

## STUDIES IN THE EPISTLE OF JAMES – PART 5

**Speaker:** Capt. Abhishek Babu

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**Scripture:** James 3:1-12

Pastor has been doing a series on James. We started with James 1:19-27, with faith obeys the Word. Then we did 2:1-13, faith removes discrimination. And last week, we did 2:14-26, faith proves itself by works.

Today, we continue the journey in James with ch.3, 1-12, talking about guarding the tongues or taming the tongues.

### James 3:1-12

*Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. <sup>2</sup> We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.*

*<sup>3</sup> When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. <sup>4</sup> Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. <sup>5</sup> Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. <sup>6</sup> The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*

*<sup>7</sup> All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, <sup>8</sup> but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

*<sup>9</sup> With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. <sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. <sup>11</sup> Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? <sup>12</sup> My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olive, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*

Before I go into the Word, let me ask you a simple question: How many of you probably started your day by saying something which you should not have? Let us see a show of hands; I'm not going to ask you what you said. No hands? Then I don't think I need to preach the Word because you are already there (smiles). One hand going up very sheepishly. It is not possible. James has been loud and clear that this is not possible.

Starting from v.1, James says, "Not many should be teachers." Now, why should he say so? Here's the problem. We actually talk a lot. That is something that is inherent in us. As I was preparing, I looked up some references, and I came across this internet search which said that the average man speaks approximately 1,000 words a day. Even if it is a far stretch, and you come down to 500 or 600 words, I don't think there is anything, apart from our regular breathing, that we do 500 times a day. To put that into perspective, 500 words, 50 words a page – it's a book of about 20-25 pages! So, all of you are authoring a book of 25 pages almost every day. That's how much we speak, and that's what gets us into trouble. That's the biggest issue with words.

And in James 1:19, he exhorts us to be slow to speak. In 1:26 he says that the use of our tongue is one indicator of the true religion. It's not a religion by what faith we follow, but a religion by what we believe and what we are from the inside – our response.

Ch. 2 says: the tongue reveals our partiality and proclaims our faith. We could have an outward expression of how we want to be. We could have our best foot forward, but when we open our mouth, our tongue actually lets everybody know the truth. When I was a kid, my dad used to tell me that it's better to keep quiet and let the world think that you're smart, than to open your mouth and remove all doubts. That helped me to watch what I spoke.

But what's so important in using the word? Why has James, or the Word of God, or the Bible, spoken so much on the word? Hebrews says: God upholds the universe by the power of His Word, by His powerful Word. God spoke the world into creation. God created us in His image by His words. And that likeness of that image is the ability to express our emotions, our feelings, communicate; and words happen to be one essential aspect of that means. And therefore, it's easy to understand that there would be so much emphasis on how and what words we use.

But it's not been simple. It's not an easy journey. If you look at the Bible itself, there are multiple instances going back to the very start. What did Adam do when they fell? He opened his mouth and accused Eve, saying, "This woman You gave me." He used the ability of his words to speak accusation.

Psalms 5, psalm 10 talk about "whose tongue is an open grave, whose tongues deceive, and whose mouths are full of curses and bitterness." If you were to understand the gravity of this word 'an open grave'... What happens if a grave is open? You could smell it from a mile away. The stench of a decaying body! That's the comparison he's drawing by saying that your mouth is an open grave, and whose tongue's deceit, deception and lies is very akin to what the devil does. That is what the tongue is capable of.

In Isaiah 6, when he saw the vision of God's throne, he suddenly felt overwhelmed by the incense and the finiteness of who he was. What does he say? "Woe unto me for I am a man of unclean lips." He didn't say "I'm an unclean man". He didn't say "I've committed great sins." He said unclean lips. He realized that there were things in his mouth which was not in line with what God intended.

Proverbs 18:21 "Death and life are in the power of the tongue"

Proverbs 12:18 "Words are like sword thrusts." Probably from where one would draw the inference of pen being mightier than the sword. That's the ability of words.

Matthew 12:36, Jesus said that we will give account for every careless word.

Therefore, it's very clear that every word that we speak has got a consequence. Every word that we utter has a repercussion, and every action of our words has a much more significant reaction. It's not an equal and opposite reaction. It's much more significant. As kids you would have heard: Sticks and stones can break my bones but your words will never hurt me. That's very far from the truth. We may recover from broken bones in a couple of weeks or months. But, words that are spoken have the ability to damage one for life. And that's evident by the months and years or maybe even lifelong therapy that many people undergo. It is said that couches are dented because of the constant sitting during therapy sessions. It's very significant to understand that it is not what is done to you, but what is done in you that has much more effect on your life.

With this background, we look at James' message where he starts off by saying, "Many should not become teachers." It is difficult to understand why James should say that. In fact, Paul says that God

has given the shepherds, evangelists, and teachers for the equipping of the saints. We all know that there has to be somebody who has taught us, both education-wise and in the Word of God, and that's why we are here where we are. If we didn't have them, we wouldn't be here. Therefore, teachers are significant. Teachers are important and so is the Word of God from which they taught.

But James is talking from the context of how it was with teachers then, the rabbis who had the ability to reach out with an influence on the people that they spoke to. They would probably meet in the synagogue with 50 or 100 people, and they would be able to speak to them, and be able to influence them. If they were speaking in the city square, it would be about 500 or even 1,000 or more people that they could reach out and influence them. If James was here today, he would have realized that it would have been a matter of seconds when you had two and a half million subscribers following you. Social media takes it far and wide. So, teachers have the ability to reach out to much more people. Not only that, teachers use much more words. If an average man uses thousands, I don't know how many words the teacher would use. But what was important was, that unless a teacher's words were thoughtful and intentional, with life and had a conviction, they could end up damaging people.

When he says "not many should become teachers," it's because the teachers who were there then, were significant people in the society. They were considered to have a certain elevated position, and it was a glorified position. From James' point of view, it was kind of being looked at as something that would give somebody personal glory. And that is what he is saying: Don't be tempted by that. Don't try to land yourself up wanting to become teachers for the want of that personal glory.

Then he adds one line. "Teachers will be judged with the greatest strictness." Does he imply that teachers would have a different standard, a different benchmark, or a different threshold at which they would be judged? One could say so. But that's not the case. The teachers are not going to be judged differently than us or anybody else, but they would actually find themselves in more situations in which they would have caused errors. "Anyone who does not stumble in what he says, he is perfect, able to bridle his own body."

James 3:2 "We all stumble in many ways." Therefore, if we are going to be stumbling in many ways over a thousand words, imagine what the teacher is going to do. He's going to have many more situations of stumbling. And when he stumbles, he's going to cause much more effect on those he's speaking to. Just by virtue of the fact that they talk more, they're going to have much more to be judged upon. It's not just the words; it's the judgment on what was imparted – godly or ungodly. And that's where the teachers would have a very difficult judgment because they could have stumbled and caused an ungodly teaching, or teaching which is not in line with God's will and purposes.

Then he says, "Anyone who does not stumble is a perfect man, able to bridle his own body." And that is not a factual statement; it is more rhetorical, almost harboring on sarcasm, because we all know that there is only one who is a perfect man, our Lord Jesus Christ. We all fall short of that benchmark. He says, "If he is not stumbling in what he says, he is perfect and able to bridle his own body. In other words, if you are able to control your tongue, then you are the perfect mature Christian. If you are one who is able to watch what he says, and act in self-discipline, then you have developed yourself into such a person that has control over your body. It's absolutely impossible.

I think of all those people who think that they have achieved self-discipline; they are those who have actually gone into the mountains and forests to keep quiet, because they didn't want to land up in situations where they had to talk. That's how they achieved self-control, by avoiding situations requiring them to talk.

In my sailing days, one of my ships which used to come to India. We were all Indians. It happened to be the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, and obviously you know how the country gets when it's Independence Day. Due to security reasons, the agent came and gave me a pass, just for me and my wife. But the crew was not allowed to step ashore. When I spoke to the Immigration Officer, I asked him why? He said, "We need to undertake strict background checks on every individual who wants to step off the ship, and August 15<sup>th</sup> makes it very difficult. So, to avoid doing the extra work, we just say 'don't go ashore.'" He basically avoided doing his work by avoiding the problem altogether. And that's the situation here. If you want to avoid stumbling, don't talk. That's the only solution. Otherwise, it's not going to work.

vv. 3 onwards, he gives comparison to the power of the tongue. He gives examples of a horse, a ship and a spark. They actually talk about how the inward attitude affects and influences how you speak and how it is expressed outwardly. We might never really say what we think about, but whatever we say, we have actually thought about it. That's something that can put it in perspective. Words just don't come out arbitrarily. An example: how often we use the phrase "I didn't mean it!" This chapter kind of plugged it for me. I now know I can't use that anymore because I know that every word that I spoke, I actually meant it. I sure everyone of us has done it, got into fights or arguments, and then carelessly said that I didn't mean it. but it actually comes out from the inward expression. There is no escaping that.

#### The three examples:

1. A bit in the horse's mouth.

I remember as a kid, Dad used to take us to Ooty, and we would go horse riding. We were 30-35 kg, and the horse was big, 300+ kg. it was terrifying. The trainer would say, "Nothing to do. You just sit on the horse, and I'll give it a pat and it'll start moving. The reins in your hand; pull it to the right, he'll turn to the right. Pull it to the left, he'll turn to the left. Pull both, he'll stop. Don't kick him so that he doesn't run fast. And that's it, you're in control." And slowly and terrifyingly, we would start doing that. And eventually, we would feel this immense power in our hands, holding this 300-400 kg animal by just 2 reins. That's the example that James gives. He says, "You are able to control the whole body of the horse by pulling on the bit." And who is doing that? it's the rider sitting behind who decides where this animal needs to go.

2. A ship.

If James were in today's world, his idea of ships would have been completely shaken up because all those that he called ships were much smaller than the boats today. Ships today are huge. And though the ships may have grown in size 100-fold, or even more, the rudder actually has not grown as much. It's gone up just marginally because the rudder is so powerful that it can do what is desired, even in the largest of ships. How does the rudder do it? It is not by its own power but by the captain or pilot on the bridge who decides where the ship must go.

James says that although they are so large and driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder. In those days, they had to navigate by harnessing the power of the winds by utilizing the sails. If they had to go from one direction to another, and the wind was blowing in the opposite direction, conventional thought would be that it is not possible. But, if you set your sails right, and use the rudders in the right manner, you actually get a resultant vector and make the ship go in the direction you want it to. It's the power of the ability to control the rudder and the sails to make the ship move in the direction that the pilot wanted it to go.

Today, it is much easier. You have propulsion. You can direct it in any direction you want to. James is trying to emphasize the idea that there is somebody deciding in which direction it needs to go.

3. A small fire.

Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the fire, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. Examples 1 and 2 were of positive expression, and now, example 3 is of destruction.

The internet has many instances of such forest fires. One of the worst ones was in the year 2016 in the city of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, which claimed some 2,400 buildings. It was said to be one of the worst fires in 100 years, laying claim to at least 14 deaths. What was the cause of that forest fire? It turns out it was just two kids playing with lit matches as they walked along the trail in the Smoky Mountains. That's what the tongue is capable of. Small instance of a spark; a great fire which can annihilate large forests.

Why does James use these 3 examples? Basically, he is expounding the word in Matthew 12:33-35 where it says, "From the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks." How you are inside, comes out through your mouth. It comes out through your tongue, and the words that you speak. That's how the tongue is able to not only destroy you in a situation where it speaks out of context or irrelevantly, it has the potential to destroy communally. It is able to cause destruction outward. And for that is required a change not just of the situation, but a change of the heart.

vv.6 onwards, James is putting more emphasis on the destructive power of the tongue. I'm going to read The Message version to give it a little more weightage.

<sup>5-6</sup> It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell.

What is the word trying to say here? That this tongue has the ability to corrupt the whole person. It can wreak havoc, it can create chaos, and it can destroy relationships. I'm sure each one of us has had instances in our lives where one careless word spoken in a fit of anger or a spur of the moment, has caused a crack in a relationship. And if it was not mended, it had the potential of taking that crack, literally wedging through it and making sure that it was ruined forever. That's the potential that the tongue has. Not only that, it's got the capability of polluting the entire body. It can corrupt our hearts. And when we get corrupted from inside, the outward expression of that is literally what I read earlier from the psalms – the filth and the rot that comes out from our throats.

It's the words, it's the expression which can cause nothing but destruction. We then end up slandering people, we end up putting down people, we end up using words which are just not right. And as a result, we cause an immense amount of change with the people around us.

But when we look at the ability of the tongue to cause so much damage, one would immediately think: Why not set it right? Why not do something about it?

Then James comes in with another ironical statement. In v.7, he says, "Humans have been able to tame all kinds of animals and birds, but why are we not taming our own tongues?" He gives references to birds, reptiles, sea creatures. I'm sure many of you have been to shows where you have seen animals do a lot of tricks. One of those which I happened to see was with my family in Tenerife, with orca whales, or killer whales. One of the whales sang 'My heart will go on', the Celine Dion song,

along with the conductor. Amazing! And then, there are simultaneous videos where a similar animal has actually crushed his trainer's body because of its natural instinct.

That's what James is saying: The tongue is just not possible to be tamed. It's been compared to a restless evil, one which is full of deadly poison. He also uses the comparison of a venomous snake. We all think that we have the ability to tame our tongue. We can probably teach it tricks, we can probably cage it, we can set certain parameters. But the tongue somehow has a mind of its own. It actually lashes out when it wants to lash out. We can defang it, but we can't remove the venom from it. That is what James is emphasizing, and each one of us has seen it happen. No matter how controlled and composed we are with the situation, our tongue outdoes it. It ensures that when it wants to speak out, it speaks out. And when it starts speaking out, it speaks out with no control. That's why James calls it 'restless evil, full of deadly poison'.

vv. 9 onwards, he says that there is something hypocritical about the tongue. "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. This thing should not be so." Why does he say that? Because, he says, we were all created by God in His image, and part of that image was an expression of our emotion. Ability to communicate and words play a significant role in that. And so, the purpose of the tongue was to express to one another in love, to edify each other, and for the greater purpose of glorifying God. Yet, with that tongue we also curse human beings.

Come Sunday morning, we are all in praise and worship here with the hands lifted up, singing nice songs. And Sunday afternoon, we are in the nearest restaurant starting a gossip session on what we saw in church and what somebody did. Through the week, we have our morning prayer, and then we are ready to go into office, our workplace, our schools, and then we are ready to put down the other person with an agenda to get ahead. And for that, we will say and do whatever we feel like. We may have our quiet time with God, and then immediately we are on our mobile phones to comment our point of view on social media and what others have commented on. There is this relentless impulse to always speak and put your point of view on how you felt about things.

Blessings and curses come from the same tongue. With our tongues we bless the Lord, but then we curse people who are made in the very image. One moment we can be saying beautiful, up-building words, words of blessings; and at the very next moment tearing that person down for life. That is the ability that we hold with this tongue. And James is saying that this is just outright wrong. This should not happen. If we're living a life of hypocrisy where we are able to do these two aspects, then we have actually not really committed our lives to Lord Jesus. We are not fully depended on Him to be able to allow Him to have control on our words and our utterances. We just speak our minds. We don't have the bridle on our tongue.

Ephesians 4:29 says, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouth, but only such as is good for building up as it fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." And this is another aspect where we all fail. We have this urge to constantly give free advice. We want to always speak out. We have an opinion about everything whether we know the best of it or not. And we always say, "In my point of view" or "in my opinion", and we actually speak out. And the word of God says, "Speak only if the time is right."

He uses other examples.

- "A spring cannot pour out fresh water and salt water." I don't know how many of you have seen fresh water springs. There are very few salt water springs. But one spring cannot do both. It just does not happen. It either gives you fresh water which you can drink out of, or it

gives you salt water which you cannot drink it. you can't set a clock and say: Today is Saturday. I'm going to get fresh water out of that spring.

- "A fig tree cannot bear olives. A grapevine cannot produce figs because it's just not the nature of that plant." These are two individual plants which have a different purpose of what they produce. "And a salt pond cannot yield fresh water."

What is the purpose of these examples? He's basically saying that a disciple of Lord Jesus cannot have a mouth that speaks curses, cannot have a mouth that brings hurtful words, cannot have a mouth which has inconsiderate words, impure words, or words that do not build up. And that applies to each and every one of us. If we are disciples of Lord Jesus, and we believe to be Christians in our ways, then our words cannot be two-timing, cannot be hurtful, cursing and inconsiderate, or do not build up.

So, if springs cannot produce fresh water, Christians cannot speak blessings and curses. If fig trees cannot bear olives, then Christians cannot use their tongues unchecked. There has to be some control on what you're doing.

When we look at all these verses, then we need to understand what else can be done. James said: Don't do this because you're incapable of doing it. and if you speak, this is the damage you're going to do. So, make sure you control it. but it is not easy. There has got to be something more that we are able to do. And it's pretty simple. It's just five checkpoints.

#### **CHECKPOINTS:**

1. **Refrain from attack words.** Refrain from lashing out. Matthew 5:44 "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." That's our response. Whenever you're in a situation where the rude guy in the vehicle overtaking and cutting you, before cursing him, bless him. Pray that he reaches home safely. You'll find much more peace in that. I find that very difficult to do, but my mom does that. When she sees the guy rashly cutting across, she just blesses him and prays for him to reach home safely. It helps when you pray and bless. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
2. **Refrain from gossip.** Proverbs 20:19 "He who reveals secrets is a constant gossip; avoid someone with a big mouth." Every time somebody walks up to you and says: Did you hear? Say: I didn't and I don't want to. That's the only solution, because if you sit down and: "Ya, tell me all about it," you started something really bad.
3. **Use clean words.** Matthew 12:36 "But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken." Going back to my childhood days, those days we were not so exposed as today's kids are. I would come across some words that I would hear from some of the other kids. And I would come up to dad and ask him: what does this mean? Why did he use that? Dad's answer was: All those words that people use which don't make sense or which are not right, are those who don't have a vocabulary to fill the right words. And so the task that he gave me was to refer to the Roget's Thesaurus, look for all the synonyms and antonyms and find the right word to fill in the right place in the right statement and use it rightly. That's how I built up my ability to use the right words, clean words, because there's always something filthier to fill in a statement. And sadly, that is what is missing today. The dictionary or the thesaurus is not in the center of the bookshelf. Kids are exposed to every kind of word and language that they hear, and they fill that into their statements. It's become the 'in' thing. We need to learn to use clean words.

- 4. Use truthful words.** James 5:12 says, “But let your ‘Yes’ be yes, and your ‘No’ be no.” I remember my wife made it a point to tell my children that they should not say, ‘I promise’. There’s no such thing as ‘I promise’. If you have said yes, you will be held accountable for the word you said: yes. And if they said no, then we will take you at the value of the word that you said. If we don’t give them the ability and we don’t teach the importance of our ‘yes’ being yes, and our ‘no’ being no, then we allow discredibility to come in. Lying brings a loss of credibility. It’s a situation which will land you getting more and more stuck. It’s not going to get you out. If you start by lying, and you think that it’s a little white lie, and does not hurt anyone, there’s no such thing as that. It’s only going to make the situation worse.

There’s a funny story. This lady wanted to hold a feast for the guest coming over in the evening. She goes to the butcher’s shop and asks for a chicken. He goes to his freezer and finds only one chicken left. So he takes it out and brings it to her and says it weighs 2 lbs. She said, “That’s a little small for me. Can you give me something bigger than that?” Knowing that he doesn’t have one more, he could very well have told her that this was all he had. But he goes back to the freezer, puts it back and takes the same bag out. And he says, “Yeah, I got this – 3 lbs. She said, “Great! I’ll take both of them.” It’s a situation that can only land you up in a worse condition.

- 5. Use edifying words.** I already read Ephesians 4:29. “No rotten talk should come from your mouth, but only what is good for the building up of someone in need, in order to give grace to those who yearn.” When you look at Ephesians 4:29, it is something that is very essential. It is something that we can easily adopt. The world, when you look at it, they use the acronym ‘T-H-I-N-K’. I heard that in school. I’m sure many of you think before you speak:

T – is it truthful?  
H – is it helpful?  
I – is it inspiring?  
N – is it necessary?  
K – is it kind?

That’s how the world says: think before you speak. The Bible has made it much easier; just instead of these five points, it is made it into three points:

- Is it good for edification?
- Is it right for the time?
- Does it give grace to those who hear it?

If we can stick to just these three points of whether it’s edifying, whether it’s at the right opportune moment, and whether it brings grace to the situation, then your words will mean what they were meant to be, rather than being empty words.

Trust you are blessed.

Amen.

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