

Runaway Tongue

Speech Therapy for Saints-Part One

James 3:1-5a

There is a common household plant used for decorative purposes called the dieffenbachia. It's known for its large attractive green leaves with shades of lime green and yellow. What many people aren't aware of is that its leaves are somewhat toxic. If a child or animal were to chew on one of its leaves, their tongues would temporarily swell up, causing an inability to speak. Because of that fact, the dieffenbachia has the nickname "dumb cane"—the effects of its leaves prevent someone from speaking.

Following the service the ushers are going to hand everyone several leaves to use in case of an emergency. Perhaps we should all own a plant or two.

Experts in the field of speech estimate that the average person creates 12,000 sentences composed of 50,000 words every day. If that were put into print, it would be a paperback edition of around 150 pages. I doubt any of us would want to read that at the end of the day.

If we had a tape recorder that followed you around this past week and recorded everything you said how many would want it played back in public?

By the way, a tape recorder is a small plastic black box that plays things called cassettes. It now lives in the land of typewriters and 8-track tapes.

J. Vernon McGee, the former Bible Teacher with that strong Texas accent said, "It takes a baby two years to learn how to talk and then fifty years to learn how to keep quiet."¹

The truth is we never quite get it under control. Yet it remains one of the greatest gifts given by God to mankind.

The Bible refers to its power to heal, encourage, edify, teach, support, exhort, sing, pray, and praise, but this little two-ounce slab of muscle and nerve can also commit the opposite effects.

The first temptation came from the words of the serpent. The first sin after the fall of Adam and Eve was the sin of wrong speech; Adam accused God of being at fault for his sin by giving him Eve as his wife, and it's gone downhill from there.

The Bible describes the power of speech to corrupt, pervert, flatter, slander, gossip, blaspheme, complain, curse, seduce, destroy and lead astray . . . and that's just for starters.

Every time I go to the doctor, the first thing they look at is the tongue because in the physical realm, the tongue often reveals the symptoms of deeper issues. The same is true in the spiritual realm. The tongue is nothing more than a little tattle-tail . . .² and didn't you get mad at Tattle-tails?

In my home, my parents had consequences for my three brothers and me if we ever got a spanking at school—that's right, a spanking at school—which dates me with to the Patriarchs.

One of the rules was, if we got a spanking at school, we automatically got a spanking at home. They just assumed the school was right. Can you image a time where parents automatically sided with the teacher rather than the student? What kind of world was that?

Well, one afternoon, I was taken by my 4th grade teacher up the steps to the Library where a spanking was to take place. She had evidently not fully developed the fruit of the spirit which is patience.

The bigger problem was my older brother saw me going up there, and he automatically knew why (it wasn't to check out books). On the bus ride home I pled with him, and he promised me he wouldn't tattle.

You see my school didn't automatically tell the parents about the spanking, and so the possibility existed that my parents would never find out. That was at the top of my prayer list.

At the dinner table that night, my older brother Danny blurted out, "Stevie has something to tell you." I claimed to have nothing to share except my testimony. That led to a phone call to my teacher . . . which led to the truth . . . which led to the great tribulation . . . and there was no rapture in sight.

You see, my parents had another rule—if you got a spanking at school and didn't confess it at home by yourself, you got a spanking from each parent. They learned that from Hitler. I got three spankings that day, which was actually a good day compared to some others.

Listen, nobody likes a tattle-tail, but the tattle-tail isn't the problem.

The tongue is simply the messenger that delivers the mail composed by the heart. The tongue is the tattle-tail of the heart. That's because the tongue and the heart are directly connected.

Solomon wrote, "***A wise man's heart guides his mouth.***" (*Proverbs 16:23*)

Jesus Christ said in *Luke 6:45*, "***Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.***"

That's why we all have the same speech impediment . . . it is called sin. And nowhere is our sin put on display more than in our speech.

So it is no surprise that the letter from James turns to the subject of speech as he explores this issue of spiritual maturity.

Most, if not all, of chapter three reveals the fact that every Christian—with no exception—is in desperate need of speech therapy.

James begins the discussion with a very serious prohibition.

1. A Serious Caution

Notice *verse 1*. ***Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.***

This is actually an imperative you could paraphrase, "Don't be so quick to become a teacher".

I believe James is specifically relating this caution to teaching Biblical truth, but his caution could certainly apply to contexts outside the church.

Why is teaching under such scrutiny? Because a teacher deals in words—his instrument is speech—his agent is the tongue by which he fashions his lesson and thereby influences lives.

Teachers deal with words, concepts, ideas, and doctrines that will influence and shape the thinking of those under their charge.

Let me back up for a minute or two and expound on the problem that I believe James was addressing.

The word for "teacher" here is *didaskalos* (διδασκαλος) and it comes out of the context of the Jewish synagogue and it carried with it a great deal of admiration. The New Testament teachers and pastors were in some ways inheriting the legacy and heritage of the Rabbi.

The Rabbi was a Jewish teacher who studied the law and its application to life and was engaged in teaching others.ⁱⁱⁱ It was the most highly influential position in the Synagogue if not the entire Jewish Community—second to that of the Jewish Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin.

One Old Testament scholar said that the Rabbi was treated in a way that was liable to ruin the character of any man. The very name literally meant, "Great one, or "My great one."^{iv} Everywhere he went people were effectively saying, "Hello, Great one . . . How are you, Great one," which in our vernacular would be tantamount to saying, "You're the greatest!" That would ruin just about anybody!

In fact, during the lifetime of James, it was held that a man's duty to his Rabbi exceeded his duty to his parents because his parents only brought him into the life of this world but his teacher brought him into the life of the world to come.^v

In fact, if a person's parents and their teacher were captured by an enemy and held for ransom, it was held that the teacher was to be ransomed first.^{vi}

So now you move from the synagogue into the life of the developing church for the believers. James is at the beginning days of this transition.

Teachers no longer had to be Rabbi's. They weren't required to have the training to teach and speak from the floor of the Christian assembly. There was the temptation of admiration and respect, and the fact that the synagogue had an open platform policy for visiting teachers—Paul took advantage of this himself. That open platform policy for teachers opened the door for self-appointed, selfishly motivated individuals to make a rush for the platform.

James says, “Hold on . . . you want the platform? You want the position? Don't forget the penalty.”

You want respect? Have you considered the responsibility?

Have you taken on the role because you want admiration? Don't overlook the coming day of accountability.

Paul would later challenge Timothy to work hard in the word, handling it – interpreting it accurately (2 Timothy 2:15).

So James says—look there again at verse 1—***Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.***

That's future tense—we will in the future incur a stricter judgment.

James is referring to the Bema Seat, the Judgment Seat of Christ, before which every believer will stand one day, not to determine if we'll get into the Kingdom, but to determine where we'll serve in the Kingdom.

The unbelievers will all be judged at the Great White Throne before being cast eternally in the lake of fire – ***Revelation chapter 20.***

The believer will be judged at the Judgment seat of Christ, a judgment that basically involves an evaluation of our works – ***2 Corinthians 5:10.*** And James delivers the news that teachers will be judged by a higher standard.

Pastors,
Youth Leaders,
Sunday School Teachers,
Adult Teachers,
Bible Study Leaders,
Itinerate Preachers,
Missionaries who handle the word,
Bible Conference Speakers,
Christian Counselors,
Small Group Leaders,

Basically anyone who served the word of God to others and communicated it's truths to students are going to get a double dose, a closer look, a stricter judgment. Every word will be judged not only for its delivery, but its accuracy, effect, tone and spirit, motive, and its influence.

Do you know what this means? It means that teaching, especially as it relates to spiritual things, happens to be the most dangerous activity on the planet.

I really appreciate the fact that James changes the pronoun in verse one to 1st person plural. Did you notice the word in verse one? ***We will incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways.***

James isn't just saying, “You guys out there are in for it.” No, “*we* are held to a higher accountability—*we* who teach.” James is saying, “I'm in this too.”

So am I! I'm not just preaching this to you who teach, I'm preaching to myself. I am even now potentially indicting myself— this is especially dangerous for me too.

Maybe you're out there thinking, “I was just about to volunteer to teach 3rd graders . . . I was thinking about volunteering to teach an ABF.” Maybe you just signed up to teach a ladies Bible study or become a small group leader or you're at Shepherds seminary preparing for vocational ministry, go ahead! James is not trying to shut down the recruitment office. He's simply delivering a very serious caution.

Be careful . . . don't come unprepared . . . don't treat it lightly . . . don't enter into it for yourself . . . live for the benefit of your students . . . resist the accolades . . . remember you are a clay pot . . . fear and pray not to lead your students astray.

There is a final exam for teachers. How's that for irony? Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd is going to do the grading. He will determine and reward that which was indeed accurate, spiritually minded, beneficial, edifying, courageously true, and God-honoring.

You see, no one makes a mad rush for the stage if they understand the gravity of the coming Bema Seat and it's evaluation of our speech.

The Scottish Reformer John Knox was so awed and burdened by the responsibility to declare God's word faithfully that when he stood at the pulpit to preach his first sermon, he broke into tears and wept uncontrollably and had to be escorted from the pulpit until he could compose himself.

Now following this serious caution is a rather surprising admission. James now applies his comments to not only teachers, but the entire congregation of believers.

2. A Surprising Admission

Notice *verse 2*. ***For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.*** Notice again James personal inclusion in this admission. ***For we all stumble.***

Thank you James! I would have expected Apostles to have it nailed down. I had no idea that a best-selling Christian leader like you, James, would have the same problem I have, especially regarding speech, so that's actually encouraging. Job had the same problem—for as God confronted him for his words, Job said, ***"I am unworthy, what can I reply to You? I put my hand over my mouth."*** (Job 40:4)

Isaiah was as faithful a servant of God as any prophet, yet when he encountered the living God he said, ***"I am a man of unclean lips."*** (Isaiah 6:5)

Rash words came from the lips of Moses (Psalm 106 records).

The Apostle Peter periodically opened his mouth only to change feet. He made an incredibly noble and passionate resolution – ***These will all fall away from you, Lord, but I never will.*** (Matthew 26:33)

Eusebius, the first church historian writes that James was nicknamed, "The Just" because of his great virtue.^{vii} James writes, ***"For we all stumble"***—and would you note he does not say *for we all fatally fall*.

The word "stumble" means to slip up in what we say, and James uses the present tense which means the experience of stumbling occurs over and over again.^{viii}

Does that surprise you? Are you out there thinking, "Certainly you're not talking about me . . . I'm not always slipping up with my words." Ask your wife if this applies to you – she'll tell you your name is written all over it!

Now would you notice that James writes, ***"We all stumble in many . . . and the translator offers the word, "ways" . . . we all stumble in many ways."***

It could just have easily been translated, *"We all stumble in many words."* In fact, James

goes on to write, ***"If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man."***

There's that word *perfect* again. Keep in mind this word *teleios* (τελειος) which refers to maturing in progress not arriving at perfection.

James is simply saying that progress is revealed by that tattle-tail that lives in our mouths.

Thomas Manton, a Puritan who wrote and preached in the early 1600's shed light on this concept in his commentary on James, which I am enjoying. He wrote, in the Jewish discipline there were two categories of student: **beginners** [those who've begun their Christian walk and experiment in virtuous actions] and the **perfect** [these were they who had attained some progress in their instruction].

Manton goes on to say that this verse then could be read, "Anyone who bridles his tongue is not a beginner, one who is experimenting in virtue, but a perfect person, one who has made some progress."^{ix}

Isn't that the challenge? About the time you think you made progress, you slip up. One author commented 'why is the Christian path so littered with orange peel?'

Can I show you by implication that James felt the same way? This is, in my view, the proper attitude of the progressing. I've already pointed out that James used the 1st person plural pronoun to include himself—***verse 1-we will incur a stricter judgment; verse 2- we all stumble in many ways.***

But now, as James describes the perfect, that is, progressing maturing believer, he switches the pronoun in the middle of the verse.

Look again at ***verse 2. For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man.***

James holds up the standard for us to pursue while at the same time encouraging us with the subtle implication that he's with us and none of us are there yet, which is a mark of a genuinely maturing believer.

I have been privileged in this ministry to be around some very godly, mature saints who've served Christ for 40, 50, 60, years, some of which come to speak in the summer. Every one of them does the same thing James just did; they classify themselves in our conversation, not as those who've arrived but as beginners who have so much to learn.

So don't give up . . . keep going . . . slipping . . . stumbling . . . starting again.

The Christian life of maturity is nothing more than a series of new starts.

Keep in mind you are not pursuing perfection, you are making progress. So don't *give up* and don't *let up* either. James is giving none of us a free pass.

He's been challenging the very core of our actions and thoughts, and he's attacked our prejudices and our partiality; he's challenged our response to trials and our view of temptation. He has called into question the sincerity of our faith by the presence of works.

Now he's signed us up in a course that challenges our speech, and on this subject James is going to spend the most time.

James writes in *verse 2* – look there one more time; ***If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.***

In other words, you bridle the tongue, you can bridle the body. What does he mean?

Think of it this way:

- A man who runs the marathon can run around his house;
- A professional golfer can handle a 2 foot putt – most of the time^x
- A surgeon can take out a splinter;
- A world-class chef can scramble eggs.

They've learned the hardest thing, so they can handle the easier thing.

James is saying that whenever you bridle the tongue everything else just got easier.

Now watch as James illustrates for us how powerful the tongue truly is. He uses two simple scenarios to illustrate the same truth.

3. Simple Illustrations

Notice *verse 3*. ***Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths, so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.***

In other words, if you can put an instrument of pressure in the right place and in the right hands, even if the instrument is a slender bit along with the rest of the bridle, we can turn the entire body of that massive horse.

Here's the amazing thing—that horse is still far more powerful than you are. The horse is still bigger and faster than you are.

Your only hope in getting a lift and gaining control of that magnificent animal is to slip that

bridle on and get the bit in his mouth. When you do, you can ride off into the sunset

In this analogy, the bit is your tongue – and your tongue controls your body.

Something *less* powerful is able to control something *more* powerful. The movement of this little tongue through speech can determine life's direction.

James gives another illustration in *verse 4*. ***Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.***

Again, compared to the size of the ship, the rudder seems like an afterthought. Yet, without it, that massive floating beast would be left to the mercy of the wind and the waves.

That little rudder literally makes a difference in whether or not the vessel is sea worthy or not. This is illustrated perfectly in World War II as the German battle ship—The Bismarck—was launched into battle with Great Britain.

The Bismarck was the pride of the German naval fleet, and it was destined to bring the British Navy to a watery grave.

As soon as the news was leaked, the British Navy sent their finest battleship—The Hood—with her 2,000 officers and sailors aboard to intercept the Bismarck and sink it.

Instead, when the two ships engaged, the Bismarck blew up and sank the Hood. The situation was desperate as the Bismarck could now impact the British sea-lanes which Great Britain depended upon for survival.

The British Admiralty scraped together a small fleet in hopes of catching the Bismarck before she could get back into port for refueling. One small aircraft carrier got close enough to let loose a few airplanes. One of them flew toward the Bismarck and was able to drop one torpedo in the water which sped toward the massive battleship.

One little torpedo wouldn't do much damage . . . but of all things that torpedo struck and jammed the rudder. Now, all this naval powerhouse could do was steam around in a big circle. British destroyers arrived that night and took up their positions and began to pummel the Bismarck as she continued her frustrated circle around and around.

All because of that little rudder that the pilot could no longer control, the Bismarck eventually blew up and sank beneath the waves of the sea.^{xi}

Look at the ships, James writes, though they are so great . . . they are directed by a very small rudder.

James goes on to write in verse 5, So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.

Little thoughts that are conceived in the heart and fashioned into words can direct your body which can effectively direct your entire life.

Think about it:

- Your tongue can sour your marriage or sweeten it;
- Your tongue can distance fellow workers and ruin your career or encourage and unify the team;
- Your tongue can accept an invitation that ruins your character or reject it and protect your personal integrity;
- Your tongue can defy God and lead you to eternal destruction or it can surrender to God which ultimately leads to eternal joy.

The tongue is so small . . . but it can lead your entire body and your life to ruin.

By the way, the key is not tongue control; in fact, in our next session we'll discover the amazing statement in *verse 8 that no man can tame the tongue*. You can't do it.

This isn't about tongue control, it is Spirit control. Both the bit and the rudder are similar illustrations in that they must be under the control of an expert horseman or an experienced pilot. You aren't either one . . . and neither am I.

No wonder David prayed **"Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips."** (*Psalm 141:3*) You do it Lord!

No wonder David wrote, **"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord. (Psalm 19:14)** You guard it Lord.

The Lord of your life is the only one strong enough and wise enough to be the Lord of your lips, your tongue, and your mouth.^{xii}

Let's wrap up our study with a couple of challenges from Thomas Manton, that Puritan pastor who took his congregation through the Book of James in the 1600's. I've rewritten them to bridge the gap between the 17th century and the 21st century, but their basic tone and text has been retained.

First, rebuke others all the more tenderly. We all need forgiveness and we all slip up along these same paths.

Second, depend upon God's grace all the earnestly. God wants you dependent and beholden to His power.

Third, magnify the love of God all the more gratefully. It isn't enough to stop saying things, but to begin saying things with thankfulness and happiness.

Finally, walk all the more cautiously. You carry a sinning heart within you; the man who has gunpowder with him should always be afraid of sparks.^{xiii}

Good words!

Right now, I'm mindful of the prayer of an old saint which needs to be the ready prayer on our own lips; "Oh Lord, fill my mouth with worthwhile stuff and nudge me when I've said enough."

I feel the nudge . . . I've said enough.

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- iv William Barclay, The Letters of James and Peter (Westminster Press, 1976), p. 81
- v Ibid
- vi Ibid
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- viii D. Edmond Hiebert, James (BMH Books, 1992), p. 188
- ix Manton, p. 182
- x Joseph M. Stowell, Tongue in Check (Victor Books, 1983), p. 14
- xi Phillips, p. 98
- xii Warren W. Wiersbe, James: Be Mature (Victor Books, 1979), p. 92
- xiii Adapted from Manton, p. 183