

James 3

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[0 : 00] A restless evil full of deadly poison. Now, whatever that is, it's not good.

So, what is it, this restless evil full of deadly poison? Now, we've already read a passage, so it's a fairly easy question to answer, but let me just play along with encouraging you to consider what this is, this restless evil full of deadly poison.

One clue is that you don't need to look very far to find one of these exhibits of a restless evil full of deadly poison. Indeed, we all have one. Convention dictates that sticking it out is rude.

So, what are we talking about? We're talking about our tongues. Your tongue, my tongue, everybody's tongue. A restless evil full of deadly poison.

Now, I don't know how you respond to that description of your tongue, whether you think maybe it's a little bit harsh. It certainly is brutal.

[1 : 26] No holds barred in terms of a description of your tongue, of my tongue, of our tongues. Restless evil full of deadly poison.

But I think if we're honest with ourselves and as we reflect on the matter, I think we can conclude that the description, though brutal, is accurate.

And what I want to do this morning is explore what James has to say about the tongue, about the words that we speak. And I'll give you the outline so that you can take a mental note and then kind of follow the order of what is being said.

We'll begin by describing the problem. Clearly, it's a problem. Something that is described as a restless evil full of deadly poison, that is definitely problematic.

So, we want to describe the problem or see what James says in describing the tongue. So, we'll describe the problem. But then what we want to do is to dig a little deeper and to identify the source of the problem.

[2 : 33] Because if we read what James has to say superficially, we might be left somewhat dissatisfied by saying, Well, yes, that's true, but what can be done?

It is descriptive, but we need to go further than simply describing a problem. So, we certainly see how the problem is described. But I think we also can find in what James says the source of the problem identified.

But then James goes further, not in an explicit way, but I think implicitly and clearly. And that is that a solution to the problem is provided or certainly hinted at.

We're pointed in the right direction as to what solution there could be to this restless evil, this tongue of ours that is full of deadly poison.

So, first of all, then, the problem described. Well, the problem is your tongue, my tongue, a restless evil full of deadly poison. And I want to notice three features that James identifies about the tongue.

[3 : 48] But before we do, notice three clear things that he says, characteristics, features of the tongue. Before we notice them, let's just confirm that the problem of the tongue is indeed a universal problem.

It affects everybody. It affects all of us. Notice how in verse 2, when James is introducing the matter, he says as follows.

And I'll paraphrase what he says in a way that I think draws out the sense of what is being said. So, there in verse 2, he says, We all stumble in many different ways.

I think the word kind of different is implicit there. We all stumble in many different ways. But, let's throw in a but there to get the sense of what I think James is saying.

We all stumble in many different ways. But, if anyone is never at fault in what he says, and then James goes on to come to a conclusion. And I think what James is stressing here is that, yes, we all have many different faults.

[4 : 52] And my faults may not be the same as your faults. The sins that I am more prone to may be different to the sins that you are prone to. In that sense, we're different. We stumble in different ways.

But, in this matter, we all stumble. I think that's the sense of what James is saying. In this, we're all the same. We're all in the same boat.

Because when it comes to the use of the tongue, we're all guilty. You can't say, well, that's not my particular sin. Yes, I'm a sinner, but I sin in other ways. No. Here, no one is exempt.

No one is spared from the diagnosis. In this matter, it affects us all. It is a universal problem.

It affects you, and it affects me. It affects us all. So, that's really just to, I suppose, clarify that and make that clear. But let's move on to notice the three particular features of the tongue, characteristics of the tongue, capacities of the tongue, if you wish, that James identifies.

[5 : 58] The first thing that he makes clear is that the tongue, your tongue, is powerful. Notice what he says in verses 3 through to 5, or the first half of verse 5.

And we don't need to read the verses again, but he uses, in order to get across his point, he uses two illustrations. And they're familiar illustrations. He uses the illustration, the picture of the bit in the mouth of a horse and how that small piece of gear, I suppose, is capable of directing a large and powerful horse.

And then he uses another illustration, another example. Indeed, he introduces them as examples. Take ships as an example. And he speaks of the rudder, how the rudder is a relatively small piece of gear, and yet it is capable of directing this huge vessel.

So, the illustrations are clear enough. Indeed, I would say fairly self-explanatory. The only thing that I would highlight or suggest to you, and you can come to your own conclusions on this and see if you think there's merit in what I'm going to suggest now.

But what I'm going to suggest is that James is not stressing so much the capacity of the tongue to direct, though clearly the illustrations do speak of the tongue's capacity to direct.

[7 : 27] The bit directs the horse, the rudder directs the ship. But that's not so much the emphasis as the emphasis on the power that is wielded, in the case of the bit and of the rudder, and illustrating the power that is wielded by the tongue.

Power to direct, certainly, but not just power to direct. Power, period. This is the stress, it seems to me, of what James is saying here by using this illustration.

He's saying the tongue is very powerful. It's very powerful. Indeed, he goes on to say there, following on from giving the examples, he says in verse 5, Likewise, so in the light of what I've said, you know, these examples I've just given, likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

It makes great boasts. And here I think we need to recognize that the word boasts is being used here not in necessarily a negative sense.

The word boast as a word is morally neutral. Now, generally, we tend to think of boasting as a bad thing, and usually it is. But the word itself is morally neutral.

[8 : 44] It's about the manner in which we boast that determines if it's bad or not. And I think what James is saying here about the tongue isn't necessarily something bad. He's simply saying it makes great boasts because it has reason to.

The tongue is very powerful. That's a fact. And that in itself is neither good nor bad. It's simply a reality. The tongue has great power. It has great power.

And that power can be wielded for good or it can be wielded for evil. But it is powerful. That's the first thing that we can notice about the tongue, about our tongues.

They are very powerful instruments. But not only is it powerful, it is also destructive. We've just said that its power can be wielded for good or evil.

And James immediately goes on to acknowledge that the great problem is that so often it is wielded for evil. And that is the purpose of the following illustration that he gives there in verse 5.

[9 : 49] So here what James is focusing on and highlighting is that the tongue is destructive.

Not only powerful, but destructive. It uses its power destructively. Again, the illustration that is used is very vivid and I think easy to understand.

And we've already commented on it as we were speaking to the children about that great forest fire that we were witnesses of there in Golspey just a couple of weeks ago.

Some of you may have seen it on the news. It was on the Scottish News. It was the main article on the front page of the PNJ just the following day. And it was quite impressive in one sense of the word and quite striking.

And that was the talk, you know, with our friends. I wonder how it started. And folks said, oh, it's probably some kids who were mucking about. I don't know if ultimately the cause was discovered. But whatever it was, it was just one small flame, one small spark that started it all off.

[11:08] And huge destruction was caused. And what James is saying is, well, the tongue is like that. The tongue is small but destructive.

And notice the extent of the destruction described there in that same verse in verses 5 and 6. It corrupts the whole person. The whole of our being, the whole of our identity is corrupted by the manner in which we employ our tongue destructively.

You know, it's sometimes said that you are what you say. And there's truth in that. The words that we speak, and when they are evil words, when they are dishonest words, when they are hurtful words, they speak of who we are.

They reveal who we are. They reveal our identity. We can determine what somebody is like by the words that they speak. Now, sometimes we can be very devious in how we use words and lead people astray in terms of their conclusions.

But the reality is that the tongue is destructive in the extent to which it affects the whole person. Indeed, there James goes on, it sets the whole course of his life on fire.

[12:21] You know, I think it was during the war that there was this slogan, you know, careless words cost lives. But not just careless words. Cruel words.

Lying words. Harsh words. Unkind words. Unkind words. Cost lives. Cost lives. Your life. The life or reputation or well-being of others.

And you know that. You all know that. I am completely confident that every single person here has personal experience of the damage that words can do.

You can look back, perhaps, with a sense of shame at words that you spoke that hurt somebody, that damaged somebody, that impacted on, maybe even destroyed a relationship.

There's maybe relationships that even now you're conscious are broken down because of words you spoke or words that were spoken by others. And you can picture in your mind's eye that the faces of the people that you don't speak to anymore, that you don't phone up anymore, that you don't want to be connected with anymore.

[13:30] Why? Because of words that you spoke or words that others spoke. You know that to be true. You've seen it. You've experienced it. You've been guilty of these evil, cruel, careless, thoughtless words.

And you've been the victim of them also. I don't need to persuade you that the tongue is destructive because you know that for yourself. So, it's powerful.

It's destructive. But there's a third aspect that James highlights here in describing the problem, describing the tongue. And that is that it's uncontrollable. Verses 7 and 8.

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man. But no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, it's not.

It requires no further explanation. You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame your tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

[14:36] So, it's powerful, it's destructive, and it's uncontrollable. That's a description of our tongue. But what about the source of this problem?

And I think the source is identified because the problem, of course, is not your physical tongue. Listen to how the reformer John Calvin describes the tongue.

And I quote directly from his commentary on this portion. And he speaks about the tongue in this rather vivid way. It is a slender portion of flesh that contains the whole world of iniquity.

But, of course, that slender portion of flesh doesn't contain a whole world of iniquity. Not the flesh itself. That's not the problem.

What is the problem is the source of the problem. What controls or directs your tongue? And there are two answers to that that follow a logical or a sequential order that we also can identify in this passage.

[15:42] The source. Why is it that the tongue speaks these destructive words? Why is it that the tongue is employed in this harmful way? Well, first of all, the source of the problem is your heart.

And really, verses 9 to 12 reflect on that. When James is reflecting on the fact of how with our tongue we can praise God and we can also curse God or curse men made in God's likeness. We can praise and we can curse. And he's going to the source of the matter because he's talking about the spring from which the water flows. And he's saying, really, that's what we need to tackle. If, you know, if evil is coming out of your mouth, then that's because it's in your heart. He's saying that's the source of the problem. And that's really where you need to tackle the issue. You can't really blame that slender portion of flesh for the words that it is employed to speak. The problem is your heart, the spring of your life.

[16:47] And, of course, here James is echoing the words or the truth that was expressed already by Jesus when he was teaching his disciples in Matthew chapter 15 and verses 18 and 19.

Listen to what he says about our mouths and what comes out of our mouths. But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart. And these make a man unclean.

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are the things what make a man unclean.

It's what comes from the heart that is then revealed by the words that we speak. In a phrase that I'm sure you've heard before, the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.

So, the problem, the source of the problem is your heart. It's my heart. But let's dig a little deeper and ask a follow-up question. That is, what directs your heart?

[17:51] So, we're digging deeper and deeper. What directs your heart? Well, James also hints at an answer to that question, more than really a hint, in what he says about the tongue and the source of the great evil that it is capable of, then in verse 6.

Because notice what it says. The tongue is also 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 then notice what he says. And is itself set on fire by hell.

So, the problem is your heart, but the problem is also your, let's call him your hellish foe. The one who sets your tongue on fire.

The one who sets your heart on its wicked course. Of course, there in verse 6, James is describing the tongue being set on fire by hell. But in the light of what we've just said, it's fair to conclude that it is our heart that is set on fire by hell.

There is an external agent involved. A hellish foe. The devil himself. Now, at this point, many people, certainly if we were to say this outwith the confines of this building, they'd say, well, that's nonsense.

[19:06] Yes, the tongue says bad things and causes a lot of destruction. But don't come to me and talk to me about the devil. Well, James says, yes, he is an actor. There is an external hellish foe who is looking to control your heart so that in due course, that heart will use the tongue to destroy, to hurt, to harm yourself and others.

And so, part of the problem is the devil himself and his devilish, hellish intentions to kill and to destroy and to harm. The problem that we have with our tongues is not just one of lacking a wee bit of self-control.

It's not something, well, I'll just try a little bit harder. I'll count to ten. You know, I'll try not to be so impulsive. I'll, you know, I'll try and say less and the problem will be solved.

That's not going to solve the problem because the source of the problem is way deeper. The problem is way deeper and graver than that. It is of satanic dimensions. This is a big problem.

It's a deep problem. It's a hellish problem. It's not just about you. It involves a powerful enemy intent on controlling, corrupting and destroying you and others through you.

[20:24] Well, what are we to do with this big problem? It's a pretty bleak picture that James paints for us. Is there a solution? Well, perhaps we are best advised not to speak at all.

You may have heard what has been said, the reputed words of Abraham Lincoln, who is reputed to have said, I would rather remain silent and be thought a fool than speak up and remove all doubt.

You know, we can smile at the pithy wisdom of Lincoln in what he says. But, of course, saying nothing isn't really a solution. We need to speak. We need to employ our tongue.

Words need to be spoken. Well, let's look at, briefly, the solution to the problem that is provided, certainly pointed towards by James.

But before we do that, let's just note a couple of quick prior points. Firstly, there is no quick fix. James does not provide a slick seven easy steps to taming your tongue.

[21 : 32] If you want a self-help book, then go to Amazon. I'm sure you could find one. It probably won't help you. But James doesn't provide that. James is realistic about this.

He says there is no quick fix. You know, he calls your tongue a restless evil, full of poison. He says that it's untameable. He's saying you can't tame it.

He's pretty brutal in his conclusions. So, there is no quick fix. Let's be clear on that. But secondly, there is in the passage and in the earlier parts of the letter what we might call glimmers of hope, that there may be some kind of solution.

You know, in verse 2, interestingly, that we've already just mentioned, but in another context, you know, we read there, we all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man.

And you say, well, how is that a glimmer of hope? Because we're all far from perfect. Well, that's true. We are far from perfect. But it is interesting that the word that James uses here to describe a man or woman who is able to exercise self-control in what he says, he describes him as a perfect man.

[22 : 41] And the word that he uses is the same word that he uses at the beginning of his letter. When in verse 4, he expresses himself in this way.

He says, Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. And the word there translated mature is the same word that is translated perfect in chapter 3.

And so, at the beginning of the letter, James is contemplating the reality that men and women, disciples of Jesus, can grow to maturity, can grow to completeness.

Not absolute perfection, because sin will ever be present this side of eternity. But there can be, and there's the very real prospect of growing, of maturing.

And he outlines the process at the very beginning of his letter. So, that's a glimmer of hope for those of us who struggle to control our tongue. But also, in the previous chapter, in chapter 2, when he is describing, or chapter 1 rather, at the end of chapter 1, when he's describing religion that is pleasing to God, what is one of its characteristics?

[23 : 56] In verse 26 of chapter 1, Now, implicit in that statement is the possibility that we can keep a tight rein on our tongue.

To put it as a characteristic of true faith, something that is impossible would be of little help. And so, again, James is suggesting that, well, it's difficult, but it's possible.

You know, we are capable of keeping a tight rein on our tongue. So, there are these glimmers of hope. But you might wonder, well, is James contradicting himself?

Has he lost the plot? On the one hand, he says that taming the tongue is possible. But on the other, he says that it's impossible. It's a restless evil full of deadly poison. Well, the apparent contradiction or quandary is resolved by identifying the solution.

And the solution, if there is to be one, must tackle the core or root problems, the source of the problem. Now, do you remember what the source problems were?

[25 : 08] Your heart and your hellish foe. Now, how are these problems to be tackled or overcome? Well, first of all, the problem of your heart. From where emerges these hurtful, destructive, selfish words that are spoken by the tongue.

How can you tackle the problem of your heart? Verses 9 to 12 are struggling with this reality of what's inside of us.

Well, how can you tackle that problem? Well, to put it simply, you need a new heart. If your corrupt heart is the problem, then you need it replaced. You need a new heart. But, of course, that's not something you can do.

No amount of effort on your part, no discipline on your part, no good intentions on your part can generate a new heart. It's something only God can give you. And so, in his discussion of something so practical as how we use our tongues, ultimately, James brings us to the heart of the human condition and the heart of the gospel.

That we are incapable of reforming ourselves. We're incapable of saving ourselves. We rely and depend on God to do it for us, to give us this new heart that we are so in need of.

[26 : 26] And God is in the business of giving corrupt sinners a new heart, a new birth, a clean sheet. The prophet Ezekiel pens the promise of God directed to you.

In chapter 36 of that book of the prophet Ezekiel, in verse 26, we read, a promise that God directs to us. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. This is something that God can do for us. So, you need to deal with the issue of your heart.

But I think we need to develop this further because we need to recognize that James here is speaking to those who were Christians. And yet he acknowledges that even as Christians with new hearts, those new hearts don't always operate in the way that you would hope they would.

You know, he speaks about how Christians can praise God but also curse their fellow man. He says this should not be, but it is. And so, it's not just a case of saying, well, I need a new heart.

[27 : 30] I think there's also implicit the need that the heart that we have, that God has given us, be renewed. It's not just a new heart, but an ever-renewing heart.

God doesn't do quick fixes either. But as God, by His Spirit, applies His Word to your life and to your mind, your heart is renewed.

And it takes time. And it involves your cooperation. You need to participate with God in this work of constant, daily renewal of your heart.

You may be familiar with the phrase that is used of the tradition or church tradition that we are part of, the Reformed Church. Iglesia Reformada Semper Reformanda, or Reformed Church, Ever-Reforming.

Well, we can hijack that phrase and apply it to our hearts. Renewed heart, thank God, but ever-renewing. Ever-renewing. That is what is needful if we are to keep a tight rein on our tongues.

[28 : 43] That the power that the tongue is able to wield be used for good and for blessing, for building up. Not for hurting and destroying, as so often is the case.

So, you have to deal with the problem of your heart, but you also have to deal with the problem of your enemy. You know, your hellish foe, as we have described him. You're picking up on what James says, that the tongue is set on fire by hell.

Who can deal with or vanquish your hellish foe? Well, with lovely symmetry, your heavenly friend. And we need to jump ahead to verse 17.

We read the whole chapter because the second section of the chapter is, though perhaps not obviously so, is intimately connected with what has come before. Because notice what James says in verse 17.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven. And then he describes it. So, having identified hell as being that which sets your heart and your tongue on fire to destroy, he then contrasts it with the wisdom that comes from heaven.

[29 : 54] If the problem is a heart set on fire by hell, the solution is a heart imbued by the wisdom that comes from heaven. And notice the radical difference such wisdom makes.

You see, on the one hand, we have a hellish heart, which is described as a restless evil, full of deadly poison. And on the other hand, we have what we could call a heavenly heart.

And how is that described? Well, in verse 17, we find that described. Pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

If you are to tame your tongue, you need a new heart that is ever being renewed by the wisdom that comes from heaven.

And what is this wisdom that comes from heaven? Well, it is God's wisdom incarnated in God's Son. The Word or wisdom of God who came from heaven and dispensed to us by God's indwelling Spirit.

[30 : 59] And so let me draw the threads to a close by posing a couple of questions to you. Do you acknowledge your problem? Do you acknowledge that your tongue is a problem?

That your tongue is capable of doing great damage, of hurting and of destroying? Do you acknowledge that? Have you received a new heart? Have you put your trust in Jesus as your Savior?

That you might be born again? That you might enjoy that gift of a new heart? Is your new heart being renewed day by day by God's indwelling Spirit?

As you listen to and submit to and seek to obey God's Word as it is brought to you and as you read it and meditate on it. Do you possess the wisdom that comes from heaven?

If you think you're lacking in that, well, you can ask for it. James at the very beginning of this letter encourages believers who lack wisdom to ask for wisdom.

[32 : 02] Verse 5 of the first chapter, if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask of God. And I have no doubt that that recommendation applies also to the wisdom that comes from heaven that he speaks of here in the third chapter.

If you lack the wisdom that comes from heaven, well, ask God for it. He gives generously to all without finding fault. May God help us in the manner that he has provided for us to keep a tight rein on our tongues, that our tongues might be used for good, for building up, for helping, for encouraging, and not for hurting and destroying.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Word. We thank you for what we have been able to ponder on and consider and learn this morning from your Word.

Help us to be honest in recognizing the problem that we have, to confess the sins that we have committed by the use of our tongue, the people we've hurt, the damage we have done.

Well, we thank you that you are a God who forgives, but not only who forgives, but who helps us, provides us the means whereby we can overcome. We pray that we would increasingly know what it is to keep a tight rein on our tongues.

[33 : 37] Not simply that we would remain silent, but rather that when we speak, it would be for good and for blessing and for building up. Help us, we pray. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.