going to change when it becomes centred now not in self but in Christ and when our life is centred in Christ then all else flows out from that we do our job no longer simply just to earn money to pay the bills but we do our job as a means of glorifying him it doesn't matter if your job is cleaning the sewers you clean them to the best of your ability you recognize how this is helping your fellow men and women you clean it out you do the best you can you make the knowledge that everything you're gathering potentially can be fertilized or somewhere else and you think well they're good and you positively do your employment to the best of your ability because you serve the Lord when you do what you do to the best of your ability you're giving your best for the Lord as though it were unto him as though it were for him you're scrubbing a step or peeling potatoes or whatever it might be you give it your best because you're doing it as unto him everything you do you're doing as a Christian now everything you do you're doing with Christ at the heart of it everything you speak you speak as a Christian everything that comes out of your mouth does so in the knowledge that everybody knows you're a follower of Jesus it is to give your life a whole new centre and focus and purpose it's not just that you take the addiction the old addiction of the world of flesh and the devil out of its pigeonhole the whole focus and identity of your life has to change it's no use for us to say out of the mouth say in mouth proceed blessing and blessing that's just only this my brethren these things ought not so to be it ought not to be this way a fountain cannot send forth salt water and sweet if a tree is seen which has different kinds of fruits on it it may be theoretically possible to take other fruits to take an apple tree and stick them in to an orange tree and bind them on to oranges and apples on the same tree but one of them is going to be fake while one of those kinds of fruit is not going to be the true fruit of the tree likewise we can dress in whatever clothes we like and we can present an image or a different person from what we are or even a different gender from what we are but something is going to be true and something is going to be false the fruit of the tree is going to be one or the other either the fountain is going to send forth sweet water or bitter either the tree is going to be an apple tree or an orange tree or an olive tree and you can graft in other fruits artificially but it's going to be seen to be artificial sooner or later you can be perhaps a worldling who looks and



sounds like they might be a Christian or you might be a Christian who is a bit careless about the things they say and comes out with things they shouldn't but one of these two is real and the other is what ought not to be and if you are a follower of Christ it ought not to be that things which come out of your mouth will defile or in any way depart from the teachings of the Lord will any way be a bad witness if you have bitter envy and strife in your hearts glory not and lie not against the truth things can become corrupted the word that is translated as strife it originally was a word that meant spinning for money it was a word you know a servant girl or a woman that would spin and yarn for money just as you might hire men to shear your sheep you know in the olden times you hire men to shear your sheep and then you pay them when they've done the job and they go away again you don't have them all the time so you would hire women to spin your wool afterwards so it's somebody who spin the spinning for hire is the original word and then it came to mean any work that was done for pay and then it came to mean something that was done purely for a monetary gain mercenary in other words and then it became again evolved into say in public life or in politics somebody who simply was in it for what they could get out of it and that's the sense in which strife is translated here against self seeking gain ambition in your hearts if that's the case glory not and lie not against the truth this wisdom this end if not from above but is earthly sensual in the sense of animalistic we're no better than the beasts if all we want is to gratify ourselves ultimately it's not of the lord so who is it of it's of the devil but where envy and strife is there is confusion that's in the sense of unbounded anarchy in the sense there envy and strife is the confusion every evil work but the wisdom that is from above is first pure then peaceable gentle and easy to be entreated now the word translated gentle it means the sense of going beyond the law beyond the letter of the law it's a sense of where somebody may be giving a decision but they recognize that to apply the strict letter of the law would itself in fact produce an injustice you get the sense here that if you apply the letter of the law strictly then justice this isn't actually going to be done so you have to go beyond that and that's the sense of the gentleness here of going beyond the law of not requiring the letter but rather the spirit and easy to be entreated entreated means they can be pled with they are gentle they are merciful full of mercy and good fruits without partiality without hypocrisy and the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace now you see what he's finishing up with here the wisdom that is from above if you're going to have wisdom contrasting with verse 15 the wisdom of this world which descends it doesn't come from above earthly central devilish how can you teach unless what you're going to teach is coming from somewhere other than yourself it's got to be coming from above it's got to be that which is the truth of God and if it is going to be the wisdom of God the truth of God then it cannot be conveyed in a manner that is harsh and brutal and unloving and uncaity it's got to be the truth of God yes but it's going to be put with that gentleness that recognizes the sinfulness of each of us the failures of each of us verse 2 again for in many things we all offend we all fail where every one of us

sinner that doesn't mean we just say oh well so what's the use we all fail so why bother but rather it means because we are all fellow sinners we all have to take this journey together and we all have to dispense the witness the teaching the example as we would want it done to us this is the example of Jesus the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace psalm 97 verse 11 we write his soul for the righteous and gladness for the upright in heart now something for us to remember that that which is sown does not immediately produce a harvest sowing and seed time is not the same as a vending machine where you put in your coin you push the bottom out comes your can of coke or your marge bar whatever it may be if you are sowing seed and sowing like it's going to stay under the soil and there's not going to be any immediate obvious impact or harvest perhaps for once but the fruit that it will bear will be a harvest rich and blessed and plentiful the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace because that's what the spirit of

God produces that's what it should produce in your heart that's what should flow out into your life and that's what it means when it talks about verse 13 a good conversation it doesn't just mean what you speak although we're talking about the tongue so what you speak is important as well but it means a life a witness your conversation your walk and all of it has to be consistent and all of us are in a situation where we will at times be the only Christian in a room or the only Christian in a family or the only Christian in the workplace or the only Christian in some position or other and then we are the ones who by our life witness speech and example must teach others it's not something we should seek out of being ambition it's a responsibility it's a heavy one and the Lord will require it of us but we have been given the means the opportunity the witness and the time use it wisely and use it well and use it for the glory of God because that's what it is given for and that's what we are designed for in the first place and that's who to turn it to and it will be ■■■ since it's■■■ to be as ■■■■ if you think it's