

A Belief that Behaves: A Subject that's in Everybody's Mouth

By Haddon Robinson

Our Father, we are grateful for the opportunity of studying your word. It is for us like food on the journey, like a lamp on the way. And we ask that as we look into the Word this morning, warning that your spirit might spell it out to us and help us to understand it in Jesus name, Amen.

Before I look at James, chapter three, I would like to express to you as symbolic of the whole student body how much I've enjoyed being here this week. I think that it's quite obvious that it takes two to make a class or two to make a session. Somebody speaking, the folks listening, and as a group you've have given good attention, and that's always encouraging. It sure is nicer to speak to folks who want to hear than folks who simply tolerate what you have to say. With that in mind, let's look at James chapter 3.

"Be not many of you teachers, my brother, in knowing that we shall receive the heavier judgment. For in many things we all stumble. But if anyone stumbles, not in word the same as a perfect or mature man able to bridle the whole body also. Now if we put the horse's bridles into their mouths, that they may obey us, we turn about their whole body. Behold the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by rough winds, are yet turned about by a very small rudder.

"Whither the impulse of the steersman Willet so the tongue also is a little member and boast of great things. Behold, how much wood is kindled by how small a fire, and the tongue is a fire.

The world of iniquity among our members is the tongue which defiles the whole body and sets on fire the wheel of nature, and is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beasts and birds and creeping things and things in the sea is tame and have been tamed by mankind. But the tongue can no man tame.

"It's a restless evil. It's full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we the Lord and Father, and therewith curse we men who are made after the likeness of God. Out of the same mouth comes forth blessing and cursing my brother. And these things ought not so to be. Does a fountain send forth from the same opening sweet water and bitter? Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives or a vine figs? Neither can salt water yield sweet."

When I was growing up, I suffered from a rather frustrating sickness called Schoolitis. It was a disease that hit with special force after a busy weekend, usually on a Monday morning. It seemed to me at times that I could never possibly get out of bed again. Or if I were able to stagger out of bed, that I could not possibly go to school. And when I would tell my mother how sick I was and how it seemed the height of cruelty to ask me to go to school, she would say in her Irish way, "All right, son, stick out your tongue." And looking at my tongue, she gauged the state of my health. I think if James were here today, he might chuckle at the diagnostic technique of my Irish mother.

But then I think he might have agreed. I think he might have said, at least in the spiritual realm, that's not a bad test. If you want to know someone's spiritual health, if you want to measure their maturity, it's good advice to tell them to stick out their tongue. That's what James is talking about

here in James chapter three. In the previous passage, he has made the point that while faith alone saves, saving faith is never alone, that it always manifests itself in works.

But now in this section, when James singles out a particular work, the work that he singles out has to do with our words. One reflection of our faith and God of our relationship to him is in the way we speak. James begins by saying, Be not many of you teachers, my brethren, knowing that we shall receive heavier judgment. In the first century, there were a great many teachers. They were the official teachers of the assembly.

And then, in addition, because they had an open meeting, men could stand to teach the people what they had learned. There were itinerant teachers that traveled from city to city to minister in different churches. And obviously the teacher had a position of authority, a position of power. But James is not discouraging people from teaching. But he does want to warn us that if you take the office of a teacher, then you are putting yourself under heavier judgment.

It's one of the marks of a dead faith that a man or woman wants to tell other people how to live and not really be too concerned about how they live themselves. But you and I who teach will one day stand under the judgment of our own teaching that the standards that we give to others will be applied to ourselves. Now how do you know whether you're qualified to be a teacher? How do you know that anyone else is qualified? Or putting it another way, what is the mark of a mature, spiritual Christian?

It would be interesting to have you jot that down on a three by five card. And I suspect that for most of us, unless you knew, this passage at the top of the list would not be the tongue. But James goes on and says in verse two, for in many things we all stumble. If anyone stumbles, not in word the same as a perfect man able to bridle the whole body. Also, when James uses the word perfect, as we saw in chapter one, he does not mean sinlessly perfect.

If he meant sinlessly perfect, we would have no teachers at all. The word refers to a richness and rightness of character. Probably the fastest definition would be mature. We all sin. But the one Mark of a mature man who is able to control his personality is that he's able to control his tongue.

So the test of whether you are spiritual, whether you are mature, goes back to the test of my Irish mother. Stick out your tongue. Now, I think that when you hear that, you might be tempted to think that James is exaggerating, that the tongue is just such a little thing that it really can't be looked at as the major indicator of your spiritual life and of your maturity. We almost bypass it and thinking of what the spiritual life is. In the rest of this section, James gives us seven illustrations, and the first two illustrations are designed to show us that even though the tongue may seem like a little thing, it is not insignificant because the fact that something is little does not make it insignificant.

The first illustration that he uses is taken from the horse races. Now, if we put the horse's bridles into their mouths, that they may obey us, we turn about their whole body. Also, if you've ever seen the Kentucky Derby or the Preakness or any horse race for that matter, you recognize that

those great horses are half a ton of muscle and nerve and sinew. They are powerful as they bound down the track or as they race across a pasture. But those horses are guided by the Jackie, who controls a four inch piece of steel in the horse's mouth.

Controlling that steel, he controls the horse. That's only 4oz. It seems so small, but controlling that small bit controls the animal. So James is saying that little bit of a tongue you had may seem small and insignificant, but the man or woman who can control the tongue is able to control the entire personality. Make no mistake about it, because something is small does not mean it is insignificant.

In order to drive home that truth, James uses a second illustration, and this has to do with the ships that sailed the Mediterranean. And he says in verse four, behold the ships. Also, though they're so great and are driven by much winds, I get turned about by a very small rudder Whither the impulse of the steersman. Will it? The ships that plowed the Mediterranean weighed between 3010 tons.

They often had a crew of 400 to 600 people. They were driven by the winds that pushed them from Port to Port. But the thing that really steered the ship was not the massive sails, but a rudder just a couple of feet long that the pilot used. Controlling that rudder meant that you control the ship. In the scheme of things, that rudder might seem extremely small, almost insignificant.

But if you control the wheel or the rudder, you control the vessel. So James makes the point that because something is small does not mean it's insignificant, and he applies that in verse five,

these two illustrations. So by application, the tongue also is a little member and boasts great things. That little tongue of yours can boast of a great many different accomplishments. I don't think James is being negative at this point.

He's not saying it's wrong to boast. He is simply saying that the tongue is able to do great things. Back in the closing days of the 1930s, Adolf Hitler stood in the great open squares of the city of Berlin and by his speech inflamed the German people and convinced them that they were to be Masters of the world. The German people and the German armies swept across Europe like a rampaging flood. They posed for a moment on the edge of the English Channel, about 30 miles away from Great Britain.

And at that moment in English history, another man arose. His name was Winston Churchill. Winston Churchill, in those dark days addressed his countrymen. He said, we will fight them on the beaches, we will fight them in the streets, we will fight them in the houses, and we will never surrender. He said again, Let us so conduct ourselves that if this little Island Empire lasts for 10 years, men shall look back and say, this was their finest hour.

And in spite of the blitzkrieg of Hitler's air force, the British people stood and turned the course of history as much as any other single factor. The speaking of Winston Churchill made a difference in English destiny. The tongue is a small thing, but it can boast of great accomplishments. With your tongue, you can stand before a congregation of people and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. And as a result of that, eternal destinies are changed.

With your tongue, you can say a word to someone who is discouraged and pick them up again.

With your tongue, you can speak to somebody whose life has come apart, who is weighed down with grief and speak a word of comfort that gives them strength to Goliath. Who could doubt the power of the tongue? Standing at the Cemetery in Gettysburg and listening to Abraham Lincoln say, Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this kind of a new nation conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Those words spoken at Gettysburg and vibrating through the decades have spoken to the inner desires of the American people.

Who could deny the power of the tongue? When a woman like Mary, Queen of Scots, said that she feared the speaking of John Knox more than an army of ten thousand men. By the tongue, we can direct lives by the tongue. A teacher can cause a student to dream dreams he never knew he could dream. Tongue is a little thing, but it is able to boast great things.

It can boast of great accomplishments. But James turns that around and says, Behold how much wood is kindled by how small a fire. Not only is the tongue able to boast great good, but that same tongue, small, insignificant, can do great damage.

We spent three wonderful years up in the state of Oregon, and one of the things that makes that area of the Pacific Northwest so breathtakingly beautiful, or it's stately trees. Those great green Giants have guarded the countryside, many of them for hundreds of years, and yet every year whole acres of those trees burned down and the ground is left blackened and charred. It comes because a campfire is not completely extinguished, because somebody driving down the highway

flips out a cigarette butt and the fire begins. And I don't think I have ever passed the great scars in the mountainside made by the spread of a fire without remembering these words of James.

What great damage a little spark can do.

And words can do damage. A fiery word spoken in the midst of conversation has a way of igniting other people. Human hearts are dry from the lack of the reins of humankind ones that parch for the lack of the milk of human mercy. So that fiery word goes from room to room, dorm to dorm across the campus, out into the community, and it spreads like wildfire and sometimes can get into the columns of newspapers. And before it is done, it can damage your reputation. It can break a family. It can bring people to ruin. In my lifetime I have seen it happen. How great a fire, a little spark can kindle it's. The nature of the tongue.

It may seem insignificant, but while it can do great good, your tongue can do great damage. And James says in verse six, and the tongue is a fire. It's the world of iniquity among our members as the tongue which defiles the whole personality and sets on fire the wheel of nature and is set on fire by hell. Verse six is a complicated sentence. I think it's important that we take it apart.

He says, the tongue is a fire. It's the world of iniquity among our members. In saying that, I gather what James is saying is that your tongue in spirit, or indeed is able to commit virtually every sin with your tongue. You can blaspheme God with your tongue. You can worship idols with your tongue.

You can dishonor your father and mother with your tongue. You can speak adulterous thoughts with your tongue. You can steal a reputation with your tongue. You can bring people down to death. The tongue is able in spirit or indeed to commit every kind of sin.

It is the world of iniquity among our members. What is more, he says, it defiles the whole body or the whole personality. A few years ago, my wife left a saucepan on the stove with some food in it, and they went off to do something else, and the water evaporated. And when she came into the kitchen, there was a flash fire on the top of the stove. In a matter of three or 4 minutes, we were able to put it out. The damage that was done was not in the saucepan by the fire. The damage that was done was done by the smoke. It had swept through the house. And while we were able to put the fire out in a matter of minutes, it took us weeks to be able to handle the smoke damage. It had gotten everywhere.

It had covered everything. Your Tongue Affects Your Whole Personality What I know about you, I know primarily from the way you speak. It has a way of showing me what you are. So if your speech is filled with bathroom humor and sexual innuendo, I know something about the kind of person you are. If your speech is filled with cutting, slanderous remarks, I know something about who you are.

It affects the whole personality. In fact, it affects the personality in another way because to a large degree, what you talk about will affect what you are. If you allow yourself to engage in caustic criticism, it does something to you like the damage of smoke in a home. It affects the

whole personality. And finally, he says, not only is it the world of iniquity among our members that it defiles the whole personality, but sets on fire the wheel of nature and is set on fire by hell.

That imagery, the wheel of nature, was used by the Greeks to talk about the course of life, the ongoing movement of life. It was pictured as though life were a wheel rolling on sort of like one of the ads for tires that we see on television. What he is saying is that your tongue is able to commit every sin. It defiles your whole personality. And everywhere you go, you can sin with the tongue. There is no place. It cannot do its damage. Wherever the wheel of life takes you there you can sin. You can sin with your tongue in your room. You can sin with your tongue.

Over in the cafeteria, you can sing with your tongue on the basketball court. You can sit with your tongue riding on a bus or walking down the street. There is no place in life, whether it be at school or home or Church or the beach or the playground where the tongue cannot do its work. It is capable of every sin. It defiles the whole personality.

And unlike any other instrument of sin, it can do its work anywhere. That's true of that little piece of flesh between your teeth. In fact, James says it is set on fire by hell. The word that he uses here for hell is the Greek word Gehenna. And Gehenna is a Valley outside the city of Jerusalem.

It was there in the ancient world, but it's still there today. In the ancient world, it was the garbage dump of the city. So when Jesus used the word Gehenna, to speak of hell. He was using a word picture. He was saying that hell is like the garbage dump of the universe.

And because people from the city came out and dumped their garbage there, fire kept burning day and night in order to consume the refuse. And so James says, these tongues of ours, when they are used for evil, are set in fire by hell itself. You say, well, that's the way it is. He exaggerates, that's really making too much of it to say that there is almost a supernatural influence to evil with our tongues. But James proves that and he does it by going on to say in verse seven, for every kind of beast and bird and a creeping thing and thing in the sea is tamed and has been tamed by mankind.

But the tongue can no man tame. It's a restless evil. It's full of deadly poison. James proof that the fire of the tongue is the fire of hell is that you can't tame it. Men are able to tame all kinds of beasts, all kinds of creeping things, but they can't tame the tongue.

Go to a circus and you see the huge elephants do their dances and respond to the command of their trainer. Watch as lions or tigers come into the cage and sit up and respond to the crack of the whip. Come to Colorado, to the Air Force Academy, and you'll see Falcons that have been trained to search for food. Get your dog. And he can do all sorts of tricks. Even cats can perform in commercials.

Walt Disney has a porpoise that has been taught to act. The Roman Emperor is said to have had a pool of fish, and he could come to the edge of the pool and call a fish by name, and it would surface in order to be fed all kinds of bees, all kinds of birds, all kinds of fish have been tamed. But the man who tames the bird and the fish cannot tame his tongue. It's a restless evil.

The picture for restless. There is a picture that would be applied to a lion or a Tiger or a wild animal kept behind bars. It paces back and forth. It is eager to escape. It wants to get out. It wants to go back to its wildness again. The tongue is like that. That animal of a tongue is behind the bars of your teeth and you're able to control it in this conversation and it breaks out on the next one. In this conversation, you feel that it is tame, but in the next conversation, it runs wild. It's like a restless animal seeking to go out to find the victim again.

In fact, he says, it's filled with deadly poison. That is like a snake. It's like a deadly snake in the grass. It leaps upon its victim and sinks in its poison and then disappears. It's like the ass poo. When it opens its mouth, lets its fangs appear, and when it closes its mouth, it kills its victim. It's a deadly poison. The poison is dropped and it sweeps through the system, but the snake itself disappears.

It is a deadly poison to destroy people. While ago here in Los Angeles, a woman's body was taken out of one of the Rivers. She had evidently committed suicide. She had taken all of the labels off of her clothes. There was no way to identify her. But they found in her coat pocket a piece of paper on which there were two words. And the words were they said. What did they say? Who said it? Nobody knew. But whatever it was, they said that as much damage to that woman as a smoking revolver. The words were enough to kill her. Your tongue can do that kind of damage. It could destroy people, can bring them down to the grave.

James wants us to know that the tongue can do great good. It can do great evil. But that as a teacher, as a person whose personality is moving to maturity, what you want is a consistency of speech. Because the tongue that is inconsistent is inconsistent with nature. In nature there is a consistency.

If you've got an orange tree, it produces oranges. If you've got a great vine, it produces grapes, you can count on that. So our tongues ought to be consistent. And so he says in verse 9, "Therewith"--that is with the tongue--"we bless the Lord and Father, and therewith we curse men who are made after the likeness of God. Out of the same mouth comes forth blessing and cursing my brother. And these things ought not so to be. Does a fountain send forth from the same opening sweet water and bitter? Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives or vine figs? Neither can salt water yield sweet."

You see, we use our tongues in such an inconsistent way. On a Sunday morning, we can come and sing great anthems of praise to God. We can stand and give a word of testimony to the way our Father has provided for us. We can speak to God in prayer. And then before the day is over, we can use that same tongue to cut down one of the Father's children. When it was made in the likeness of God that we pretend to worship.

Years ago, a little girl that I knew quite well was hugging her daddy's neck. And as she looked over his shoulder, she was sticking out her tongue at her brother and making nasty faces. And her mother said to her, Vicky, may you take your arms around away from your father's neck because

your father loves your brother too. You can't be hugging your father and doing that to your brother. That's what James is saying.

If you pretend to worship the Father and that's the word he uses, then you will be concerned about the Father's children. It's totally inconsistent to worship the Father in heaven and to cut the shreds his children on Earth. That inconsistency is contrary to nature. Putting it another way, if your tongue dips into the slime of slander, that use of the tongue destroys testimony, you get to God. Well, let's suppose we went out for a Trek in the woods, perhaps up in the mountains and we've had a long difficult climb and we are tired and thirsty and we come to a pool of water.

It's crystal clear, it's cold. And the first person in line gets down and drinks some water and they are refreshed. Second person in line drinks some water and suddenly they clutch their stomach and bend over and with a horrible scream die. You say, wow, coincidence, statistical probability. This is just his time to go. The third person drinks and they're refreshed. The fourth person drinks very fresh. The fifth person goes over and drinks and they clutch their stomach and die. Sixth and 7th person have to make a choice. Probably figure I'm not really as thirsty as I thought I was. Right. Because if any part of that pool is poisoned, salt water is 3.5% salt. All the rest is sweet water.

But the salt destroys the water. So when we engage in that kind of speech which hurts and destroys all of the things that we say that are of a benefit and blessing to others can be severely hurt. I have a young friend a few years ago was on the staff of a well-known Bible conference. One week noted Bible teacher was there and brought messages that thrill the audience. At the

end of the week, this young man was asked to drive the speaker to the airport and after they had gone several miles, they discovered that the young man had forgotten the baggage, had to turn around and come back.

And it meant that the speaker would probably miss his plane. And the speaker was furious and told that young man what he thought about him, told him what he thought about his carelessness. He left no doubt that he was a bit disturbed. That speech in the car wiped out everything that man had said all week long. It was harsh, bitter, angry, uncalled for it, that 3 minutes of venting, his venom had wiped out everything he had said. That had been a benefit to that young friend of mine. That's the way it is with speech. The inconsistency ruins the good that we say.

You see, what James is saying is no man, and that's the emphasis of the Greek construction, no man contained the tongue. The implication of course, is that God contain it and he does. It's an old story of a man who came to a watchmaker and the watch wasn't running and he brought the hands in the face of the watch to have it repaired. And the watchmaker said, look, this won't do any good.

I've got to have the works the troubles on the inside, even though your tongue is in a wet place and might slip. That's not the problem, is it? The tongue bone is connected to the heart bone. It's out of the abundance of the heart that a man or woman speaks. That's what God does his business in the heart.

I've known men whose speech was filled with blasphemy cursing and smut were just part of their vocabulary. They came to know God did something in their hearts and that had something to do with their speech known women who could use their tongues like a stiletto. And God got hold of them and changed them on the inside, change their time. God can do that. In fact, if you look at the last paragraph, you see James talking about that in verses 13 to the end when he says, who is wise and understanding among you?

And I suspect there are a lot of folks willing to respond to that invitation, especially those who wanted to be teachers. Let him show not by the lectures that he gives, but let him show by his good life, his works, and the meekness and the submissiveness that wisdom produces. But if you have bitter jealousy and faction in your heart, glory not and lying out against the truth. This wisdom is not a wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, sensual devilish. For where jealousy and faction are, there is confusion in every vile deed.

Why do you gossip? Why do I gossip? Why do you cut other people down? The answer is jealousy. Envy. You see, we have the idea that if I can tear your house down, my house stands taller. If I can cut you off at the knees and send you a cripple to the ground and then stand on your carcass, I think that somehow I am a taller person. So the person that is envious and jealous of others feels that by tearing others down and pointing out their flaws, they build themselves up and point up their virtues. It's stupid, but that is the psychology of slander, insecure, bitter, shriveled people are the people who do that because we try to make ourselves look good by making other people look bad. And that leads to confusion to every vile deed.

But notice what he says. The wisdom from above is, first of all, pure. That's characteristic of wisdom. It's pure. It really wants the best for other people. It really doesn't jump to nasty conclusions in a conversation. It really wants to understand the other person. It wants to really get that person's point of view. Have you ever gotten in a conversation where there is a difference of opinion and you make your point, the other person makes her point, you make yours, they make theirs. And pretty soon you're talking to each other quietly at the top of your lungs and the other person is making the point. And you wish they'd set up so you can make your point that moment. What you want to do more than anything else is to win.

At any time you get into a conversation where you want to win, the conversations become corrupted. Pure motive. Really want to know. You really want to hear you out. If it's pure, then it's peaceable. It's not threatened, it doesn't become angry. And then he says, It's gentle, easy to be entreated. My observations are that great men are always approachable. The greatest men I've known are always open to people, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruit. They want people to enjoy being around them without deceit, without hypocrisy.

And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for them that make peace. Pure motives lead to peace. And the seed planted in the field of peace produces righteousness. And you can do that with your tongue. It's little, but it's significant.

I know you're Christians, and therefore I know something about you that deep down inside, on your better days, the kind of person you want to be is the kind of person that blesses other people. What you really want to be and your better days is like a fruit tree. That when folks are

around you, they can taste the sweet, luscious fruit and be refreshed. And you can do that, by the way you use your tongue. Let me give you two suggestions.

For the next seven days. That is from now to next Friday. Try an experiment. Determine that for the next seven days, if you're going to speak about somebody critically and negatively, that before you do that, you'll speak about that person to the Lord, that you'll take the time, if it's worth talking about, to talk to God about it first, putting it positively. You'll decide that when you talk about other people, you'll do your best to focus on the things God is doing in their lives, the good things, the positive things, the things they do better than you.

That in the conversation, you'll do all that you can to point out the good in other people. Try it for seven days. Nobody signs up for that for a lifetime, but try it for seven days. As the day begins, ask God to guard your lips. In conversation, think about being a benefit to people. Or putting it another way, if somebody isn't in the room, speak about them with the same kindness and the same consideration that you would if they were there.

Second thing you can do for the next seven days, determine that on each day of the next seven days, at least once, you will speak to someone else. A word of honest appreciation, a word of praise that you will articulate that to a person. I came into this a few years ago when I was going through the book of Proverbs. The writer of Proverbs says, is the Crucible for silver, and the furnace tests gold. So a man is known and tested by his praise So I decided that I would try to do that I thought of myself as being a marvelous blessing to everybody I went by saying a good

word, discovered to my amazement that whatever it did for other people, It did something for me. It made me aware of how many people in the course of a day benefit my life.

So once a day at least, express appreciation to the waitress who waits on you in the restaurant or someplace else. Just to say, "I really appreciated your service. It was a good meal, the food was good but the way you served it, it was just an added tree." The stewardess on the airline, to say to her as you leave a crowded flight, "I'm amazed at the gentle way you served things to us. It really did make the flight so much more enjoyable." To your friend, to a teacher, to a parent to pick up the phone and to call home and say "I just want you to know you folks are the greatest folks in the world. I really appreciate you. It's the only reason I'm calling. But I just thought I ought to tell you that." Try it once each day at least.

I'm not talking about flattery I'm talking about an honest word of appreciation. You'll discover that there are many folks who deeply need a word of encouragement, who will blossom like a flower opening to the kiss of the noontime sun. You'll discover it does something for them and it does something for you, that you will be like a tree giving out good fruit and benefitting those who know you.

The test of your Christian experience is found in my mother's diagnostic technique. Stick out your tongue, for what you say is really a reflection of what you do.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for these friends who have listened so patiently and we recognize that all of us are on the way to becoming. And so often, we find ourselves looking back on

conversations and instead of building other people up, we've torn people down. We thank you though for those folks we have met along the way who have had an encouraging word for us, who have, by their speech, helped us to be more than we are now. And grant that we shall be that. Help us, Lord, for the next week to take this truth and put it into practice. Help us to be consistent, that in blessing you we will bless others also. For Jesus' sake we ask this and for our own sake and for the sake of those who have to live with us. Amen.