

Text: James 3:1-12

Theme: Taming the Tongue

September 16, 2018

Suppose you wanted to tame a timber wolf? What would you need to do? How much work would it take and how long would it take? Could you simply walk up to it and talk to it or call it by name and expect it to follow? Taming any animal that has grown up in the wild is a challenging, if not impossible task. Likewise, James would tell us that taming the tongue is an even more challenging task. As we consider the words of our text, we focus on the challenge of taming the tongue.

I. Our Creator has given us the life-long task of taming the tongue. A. But why do we need to tame the tongue? 1. We need to tame the tongue because it's inherently evil. James describes the tongue as a "fire, a world of unrighteousness." How destructive is a fire? How much damage can it do in less than sixty minutes? James' choice of terms is very accurate and very useful because the tongue has the potential to be incredibly destructive. Worst of all, we were born with a problem tongue, with an untamed tongue. We can insist that at least ours isn't as bad as someone else's, but, the tongue is a problem, and it's a problem for each one of us.

2. We need to tame the tongue because it impacts every aspect of our lives. James uses the phrase, "staining the whole body." If you accidentally spill a cup of coffee on your shirt and toss it in the hamper for a week, will that stain ever come out? Our tongue is like that coffee stain. When it says what doesn't need to be said, when it reacts without thinking, when it's harsh instead of kind, it ruins the rest of us. What someone says and how they say it provides an infinite amount of information about that person. In simple terms, we are what our tongue speaks. If you want to know someone, just listen. Their tongue is an amazing teacher.

3 We need to tame the tongue because it has a direct impact on the rest of our lives. Listen to the words from James, "setting on fire the entire course of life." How many times have you had a conversation with someone that, for whatever reason, was etched into your mind? What we say has a direct affect on what others think. It affects future conversations, relationships, you name it. With our words and tone, we create perception, a powerful perception, a memorable perception. We might think, "What harm can a few words do," but a few harsh words do exactly what James describes. They have the power to set the course of life for years to come.

B. Since the need is obvious, how do we tame the tongue? 1. We tame it by thinking before we speak. We know the old adage and it's quite accurate, "Engage brain before opening mouth." Before we speak, James says, "Ask yourself, 'Do I need to respond? If so, what's the most appropriate way for me to respond?'" If we asked that first question before we engaged our mouth, many words would never be spoken and many regrets would never be created. Before we open mouth and insert foot, we need to think. And as we think, we gain wisdom; we gain insight which will determine what we say, if we speak at all.

2. We tame the tongue by asking God to intervene. In our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah reminds us that the Lord helps us. God is waiting to help us in those moments when we need to ask, but forget to ask. When we react impulsively instead of reacting in love, God is waiting to show us a better way. What would happen in the next week if every person in Wisconsin asked God what to say before

they said it? The impact would be incredible! Whether everyone does it or not, James says, “Ask God first because when you ask first and then respond, you will respond in a better way, in a way that enables you to move closer to taming your tongue.”

3. We tame the tongue by harnessing its power. How much power does a 200 car train or a huge ocean tanker have? Each have incredible power, power that can be incredibly destructive. Yet, because we have learned to harness that power, to control that power, we use it to our benefit. The tongue, small as it may be, has far more power, yet when we harness that power, when we learn how to control that power, when we learn to be slow to speak and quick to listen, we’re able to use that power to our benefit. That’s our life goal, to learn to harness that power, to use that power when and how it needs to be used to give glory to our God.

4. We tame the tongue by praying for a stronger faith. Look at our Gospel lesson. The father, in his desperation, says to Jesus, “If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” Does Jesus snap His fingers and heal the child or wave His hands over the boy and magically heal him? He could have done either one, but instead, He uses the moment as a teaching moment as He says, “All things are possible for one who believes.” The power of faith. As we pray for a stronger faith, we pray that we can use that stronger faith to tame our tongue, to use our tongue to create less pain and more joy in our world.

5. We tame the tongue by choosing our battles. The words of Ecclesiastes are very fitting for the moment, “There is a time for everything. A time to speak and a time to remain silent.” Does every word spoken need a response? How many times did Jesus remain silent demonstrating ever so clearly that silence often has more power than words? When someone says something we don’t like or don’t agree with, our impulsive response is to speak. But Jesus says, “Choose your battles. Sometimes you need to speak and in those moments you need to speak the truth in love and other times? Other times, the best response is no response at all!”

6. We tame the tongue by investing in kindness. How many of you have ever gone to a financial advisor and said, “I’d like to invest in kindness?” Never happens, does it? Yet investing in kindness is one of the best investments you will ever make. When kindness is our motivation and our goal, our tongue will respond in like manner. Investing in kindness begins with respect, followed by making the effort which is followed by a plan for kindness. And finally, after choosing respect and planning, we put our plan into action. It may not be the way of the world, but it’s the way of Jesus and, therefore, it’s the right way and the best way.

7. Taming a white tail, a bear, or even a timber wolf would be far easier than taming the tongue. Even so, when we make the effort to tame the tongue, we make the effort to be who God created us to be, people who know the benefits of taming the tongue. Amen.