

THE UNBRIDLED TONGUE
JAMES 1:26
JAMES 3:1-12

INTRODUCTION:

The horse has been described as, "A half ton of raw power!" It is an incredibly powerful animal. It is able to carry large burdens, run at a relatively fast speed, and demonstrate unusual strength. Yet, this incredibly powerful animal when bridled can be a tremendous pleasure and useful instrument for its owner. But an unbridled horse can be a threat to everything that is good.

When James speaks of an "unbridled" tongue, he is referring to a tongue that is out of control. Like the unbridled horse, it goes wherever it desires to go and does what ever it desires to do. The unbridled tongue is a serious problem in society and indicates something seriously amiss in the life of the person to whom it belongs.

We want to take a careful look at what James has to say about the "unbridled tongue." It may well be there are several specimens of the unbridled tongue in this room where we are sitting now. They are sometimes found in the old as well as the young. They sometimes appear in men and women. They can

be found in the most unlikely of places. And according to James they may even be found in the mouth of a person who outwardly seems to be extremely religious.

Before you decide about your tongue as to whether its bridled or unbridled, lets look at these words from James.

I. THE UNBRIDLED TONGUE IS SMALL, BUT DANGEROUS.

James devotes a major part of a chapter to the problem of the unbridled tongue. He calls attention to both its smallness in the body, and its potential for danger.

1. Small things are often powerful.

In his counsel about the tongue James list a number of small things that exercise tremendous power. His first example is that of the bit in the mouth of the horse. As you probably know, the bit is actually a part of the bridle, the part that actually serves as an instrument of control for the horse. James also refers to the rudder of a ship. Compared with the size of the ship the rudder is a very small thing. Yet that small rudder will determine where the ship sails. It will guide the ship to the left or to the right. The whole massive

body of the ship is controlled by that little instrument called the rudder. The tongue is in the body like these other little things. While it is small, it exercises tremendous power. "Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boast. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark."

Your tongue in comparison with your arm is extremely small. But it is more powerful than your arm. Your tongue in comparison with your leg is very small. However, it has much more strength and power than your leg. So, any discussion we have about the tongue must be built upon this understanding—
—it is small but powerful.

2. The tongue can be like a little spark — it can start a deadly fire.

This is what James says, "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." A little spark of fire can appear to be so innocent, so small! However the hundreds of thousands of acres that have been burned across the west during this hot, dry summer are a reminder to us of what a little spark can do. Many of these fires were started by a small

spark. It may have been ignited by lighting or by some foolish act on the part of vacationer, but the result is the same. Hundreds of thousands of acres of land are parched by the fire that started with a little spark.

There is no way to overstate the harm that can be done by the little tongue. Chuck Swindol tells about a suicide note that simply read, "They said." The person never finished the statement. You wonder what they said! But whatever it was they said, it pushed that fragile person over the brink and they ended their lives. The tongue is so powerful and so dangerous!

A poet has written:

"The boneless tongue, so small and weak,
Can crush and kill," declares the Greek,
"The tongue destroys a greater horde,"
the Turk asserts, "Than does the sword."
"The Persian proverb wisely saith,
"A lengthy tongue — an early death!"
Or sometimes takes this form instead,
"Do not let your tongue cut off your head."
"The tongue can speak a word whose speed"

Say the Chinese, "Out strips the steed."
The Arab sages said in part,
"The tongue's great storehouse is the heart."
From Hebrew was the maximum sprung,
"Thy feet should slip, but ne'er the tongue."
The sacred writer crowns the whole,
"Who keeps the tongue doth keep his soul."

II. THE UNBRIDLED TONGUE IS A SIGN OF AN UNCHANGED HEART.

This is the first word from James about the tongue — "If any one considers himself religious, and yet does not keep a tight reign on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." Religion in this context means the outward forms that are used in a religious life. It is the things that we would ordinarily identify as religious practices. All of these religious practices are declared to be null and void if they are not accompanied by a bridled tongue.

1. The words of the tongue come from the heart.

James learned this from his older brother, Jesus. It was Jesus who said that man speaks out of his inmost being. It was Jesus who declared that what one hears coming out of the mouth is a good sign of what is in the heart. So, if the tongue is unbridled and spouts out words of gossip, words of hate and anger, words of unclean speech, words of malice, words of accusation, words of untruth, it is because the heart has not been changed. The religion is declared to be worthless because the heart has not been changed.

2. When God changes the heart, words of love come forth.

How can I be sure that my heart has been changed? What comes out of my mouth? What kind of speech does my tongue utter? If God has changed my heart, then it should be anticipated that there will come out of my heart words of love. These will be words of love and adoration for God. You should hear my tongue speaking kindly and gratefully the greatness and goodness of God. You should not hear my tongue railing at God because He has been unfair and unjust. You should hear my tongue speaking words of kindness and love toward others. The changed heart will have flowing through it the love of God.

3. When the heart is unchanged, all religious practices are worthless.

This word from James may frighten us a bit. We may not be as sure about our faith as we thought we were. Does James really mean this? Does he really mean that unbridled tongue means that all of my religious practices are worthless? Does he mean that my gifts that I give through the church are worthless if my tongue is unbridled? Does he mean that my deeds done by teaching a Sunday School Class are worthless? Does he mean that my prayers are worthless? The answer is an emphatic **YES!** If the words of the mouth are not expressing love for God and love for one's fellowman, it means the heart is unchanged. If the heart is unchanged then it is incapable of doing anything religious that will be pleasing to God. This is a frightening reality. What does this say to us about what we hear from each other in our day? What does it say about that person whose daily speech is interjected with one blasphemous, irreverent word after another? What does it say about the professing Christian whose mind and mouth is full of obscene and suggestive stories? What does this say about the person who regularly speaks hurtfully of others when they are not present? What does this say about the person who handles the reputation of their fellowman so carelessly with their words? It says that their religion may be absolutely worthless. It says they may be in need of a serious change in their hearts.

III. THE UNBRIDLED TONGUE CAN COME UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Most of what James says about the tongue in this context is negative. It would leave us with a sense of despair about our tongues. However, there is a good word to be said that is supported by the message of the scriptures.

How can I bring this little tongue under control? How can I make sure that my tongue does not invalidate every thing that I am professing as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Based on these words of James, there seems to be at least some counsel for us.

1. When we confess the sins of the unbridled tongue.

This is a good place to begin. This confession will usually involve the person that you have sinned against as well as God Himself. However, we should be warned that a simple confession of the sins of the tongue does not eliminate all of the damage that the tongue has done. There is the story that came out of the middle ages of the lady who went to the priest and confessed the sin of gossip. She was brokenhearted over this unkind and hurtful thing she had done. She asked the priest what she could do to make it right. The priest sent her off to find a bag of feathers. When she returned with the bag

of feathers, the priest pitched them up into the air. As the feathers went into the air, the wind caught them and scattered them all over the community.

The priest then turned to the woman and said, "Now, go and gather up all the feathers." But she exclaimed to the priest, "But sir, there is no way I can do that. They are scattered every where." And how right she was. There is no way you could regather the harm that you have done. But it will at least be a step in the right direction when you acknowledge the harm you have done to God and those you have harmed. That's the first step toward bringing your tongue under the control of the Holy Spirit.

2. When we acknowledge our inability to bridle the tongue.

This is a truth that James drove home forcefully. He said of the tongue, "All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." Are you ready to admit that about your tongue-- that you are not able to control it? In a article written some time ago by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin of the Synagogue of the Performing Arts of Los Angeles, we find these words about this problem: "Over the past decade, whenever I have lectured throughout the country on the powerful, and often negative impact of words, I have asked audiences if they can go for 24 hours

without saying any unkind word about, or to, anybody. Invariably, a minority of the listeners raise their hands signifying "yes." Some laugh, and quiet a large number call out "no!" The Rabbi continues, I respond by saying, those who cannot answer "yes" must recognize that you have a serious problem. If you cannot go for 24 hours without drinking liquor you are addicted to alcohol. If you cannot go 24 hours without smoking, you are addicted to nicotine. Similarly, if you cannot go for 24 hours without saying unkind words about others, then you have lost control over your tongue."

The Rabbi is right! Are you ready to admit to God and to yourself that you cannot control your tongue?

3. When we yield our whole body to the control of the Spirit.

James does not offer us a word of counsel here, but we find it in the scriptures. In the early section of the book of Acts we have a remarkable example of human lives being yielded to the Holy Spirit and the impact it had upon their tongues. On the day of Pentecost, the Christians were "filled with the Spirit." The first evidence that they were filled with the Spirit was that they began to speak with new tongues. Out of their inmost being and through their tongues begin to flow words of praise to God and words of

loving witness to their fellowman. God caused a cloven tongue of fire to set over the head of each of them. When the Holy Spirit is in control in your life, he will bring the unruly tongue under his control. When the tongue is under his control, it will be like that quarter ton horse that had been bridled. It will bring pleasure to God and blessings to its owner and to others.

Is there anyone here who will admit they have an unbridled tongue? Do you know anyone who has an unbridled tongue? If you have an unbridled tongue or others you know have an unbridled tongue, James is right! The secret of bridling the tongue is in bringing the heart and life under the control of the Holy Spirit through your faith in Him. Let me encourage you to take this practical step today.