James Lesson 5 (2022)

**TAMING THE TONGUE AND MATURE FAITH**

James 3:1-18

Key Verse: 3:2

“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.”

One of the primary purposes of God’s salvation is that we, who are forgiven and escape the corruption of this world by God’s mercy, may participate in the divine nature in every aspect of our lives and become mature. In the last two chapters in the book of James, we learn that faith, which is not accompanied by good deeds, is dead and pointless. In today’s passage, James continues to elaborate on the characteristics of mature believers. He asked a rhetorical question to prove his point in verse 13, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” Yes, it said, “By deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” According to this verse, we learn that mature faith is proved by their good deeds done in humility. So make no mistake. Faith without good deeds is dead and worthless.

As we read Chapter 3, we notice that James talks a lot about taming our tongue in verses 1-12. I wondered why he does so. I think it’s because unless we can control the words of our mouth, we cannot indeed become mature and wise believers. I read this passage many times. So, it’s frustrating for me to study this passage again while I remain unable to tame my tongue. Taming the words of our mouths is exceptionally difficult. But it is essential to all believers' spiritual health and maturity, both individually and collectively. I think that’s why Pastor James highlights this matter. As a matter of fact, our spiritual maturity starts only when we begin to tame our tongues. Otherwise, our religion or spirituality is worthless. This morning, as we study this passage, I like us to think about how we can tame our tongue so that we may use it for God’s glory and the good of others.

Look at verse 1. “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” In UBF, almost everybody is encouraged to become a Bible teacher. Many years ago, when I was asked to teach the Bible for the first time, I was worried. I asked myself, *“How can I teach others when I don’t have enough knowledge and faith?”* Of course, we can’t teach others unless we know what we are talking about. However, behind the encouragement is that teaching is one of the best ways to learn. The Bible study ministry in UBF isn't necessarily teaching others, either one-to-one or in a group. Instead, it’s more like sharing God’s words together. When we share God’s words with others, we learn a lot from each other.

By the way, when Pastor James said that not many of us should become teachers, he wasn’t discouraging us from sharing God’s words. Instead, he was saying that we should not try to take a higher position as a leader in the church. Why not? It’s because teachers or leaders will be judged more strictly than others. Teachers or leaders will be held accountable to God with a higher standard. I am a pastor of this church. I know that I am expected to a higher standard than most of us here. I am accountable for what I teach and do. Sometimes, it makes me sweat because I know I am imperfect and make many mistakes.

Look at verse 2. “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.” James acknowledges that we, as humans or as Christians, stumble in many ways, meaning that we do many wrong things. It’s frustrating that we get it wrong every time we open our mouths. And James was not an exception. We noticed that Pastor James does not beat around the bush. He was a straight talker. We find some of his words were aggressive, harsh, and forceful. Although we know it was to clarify his point, I am sure that his aggressive words might have offended some people. It seems that he admitted his own mistakes by saying, “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.”

It’s not the first time James has talked about the importance of controlling the words of our mouths. He said in 1:19, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” He also noted in 1:26, “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.” So what do you think the hallmark of a mature person is? It’s a controlled tongue (pic #1). Colossians 4:6 states, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

How can our conversation be full of grace? Well, it’s not good enough to say the right things to others unless it was done at the right time and in the proper manner and right tone of voice. I wish I had some special training to control my tongue. Well, nobody taught me how to do it. I didn’t discipline myself either. Why not? Because I didn’t think it was such a big deal. After all, it’s an uncomfortable subject, which nobody really wants to talk about. But I am impressed with Pastor James elaborated on the importance of controlling the words of our mouth. He gives various illustrations to highlight his teaching in verses 3-12.

In verses 3-5a, he illustrates that small things cause significant effects. Look at verses 3-5a. “When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 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. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes a great boast.” James gives examples of small objects with significant effects in these verses: For instance, the horse has a big body. An Arabian horse weighs nearly 1,000 LBS. But such a big horse can be maneuvered by a small piece of tool, called **“a bit.”** (Pic#2) What about a large ship? A large ship can move by strong wind or by a powerful engine. Yet, the ship captain uses only a small rudder to make it go in any direction he wants (pic#3). Small devices can cause a considerably huge effect.

Likewise, our tongues are tiny, but they significantly affect our lives. When James said **“our tongues,”** he meant **“words of our mouths.”** (pic#4)

Pastor James was telling us that we should control the words of our mouths, then we can manage a lot of things in our lives even though it’s very hard. That’s true and amazing. We often train our children to control what they say because we know that the words of their mouths have a significant effect on them and others. Likewise, we should also force ourselves to hold our tongues properly. Psalm 141:3 states, “Take control of what I say, O Lord, and guard my lips.” (NLT)

Look at verses 5b-6. “Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 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.” Here, James compares our tongue to a fire or a world of evil that corrupts the whole body in these verses. We know that it takes only a tiny spark to start a forest fire! (Pic#5) James said that untamed tongues are set on fire by hell. What does it mean? It means that unless we control the words of our mouths, we can experience hell in our lives and cause tremendous damage to others. Someone once joked that when he went to heaven, he only saw that the people there only had ears and no tongues because their tongues went to hell. Indeed, our untamed tongues are restless evil and deserve punishment.

Verses 7-10 state that our tongues are untamable. Look at verses 7-10. “All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.” What James points out in these verses sounds hopeless because our tongues are untamable, and as a result, we are inconsistent and even hypocritical.

So what shall we do with our untamable tongue? Someone might think, *“Well, since my tongue is evil, I’d better cut it off.”* But don’t do that. That would not solve the problem. The tongue itself is not evil. Instead, we should manage the words of our mouths appropriately. But how can we control our badmouths? It’s not easy. But let’s think about a few tips.

***Tip#1: Listen More, Speak Less.***I often wondered why some people talk endlessly and do not listen to others. It may be because they are hard of hearing. Since they cannot hear well, they rather speak. But another reason that some people keep talking and not listening is that they are trying to impress their conversational partner with how smart they are. It’s the sense of insecurity. Another reason people talk too much may be because they are anxious, too excited, or proud. But the truth is that talking too much can often lead us to say more than we should. And it often irritates our conversational partners. Proverbs 10:19 states, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech.” (NRSV) We don’t always have to speak, and silence is golden.

***Tip#2: Avoid Unwholesome Talk.*** To talk about someone, especially someone you don’t like, can be addictive. Even though we may rationalize by saying we are just telling what we heard, it’s unhealthy. People like to talk about others. We call it gossip. But after talking about others too much, do we feel great? No. We feel empty and heavy. We have to avoid the unwholesome talk, not even with our close friends. Ephesians 4:29 states, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” If someone comes to you and starts to gossip, you don’t have to gossip together. Remember that *“Those who gossip to you will gossip about you.”* (Pic#6) The words of our mouths have the power to uplift others or to put them down. We, as Christian believers, should use the words of our mouth to encourage one another and edify the body of Christ.

***Tip#3: Purify the Heart (11-18).*** Look at verses 11-12.“Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.” In these verses, James asks rhetorical questions to address the importance of inner purity. It’s because what we say begins in our minds and hearts. Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 15:17-18, “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.” So in order to tame the words of our mouth, we should first clean our minds and hearts through a sincere reflection of God’s words and repentance.

Psalm 51:10 states, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” Self-control and restraining the tongue are essential, as James puts it. But it is only partial. The best remedy is to have a humble and pure heart. Unless our minds and hearts are transformed and renewed by the Holy Spirit, our tongues are untamable.

In verse 13, James comes back to his main point that mature Christians are not just good talkers. Their maturity and wisdom are proved by the honorable life, doing good works in their day-to-day lives. Look at verse 13. “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” Here, the phrase “deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” stands out. James says that the wisdom that comes from heaven is humble, not proud or selfish.

In verses 14-17, James compares two kinds of wisdom, false wisdom and true wisdom. Look at verses 14-16. “But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” People harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition for many reasons. Even some people, after becoming believers, still have envy and selfish ambition unless they deal with them with honest and sincere repentance. Dealing with bitter envy and selfish ambition is not easy, especially when deeply embedded and hidden. They may even work hard, appear mature, and get recognition from others. But they are not genuine. How can we know whether they are true? It’s hard to discern. One way to discern is when people harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition, they have a secretive personal life and a conflicted relationship with other believers. They bear bad fruits.

Look at verses 17-18. “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.” People full of God’s wisdom have characteristics of godliness, which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. James’ illustrations of false wisdom and true wisdom remind us of what Apostle Paul said in Galatians 6:7 and 8, which states, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whatever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.”

Let me close my sermon. In light of today’s passage, we learn that Christian life is a life of self-discipline. No one can grow mature spiritually without self-discipline. Among all self-disciplines, taming the words of our mouths can be most difficult, but it is most crucial to Christian maturity. Taking control of our words is not something we do automatically. It should be intentional. Even though we make mistakes repeatedly, we should not despair or give up struggling. God called us to aim high. It does not mean that we exalt ourselves, become proud and self-righteous. Instead, we become humble, honest, genuine, patient, considerate, patient, considerate, flexible, confident, peaceful, lovely, merciful, and happy. It all starts with taking control of the words of our mouth. It’s essential to Christian discipleship, which is the wisdom from heaven.