

Is There a Cure for Foot-in-Mouth Disease? (James 3:2-8a)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on October 18, 2009

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Reader's Digest tells of a catering manager planning a party for a young couple and their new baby. The manager didn't know a lot of details, but as she met with the young couple in person, she thought she would pay a compliment to the mother when she first saw her: "You look like you've lost most of your pregnancy weight." "Thanks," came the clenched-teeth reply. "We adopted."¹ Add that to your mental note file of what NOT to say! Another example of Jas 3:2, "we all stumble in many ways" in what we say.

Maybe you've heard about the young man working at the grocery store in the green produce section. His first day on the job an old woman came up to him and said she wanted to buy just half a head of lettuce. He tried to dissuade her from her request, explaining he wasn't allowed to cut produce in half, it was all or nothing, but she persisted. Finally, he told her "I'll have to go to the back and talk to the manager." He went to the rear of the store to talk to the manager but didn't notice that the woman was right behind him following him, very impatiently and unhappily. He got to the back and said to the manager, "There's a stupid old lady in the store who wants to buy only half a head of lettuce. What should I tell her?" Seeing the horrified face of the manager and then turning to see the woman behind him, he quickly added, "and this nice lady wants to buy the other half of the head of lettuce. Will that be alright?" Considerably relieved, the manager said, "That will be fine."

Later in the day he congratulated the boy on his quick thinking. He asked the new employee, "where are you from?" The boy replied, "I'm from Toronto, Canada, home of beautiful hockey players and ugly women." The manager looked at him and said, "My wife is from Toronto." The boy replied without missing a beat, "Oh, what team does she play for?"²

We could all multiply examples from our own lips of trouble our own lips have got us in, proving what James 3 will tell us again: we all stumble in many ways in what we say. This chapter will have no shortage of illustrations, examples, and metaphors of the universal problem someone has called "foot-in-mouth disease," or what James 1:19 calls being "quick to speak." We may smile when *another* guy puts his foot in his mouth, but when *we* do it, it's not necessarily funny when *we* stumble in what we say, as James says we all do, sadly all too often. Our mouth can get us into trouble very easily, and it's not always very easy to get out of that trouble.

Is there a cure for foot-in-mouth disease? Can the tongue be tamed? The Jewish rabbis had taught there's a good reason God designed the tongue to be caged in by two rows of teeth! We've already studied in James that we are to be *quick to hear and slow to speak*, and James 3 now returns to that theme and explains why.

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

⁵ So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. ⁸ But no one can tame the tongue ...

Can the tongue be tamed by man? No. Is there hope for imperfect people like us who sin in many ways with our lips? Yes. But the solution is not from us – the problem is from us. The disease *is us*; the cure is found *outside of us*. Vs. 6 says sinful speech corrupts / defiles the whole body (like a disease). We need to begin in v. 2, recognizing we all sin in what we say, or as Jeremiah 17:9 says, recognizing our heart is desperately wicked, *incurably* sick. Paul compared sinful words to *gangrene* (like spreading *cancer*). As the prophet Isaiah said, we all have the disease of spiritual *leprosy*, we are all unclean like ancient Israelites with a *contaminating illness*.

In Numbers 12, Miriam sins against Moses with her speech and God strikes her with leprosy as a vivid picture of how serious the sin is of even grumbling or complaining against a leader. On other occasions some murmured against God's appointed authority and God actually sent diseases and plagues to wipe them out and on one occasion the only cure was to look to the remedy He provided. Like a snake's poison (v. 8b) the venom of the viper in our mouth spreads through the body – but there is an antidote in Christ who in John 3 said He would be lifted up like that snake in the wilderness. Our only hope is to look to the crucified Christ and His grace. But first we need to understand the problem we all have, right in here.

God was gracious in Miriam's case to heal her from her disease caused by her sinful speech, and we can be thankful God can be, and has been, gracious in our sinful words and attitudes, too. But in light of His grace and by His grace, believers should want their speech to be more and more seasoned by grace (Col. 4:6) to others. There is much hope, healing, and help in James 3 for sinful mouths

In v. 1 James begins by warning about being teachers, because the one who uses his tongue more and before more people will have more accountability before God. We looked at this verse in detail last week, and I hope I didn't bog you down in too much detail about teachers and students in ancient times, but we can't overstate the importance of teachers in biblical times, especially those who teach the Bible (which is the focus of James in v. 1). God's Word should be elevated, but James warns against elevating yourself as a teacher of God's Word prematurely, pridefully or presumptuously (i.e., with a wrong heart-motive, ambition for self, arrogant heart).

This warning from the prior context is picked up in the following context in v. 14, where it says *But if you have ... selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.*

Notice the sinful speech (lying, boasting, etc.) comes from selfish ambition in the heart (the root; speech is the fruit). This is the point we'll see more next week in v. 9-12: the heart, the nature within is the key issue to address in sinful speech, because Jesus said it's from the abundance / overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks. The tongue reveals the health within or lack of health of a person.

Sinful speech is addressed in all 5 chapters of the book of James, but James 3 is its most concentrated teaching in the entire Bible. The end of James 2 has been emphasizing that words are not enough; there must be works to go along with them (ex: 2:14-17). But words are not *unimportant*, he hastens to explain in chapter 3. In fact, both words *and* works are evidence of where the heart is. A major theme of James is that when genuine faith is present, God truly saves someone and God then gives him a transformed heart resulting in a transformed life. One proof is transformed speech:

James 1:26 *If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.*

That's the same image as Jas 3:2 (tongue-bridle), and it shows the serious warning that those whose lives are marked by habitually unbridled uncontrolled speech – unchanged speech because of an unchanged unsaved heart – their Christianity is self-deceptive and worthless to save, no matter what they may think of themselves.

But even those who are saved still stumble and struggle at times to bridle their tongues. I've heard many Christians give testimony of how God saved them, and one of the first changes they noticed was in their speech – chronic cussing, foul language and jokes – some even changed overnight (not that they never slipped again, but it was such a change they had to attribute it to God). Other sins of the tongue, though, can continue for many years for Christians and can cause much damage in individuals and even in entire churches.

It's said 'it takes a baby two years to learn to talk and fifty years to learn to keep his mouth shut ... Another has expressed it this way:

If your lips would keep from slips,
Five things to observe with care:
To whom you speak, of whom you speak,
And how, and when, and where. —Author unknown

... [J. Vernon McGee wrote:] I think the church is more harmed by the termites within than by the woodpeckers on the outside. Someone has put it like this: “[You are] master of the unspoken word, but the spoken word is master of you.” In other words, my friend, once you have said it, it is beyond your control.’³

James 3:2-8 gives 4 metaphors of the mouth needing control:

1. An Unbridled Horse (v. 2-3)
2. An Undirected Ship (v. 4)
3. An Unstoppable Fire (v. 5-6)
4. An Untamable Creature (v. 7-8a)

1. An Unbridled Horse

In v. 2 James spoke of the bridle, and v. 3 speaks of its bit that goes in the mouth: ³ *Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.*

The bit and bridle is a biblical image for both restraint and control.

Psalm 32:9 *Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding, Whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check ...*

To James, practicing self-control is like breaking in a wild horse.

Bridles are the harnesses which go over the horses' heads and hold the **bits in the horses' mouths**. Connected to the bit are the reins. Though the bit itself is a very small piece of steel, yet if a person can control that bit, he can control the behavior of the horse. So the tongue can direct the life—either for good or for evil.⁴

Ben-Hur illustration: controlled horses = great use with bit/bridle. Great Arabian horses can be reined in. Such massive and mighty creatures can be guided by such a small bit, which is what James emphasizes (even in English, “little bit” and “itty bit” capture). A relatively small bit can lead and guide the entire body of the horse, and the relatively small tongue can guide the direction of your life. Point: if you can govern this little part, you can govern the whole.

When James speaks of the bit, control and restraint is pictured. We must say “whoa” to our words before we speak them too hastily.⁵

The horse doesn't bridle itself though, and no mere human can tame his wild tongue by mere human effort and natural power, but by God's almighty supernatural power, the mustang in our mouth can be broken like a horse and bridled. We must tame, restrain, and rein back our “horse voice” (pardon the pun) or it can do more damage than a bucking bronco. A wild horse broken and brought under control has great usefulness to the master, but an untamed tongue is like a wild runaway stallion. My teacher Mrs. Obert used to say “hold your horses,” when we'd start talking too fast or getting ahead of ourselves, and Marilla Cuthbert used to say “hold your tongue, child” with the same connotation. My mom used to say “if you can't think of something good to say, don't say it.”

James used to say: *Be quick to hear and slow to speak ...* (1:19).

The Apostle Paul used to say: *Let no unwholesome word **proceed from your mouth**, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. **Do not grieve the Holy Spirit ...*** (Eph. 4:29-30).

When a true believer does not bridle his tongue, it grieves the Holy Spirit Whose fruit is self-control and Who is present within to help. Wild tongues can be broken and bridled by God's power to be a blessing instead, if we will look to the Savior for grace, lean on the Holy Spirit for help, and learn from the Scriptures and obey them. If you could just work on those 2 verses:

- James 1:19 (*be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger*)
- Eph. 4:29 (don't let any unwholesome or unhelpful words come out, but only what edifies, is needful at that time, and gives grace)

If we all could memorize, internalize, and daily apply just those 2 verses with care and prayer for 2 weeks, our lives and relationships could be revolutionized. If all Christians obeyed those 2 commands regularly (not perfectly but persistently), I think much, if not most, interpersonal conflicts, family breakups, even church splits, would greatly diminish if not disappear altogether.

There is great protection in a bridled mouth, but there is great power and potential damage even worse than a horse's rear kick, when this little tongue is left running like an unbridled horse.

The second comparison James uses to make this same point is the:

2. Undirected Ship

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.*

In the Jewish law tradition of a testimony needing two or three witnesses, James adds another witness to prove his point (like at the end of chapter 2, he uses Abraham and Rahab as witnesses for his point that true faith produces works that justify faith's claims).

Look at the ships also – in the Mediterranean Sea, or wherever the 12 tribes were dispersed abroad, they were all familiar with ships, including great ships that even in that day could carry hundreds of people (Acts 27:37 speaks of a boat Paul was prisoner on that had 276 passengers). That chapter is a good illustration of the strong winds James speaks of here, as is Jonah 1 and Psalm 107. Modern boats not only hold hundreds, they can hold thousands of passengers. But the remarkable truth or any is that despite great size, they “*are still directed by a very small rudder*”

‘the Queen Elizabeth weighed 83,673 gross tons. The rudder of that ship weighed ... less than 2/10th of 1% of the total. Yet when the rudder is **turned**, it controls the direction of the ship itself. It seems incredible that a man can control so huge a vessel with such a relatively small device; yet this is exactly what happens ... we should not misjudge the power of the tongue by its size.’⁶

Most of us weigh between 100 and 250 pounds – a man's tongue, though, only weighs about 70 grams (about 60 for grown woman). But this relatively little member of our mouth affects the whole, just as the largest cruise ship today is driven and directed by a very small rudder relative to its size (captain drives by a little joystick).

That's a tremendous power but that's also a terrifying potential for danger if it's not under control. The whole could crash into a reef or wreck on the rocks, and could sink many a life not steered right. A president's tongue can cause a war, a commander's tongue can send a fleet of battleships, and a betrayer's tongue can effectively sink them by giving away their location to the enemy's air force.

Loose lips sink ships, was an old war saying, and in the church, loose lips shoot down individuals, destroy reputations more than any WWII cannon destroyed people, and can shipwreck churches. The power of an individual tongue can be illustrated in individuals whose tongues shaped history: Winston Churchill, Adolph Hitler. Rudders drive ships and tongues can drive armies and nations. The greatest battleship ever made in its time was the WWII German *Bismarck*, a ship Hitler's army boasted as “unsinkable.” Winston Churchill of Britain had ordered his armed forces to hunt and sink that *Bismarck* (which later inspired a song of the story). One report says it was the loose lips of a Norweigan at a cocktail party in Stockholm on May 20, 1941, that made it to the British navy, alerting them to the location of the Nazi's famous warship.

But in the ensuing battle, Britain's flagship *HMS Hood*, pride of their Royal Navy, proved no match for the German *Bismarck* which quickly destroyed the British battleship. Maybe this German ship would prove to be unsinkable after all?

One article says 'the *Bismarck* had blown up Britain's finest battleship, the *Hood*, in an eight-minute duel earlier in the mission, then [wangled its way] successfully through the fleetwide snare spread across the North Atlantic to trap it. The British high command agreed nothing short of a miracle, after that, could avert a disaster that well might translate into victory for Hitler. But they got their miracle ... Naval historians credit a "lucky hit" [on May 27] by a torpedo dropped from an outdated Swordfish dive bomber—an archaic British naval biplane. Others cite nothing less than Providence [that guided the bomb to the ship's one weak spot] ... The Swordfish, by appearance, was a pathetic David pitted against a Goliath of a warship; it was capable of a mere 95 mph cruising speed and equipped with a single torpedo. It hardly could be expected to injure the *Bismarck*, which steadily was nearing the French coast and the protection of Luftwaffe air cover. Yet, in the second attack on the evening of 26 May, a Swordfish coming in low over the battleship's stern scored—barely—a hit. The torpedo struck the very rear of the *Bismarck*, appearing to cause little damage. But in reality, it was a mortal blow, jamming the **rudder** and all but eliminating the battleship's steering ability. Through the night, the British high command listened to reports of the *Bismarck's* erratic course, ecstatically realized what had happened, and marshaled a fleet from converging directions to deliver ... a withering long-distance assault ... an estimated 400 British shells [as the *Bismarck* spun as an undirected ship, a sitting duck, that would soon be sunk]. The *Hood* was avenged and, in the eyes of some historians, the world preserved from Nazi dominion.'⁷

A little rudder makes a big difference. So does your little tongue, which uncontrolled is like an unbridled horse or an undirected ship

3. Unstoppable Fire (v. 5-6)

So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.

Little words that come from little tongues can boast great power: Fire!

Land!

Guilty!

I have a bomb! He's dead ... I love you ... I forgive you.

I Am! (in biblical languages, one word)

It is finished! (one word in Greek)

Luther: "one little word shall fell Satan. That word above all earthly powers..."

An unknown poet wrote:

A careless word may kindle strife.

A cruel word may wreck a life.

A bitter word may hate instill;

A brutal word may smite and kill.

A gracious word may smooth the way;

A joyous word may light the day.

A timely word may lessen stress;

A loving word may heal and bless.

The Scriptures want us to guard our tongues not just for the sake of our own life, but for the sake of the lives of others, as well. 3rd image James uses is of fire which spreads and can damage many. v. 5b-6: *See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.*

A tiny spark has tremendous potential to destroy, as the readers of James would have been well familiar with in their dry brush climate, and which we in California are no strangers too, either. A careless smoker or campfire not controlled can destroy a forest, and a careless tongue not controlled can destroy a community.

‘**Fire** has the amazing and virtually unique capacity to reproduce itself in an almost unlimited way as long as it has fuel to burn ... **fire** feeds on itself. If there is sufficient flammable material and enough oxygen to sustain combustion, it will burn on indefinitely. On October 8, 1871, at about eight-thirty in the evening, a lantern in Mrs. O’Leary’s barn, presumably kicked over by her cow, ignited the great Chicago fire. Before it could be contained, 17,500 buildings were destroyed ... [costing the city \$400 million in damages and] 125,000 ... were left homeless.’⁸

‘In the tinder-dry conditions of Palestine a forest fire was almost immediately out of control; and no man can control the damage of the tongue ... There is nothing so impossible to kill as a rumour; there is nothing so impossible to obliterate as an idle and malignant story. Let a man, before he speaks, remember that once a word is spoken it is gone from his control; and let him think before he speaks because, although he cannot get it back, he will most certainly answer for it.’⁹

James 3:6 says “*the tongue is a fire ...*” – but fire needs fire-starter

Proverbs 16 (NASB) ²⁷ *A worthless man **dig**s up evil, **While his words are like scorching fire.** ²⁸ A perverse man **spread**s strife, And a **slanderer** separates intimate friends.*

The damage from fire is not easily undone, so James warns us of its danger so that we can stop the fire before it starts. Matthew Henry said if you dread fires and flames, you should dread contentions, revilings, slanders, lies, and every thing that would kindle the fire of wrath in your own spirit or in the spirits of others.

Spurgeon: ‘We should watch day and night lest the fire of sin should break out in the midst of the community, and on its first appearing we should be ready at once to quench it with the water of life. Our eye should carefully mark the first uprising of the fires of strife, lest anger and ill-will should mar the union of the church of Christ ... anything which concerns any part of the church concerns us all. Knowing how great a matter a little fire kindleth, we should all be eager in the spirit of love to quench the tiniest spark, which may become the mother of a flame. There are many ways in which the fire of evil may break out besides that of strife ... worldliness, or sin; but if the evil be speedily detected the outburst may be kept within limits, and stopped before it leads to a general conflagration. Since we never know when evil may come we must always watch unto prayer ... Before the cry is heard, “Fire! Fire!” we must be already on the road to it [to extinguish it].’

Alas! too many seem to be of a very different mind, for they are amusing themselves with spiritual-dreaming and worldliness while the fires are raging all around them, and men are perishing in them. Like Nero they sit fiddling on the top of the tower while the city is burning; they are indifferent to the mischief which ought to arouse all their zeal. Woe unto them ... O believer, stand upon thy watch-tower, and weary not ...'¹⁰

James 3:6 goes on to say the tongue is “*a world of iniquity*” – the strongest statement perhaps in Scripture on how much sin is in a tongue and how far-reaching its effects can be.

“... *which defiles the entire body*” – so many of us think we can avoid being defiled if we don't have TV or avoid worldly people altogether, but Jesus taught it's not what goes into a man that defiles him, it's what comes out of a man that defiles him. We are defiled by what we say, James agrees, corrupt speech reveals a corrupt heart. The tongue is a tattle tale of what's going on inside.

“... *and sets on fire the course of our lives*” (or “nature,” or “wheel of birth,” or “circle of life” but not in New Age / Lion King sense)

‘The ancients used the picture of the wheel [or *circle / course*, the term in v. 6] to describe life in ... different ways.

(i) The wheel is a circle, a rounded and complete whole, and, therefore, the wheel of life can mean *the totality of life*.

(ii) Any particular point in the wheel is always moving up or down. Therefore, the wheel of life can stand for *the ups and downs of life* ...

(iii) The wheel is circular; it is always turning back upon itself in exactly the same circle; therefore, the wheel came to stand for *the cyclical repetition of life* ... the phrase most probably means *the whole of life and living*. What James is saying is that the tongue can kindle a destructive fire which can destroy all life; and the tongue itself is kindled with the very fire of hell.’¹¹

‘It is as though the tongue is at the center or hub of the wheel of nature and, like a fireworks display, the wheel is **set on fire** at the center. The more it burns, the faster it revolves until the whole wheel spins in a blaze, spitting fire in all directions. But the tongue is only the fuse; the source of the deadly fire is **hell** itself (lit., “Gehenna,” a place in the Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem ... where continuous burning of rubbish made it a fit illustration of the lake of fire).¹² That's the unstoppable nature of the tongue's fire.

The tongue is an unbridled horse, undirected ship, unstoppable fire

4. An Untamable Creature

⁷ *For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.* ⁸ *But no one can tame the tongue ...*

How's that for an encouraging end to a sermon! We'll pick up with this last point next week, but there is actually an encouraging note in this text in these 4 images James uses, that not everyone catches. Each illustration shows us our hopelessness but each also has hope.

- The tongue cannot be tamed by the human race, but as Jesus said, what's impossible with man is possible w/ God!

- The horse cannot bridle itself (but its Master can)!
- The ship cannot steer itself through stormy seas (but the Captain can, and Jesus is Captain of our soul)
- The fire that burns like hell can be overcome by a greater power from heaven, transforming the tongues of sinful men

Remember Peter? He had a fiery tongue that caused trouble. Jesus even once said to him, “Get behind me, Satan” (words from hell)!

But on the day of Pentecost, another fire from heaven came down like tongues of fire, and settled above him and the others, and Peter went out and preached the gospel with Holy Spirit fire and power. Though he had denied Jesus 3x a few weeks earlier, Jesus gave Him grace and 3x reaffirmed “do you love me?” and then 3x commissioned Peter to feed the flock (i.e., use your mouth again that I have forgiven to teach my grace to my church). For Peter, original charter member of the foot-in-mouth club, the right kind of fiery tongue now empowered him to preach the gospel powerfully and to start a blaze that would eventually set the world on fire, effecting thousands that day and many millions since!

‘If we must say that the outworking of sin first appeared in the abuse of speech (Gn. 3:12 ...), we must also say that the first act in the new creation was the renewal of the power of speech, a tongue intelligibly declaring the wonderful works of God (Acts 2:11). Maybe this is what James wants us to learn from verses 7–8a. Would not this be a marvellous display of the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ in our lives, if our tongues were as his: ‘No man ever spoke like this man!’ (Jn. 7:46)? In the Greek of John’s Gospel these words have the same sort of order as that in [James 3:8]: the noun ‘man’ is held back right to the end of the sentence for emphasis: ... ‘never did one speak thus—no *man*’¹³

What no man can do, our Lord can do, transforming our tongues. The same Lord’s grace gives help in extinguishing sinful speech:

Proverbs 26 (NIV)¹⁸ *Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows¹⁹ is a man who deceives his neighbor ...²⁰ Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down.²¹ As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.*

Proverbs 12:18 (NIV) *Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

There is healing in wisely sincerely humbly confessing your sin to those you sin against: “I was wrong to speak that way. That was sin, and by God’s grace I have repented to God but I’m also sorry for any hurt or pain I caused you. Will you please forgive me?”

There is healing and hope for us who sin with our lips, by Christ’s stripes we can be healed of sin’s scars, even deep verbal wounds.

¹ *Reader's Digest*, June, 2005, p. 67.

² "Taming the Tongue," by Steve Hereford, sermon dated 2/14/1999 at <http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=12300052755>

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