October 23/24, 2010

A Restless Evil

Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James

James 3:1-12

Pastor Bryan Clark

In Genesis Chapter 1 we learned that we are made in the image of God. That means lots of things but one of the things it means is we've been given the ability to rule over creation. So that is expressed in a number of ways: in our ability to build, in our ability with technology, medicine. All those are expressions of ways we rule over creation. It also includes our ability to tame and train the creatures that God has made. We tame and train whales and elephants and birds and dogs and horses. But, interestingly enough, the Bible says there is one "*beast"* that no man is able to tame. And sadly it is the one beast most likely to destroy you and the people you love.

That's what we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to James 3. We've titled this series *Practically Christian.* I can't imagine a more practical topic than our topic today and I'm just going to warn you upfront, we are not lobbing any softballs today; it's pretty intense! James kind of hinted at this topic a couple of times in chapter one; he gets right after it in chapter three. As a matter of fact there are very few passages—texts in the New Testament—with this level of intensity. The end of chapter two—the second half of chapter two—James talked about the topic of faith and works and essentially said a faith that saves is a faith that works. It's not dead; it's not useless; but it's alive and there's an energy to it and it produces fruit in our lives. It's a faith that works itself out. If you take the chapter divisions out and you just imagine this as an ongoing discussion, there's no question that what James is identifying is one of the most obvious, one of the most significant out-workings of saving faith—this subject of what comes out of our mouth—our tongue.

With that in mind we pick it up in Chapter 3, verse 1:

> **Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.** (*NASB, James 3:1)

Very sobering opening verse—especially for someone in a role like mine—reminding us that when we quote God, we'll be held accountable for what we say. I understand, with my calling, I will incur a stricter judgment. The word **judgment** is not a condemnation; it's a neutral term. It could be positive; it could be negative. The grammar in this text would indicate there were many of them assuming the teaching role and James is trying to slow that down saying, "I wouldn't do that unless you fully understand the ramifications of what it means to speak for God." But this isn't just for me; it's for anybody that spouts theology. It's for anybody that spouts doctrine; it's for anybody that says, "The Bible says…." Pastors, children's teachers, parents with their children, those that get on the internet and blog yourself happy! (Laughter) When we talk about the tongue this morning, we're talking about what comes out of our mouth but we're also talking about your emails; we're talking about your blogs; we're talking about your Facebook. We're talking about every way in which we communicate and recognize—in whatever form it is—when I am speaking for God, when I am saying, "This is what God says," when I'm talking theology, when I'm talking doctrine, when I'm talking Bible, there's a sobering reality that I will be held accountable before God for what I say.

There's kind of this old adage that floats around the church world that the most dangerous member of your church is the first year Bible college student. There's a lot of truth in that. You get just enough knowledge to be dangerous. Suddenly there's a degree of arrogance; suddenly you're a theologian; suddenly everybody's wrong and you're right and people start carelessly and recklessly spouting off. People read a book and suddenly they're theologians and everybody's doing it wrong and they're doing it right. And they get on their blogs and they get on their emails and they let it fly! What James is saying is, "I wouldn't do that too quickly. You need to realize you'll be held accountable because what we're doing is quoting God and it's a serious thing to misquote God." For me, as a preacher, there were two events early in my ministry that really helped me understand this. This first one may seem silly to you but I think all of us as preachers identify. The first time I realized that somebody actually listened and listened to the degree they made a significant life decision, I can't tell you how deeply that unnerved me. There was suddenly this sense that, "This is really serious!" This isn't preaching class anymore. This isn't just some sort of a game we play. This isn't just the church thing. Somebody actually listened and they made a very significant life choice and I remember how deeply that bothered me. My insecurities began to flow. I thought, "*I don't know that I'm up for this*!" This all of a sudden seems really serious.

Sometime later I received a phone call one day from a cowboy out in the Sand Hills—never met him before, doesn't attend our church, but he wanted to come in and talk to me. This is when I was in Broken Bow. When he walked through the door, he was a giant of a man, probably 6'5", 6'6". He was huge and just everything that you would think of a Sand Hills cowboy except, for the next two hours, he sat in my office and he cried like a baby. Now if you know a Sand Hills cowboy, these guys don't cry; these guys are tough! That was part of *the moment;* it was just so out of context, but he couldn't stop weeping as he unpacked his story. His wife had walked out on him; his children had abandoned him and his whole life had come unraveled. He talked about the many times he had thought about killing himself and that he was just hanging on by a thread. Then he said, "The only thing this year that's kept me alive is this," and he reached into his pocket and he pulled out a devotional—a devotional published by Haven of Rest which was a radio ministry out of California. It was a 30-day, what they called an *anchor*. This thing had been so worn down you couldn't even tell what was on the cover. Throughout the pages—and he spent probably an hour going through page by page—he had things written down. Some of the pages he had read so many times, they were so worn, you couldn't even really tell the print. He had marked there: "This was the day that my wife walked out," "This was the day my children abandoned me," "This was the day I thought about killing myself." He had sweat stains; he had tear stains; he had coffee stains. I mean this thing was absolutely worked over. And while he was talking, I became more and more uncomfortable. I felt like Isaiah, in Isaiah 6, when he has his vision and he says, "I'm coming unraveled." That was me! Because the sobering reality was: I had written that devotional. He had no idea. It came from California, but in my days in Broken Bow, I did a lot of that just to keep the bills paid. That comes pretty easy for me; I'd just crank them out! And suddenly I was looking at this man who was hanging on every single word, believing it to be true—it's all he had! And it just absolutely unraveled me; it unnerved me. I found myself thinking, "Wow, this is really serious," and for weeks after that I just couldn't get that imagery out of my head. I wasn't sure I was up for it. It just seemed like the stakes were too high. I have never been the same as a preacher since. It helped me understand this is *very* serious business.

Sometimes people will ask me, "How was your weekend?" I never know quite how to answer that question. I'm guessing my weekend isn't like your weekend. My weekend is joy. I love it when the body gathers; it's the highlight of the week. But it's also filled with a deep sense of restlessness and agony over the seriousness of what I've been called to do. Patti would tell you there's a degree of agony that goes with the weekend of realizing I am going to be held to a stricter judgment for *what*

I'm about to say, *why* I say it and *how* I say it. My family and I—we kind of joke about my Saturday schedule because I am obsessive. It's about nine hours for me and about half of that is preparing my heart and my head and just coming to grips with the reality of this sober calling. I am about to speak for God and I'm going to be held accountable for every word I say and how I say it and why I say it. And the only way I know to prepare for that is to be obsessed with this schedule that rightly prepares me. I could not imagine standing up here without that degree of searching my own heart and my own head because I know that I'll stand accountable before God. But, hey, it isn't just me. It's every life group leader, every Sunday school teacher, anyone who says, "Thus sayeth the Lord." When you're talking theology, when you're talking doctrine, when you're speaking for God, don't be too quick with that because you're going to give an account for whether or not you have rightly represented God. It's a rather sobering thought.

Verse 2:

> **For we all stumble in many ways...***That word stumble is over and over used for sin. We all sin; we all struggle in many ways.* **If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man**...a mature man...**able to bridle the whole body as well.**

Very interesting verse! In essence what James is saying is that what comes out of your mouth is the barometer of your life. He is saying that if you can bridle your mouth, you can bridle your whole body. But, if your mouth is out of control, you are out of control. It's the best barometer we have to our spiritual maturity. The reason for that he's going to tell us later is because not a single one of us has within us the ability to control our tongues. The only hope we have is that the Spirit of God controls our tongues. Therefore, if my mouth is under control, it's evidence of the presence of the Spirit; my life is under control. If my mouth is out of control, it's evidence that the Holy Spirit's not in control, so everything's out of control. That's in essence what he's saying. Then he uses two very simple illustrations.

> **Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. 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.** (Vs. 3-4)

Now I think there's kind of a dual application because he started with teachers. He is making the point that how teachers affect the body, so the pilot affects the ship. So there's this idea that when the teacher speaks truth, then it directs the ship accordingly. When the teacher speaks that which is not true, it steers the ship in a different direction. But it's also *my* tongue and *my* body so there's both a corporate application and an individual application. I think very simply put, he's saying you put this little bit in a horse's mouth and you control a thousand pounds of muscle. You get this little rudder on the back of a ship and he says a great ship with strong winds is controlled by that little rudder in the back of the ship.

Obviously the point he's making is: Even though your tongue is a very little thing, it controls your whole body, your whole sense of self. As a matter of fact that's what he clearly says in verse 5:

> **So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.** *The phrase* ***boasts of great things*** *is almost always derogatory. It's a negative statement. He's setting us up for the fact that our tongue gets us in lots of trouble—which is what he says in the second half of the verse.* **See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!**

Clearly the first readers—the people that James was writing to, the dispersed Jews—were minimizing the importance of this and he is now making the case that, "This is a *very* big deal!" Yes it's true that the bit in a horse's mouth is small. The rudder on a ship is small but it's very powerful; it steers the whole ship! And, yes, it's true that your tongue may be a very small member of your body— it's a little flame—but the little flame sets the whole forest on fire.

One of the things that was very sobering in studying this text was the degree of intensity and the severity of the language in this text. I can think of very few, if any, text in the New Testament that has this degree of intensity and this severe language. James is saying, "This is a really big deal!"

I've said it before. We have a habit in churches of kind of setting apart certain sins as *really naughty* and others as kind of dismissed as *no big deal*. I mean, if somebody is addicted to alcohol, man, that's a biggie; you're messed up! But if somebody's addicted to gossip, addicted to critical speech, addicted to a tongue out of control, that's no big deal. Yet every one of us could name times in our school, in our place of employment, in our family, in our neighborhood, in our church where somebody's mouth was out of control and it lit a fire that did a lot of damage.

Over the years we, as leaders, on occasion have had to remove people from positions of leadership— from ministry roles—because they had a mouth that was out of control. And as I process back through my head, in every instance that I can recall, when the people around them were made aware that this is why we had to do that, in every case people immediately minimized it. "That's all? That's all? It's not like they were committing adultery or something!" See, that's the problem. And I think that's the problem James is addressing. We tend to minimize this as *no big deal*. And James is saying, "Actually it's a really big deal because this little fire sets the whole forest on fire. And then you've got a big problem!

Verse 6:

> **And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity....**

Now he's going to get into some very severe language. What does ne mean by the whole **world of iniquity**? The best way to explain it, I think, is to say it means that the sum total of everything that's wrong with you makes its way into your mouth. That's what he's saying: it's the whole world of iniquity; it's the sum total of everything about you that's wrong, that's sinful, that's evil. It seems to collect in our mouths and out it comes. In other words, whatever your struggle is, whether you struggle with arrogance, whether you struggle with pride, whether you struggle with anger, whether you struggle with bitterness, whether you struggle with unforgiveness, whether you struggle with fear, whether you struggle with insecurities, whether you struggle with lust—whatever your deal is— the sum total of everything that's wrong with us somehow finds it's way into our mouth and our mouth gives expression to it. It's the **world of iniquity** for us. That's why it's such a big deal.

> **...the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body...** (Vs. 6b)

That word **defiles** is the word that he used in chapter 1:27, when he says remain "unstained," remain undefiled—that's our word—"from the world". You remember when we defined *the world.* We said *the world* is basically defined by a value system that, at its core, has *me* operating as my own god. So to be stained by the world would be to buy into a value system where I run my own life. I'm in charge; I'm my own god. Clearly James is tapping back into that when he says, "This is this whole **world of iniquity** and the problem is that it's been stained by the world." In other words the reason

your mouth is out of control is because you're still operating as God. You're running the show and, as long as you're running the show, you're never going to bring that tongue under control. That's why it's the barometer. It's saying the Spirit's not in control; you're in control; you're being your own god; you've been defiled by the world.

> **...it defiles the entire body...***it stains the whole body***...and sets on fire the course of our life...**

There's a lot of debate on what's meant by this phrase **the course of our life.** Literally the Greek is the *wheel of our origin or the wheel of our life.* There's a lot of discussion as to whether or not James was picking up something from a first century philosopher and bringing it in or what exactly he meant. I think the best way to understand it is to think about a wheel and, in a first century culture, the idea of a wheel being set on fire and, as that wheel turns, the fire just keeps coming around. I think we would refer to it today as a *cycle*, a *pattern*, a *habit*. This wheel is on fire and the wheel keeps going around and around so the fire keeps coming back, over and over and over. That's why the NASB says it **sets on fire the course of your life.** It becomes a habit; it becomes a pattern; it becomes what defines you. There are certain people, everywhere they go there's conflict. There's conflict at work; there's conflict at home; there's conflict in the church; there's conflict in their neighborhood; there's conflict everywhere they go. In their minds it's always somebody else's fault. But what's happened is this has now become a habit; this has become a pattern; this is now defining the course of your life and you're going to scorch, not only your own life, but the people around you that you love most—because you have a mouth that's out of control. It now defines you and if something doesn't change, it will destroy you.

> **...and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.** (Vs. 6c)

Now think about how many New Testament texts do you know with that kind of language? What exactly is lighting my mouth on fire? Answer: it is hell itself! The enemy sticks his match into the fires of hell, lights your mouth on fire and backs up and watches you do his work—destroying your life and the lives of those you love most—out of control! The severity of this language, again, tells us this is a very big deal.

Verse 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. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.** (Vs. 7-8)

There is one beast that we've never been able to tame and that's the tongue. What's being said there is you cannot tame your tongue. That's why it's the barometer of your spiritual condition. The only way your tongue can be brought under control is through the power of the Spirit. It's an evidence of your brokenness and your surrender to the Spirit of God. That's the only way your tongue's going to be brought under control. No person in this room can tame his or her own tongue. If you walk out these doors saying, "You know that's probably a good point. I probably need to bite my lip and be a little more thoughtful what I say," you are in trouble. You do not have the ability to tame your own tongue. It's not going to happen; it will just recycle again and again and again. The language here: **it is a restless evil**. It's ever lurking in the shadows. There's a restlessness to it; it's just waiting to explode. As a matter of fact, the description is of a poisonous viper. *The death delivering poison* is the literal Greek there. It's a very vivid imagery. There is this snake in my mouth and it's restless and it's always waiting for an opportunity to come out and deliver its poison.

Let's imagine that I have a dozen very cranky rattlesnakes. Now I don't know what makes a rattlesnake cranky but these rattlesnakes are upset and I dump them in your house. Twenty-four hours later you can return. You live every day knowing they're there. Every time you walk into a room you don't know if they're hiding in the shadows. You don't know if they're in the closet. You don't know if they're in the couch cushions. You don't know where they are but you know they're in there. Nowhere feels safe and you know, at any moment, you're going to get bit—and that snake is going to deliver death delivering poison! Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. That's how you live every single day—and I am sorry for you. You live with someone whose mouth is out of control and you never know from one day to the next what's going to set it off. But there's this restlessness; there's this snake that, at any given moment, is going to strike and deliver the poison. Again the language, the imagery, here is very strong. The reality to this is that probably every single one of us here this morning could go back a year, five years, ten years, twenty years, thirty years—depending on your age—and identify something someone said that deeply wounded you and you can still feel the pain to this day. That is sobering. Twenty years later you still show the scars of where you got scorched by somebody's tongue. James says in verse 9:

> **With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.** (Vs. 9-10)

Literally what he's saying, it can't be this way. Now he's going to make his case for that.

> **Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.** (Vs. 11-12)

The point he makes is you can't do it both ways. With the same tongue you can't bless God and curse men. But he makes his point. Is it possible for a fountain to bring forth both fresh and bitter or fresh and salt water? Is it possible for an apple tree to produce an orange? And the obvious intended answer is, "No"! Therefore it's not possible for both to be coming out of my mouth. So let's think about that. What is he saying? There are two options. One is that when you bless God, that genuinely comes out of an authentic heart that is surrendered and yielded to Him. Can you imagine anyone under the control of the Spirit pretending to curse men? No, that would be silly. No one under the control of the Spirit would do that, so we eliminate that option, which leaves us only one option. If what's coming out of my mouth is fire, is poison, is scorching the people around me, then whatever blessing I'm offering to God is just pretend. It's just a show. That's exactly what he's saying. He said it in chapter one, verse twenty-six. "*If your religion doesn't lead to an ability to control your mouth, your religion is worthless*." Jesus said it in the gospels. "*Whatever is coming out of your mouth, that's a reflection of what's in your heart.*" It's the barometer of what's really going on in the inside.

Now again I want us to think about the severity of this language—the intensity of this language. There are very few New Testament passages like this. What comes out of my mouth is the sum total of what's going on in my life. Everything that's messed up and wrong with me somehow makes it to my mouth and comes out in a fire that scorches the people around me and that fire is lit on fire by hell itself—which is clearly an evidence that I am not broken and surrendered to the life of the Spirit in me.

So where do we go from here? Some of you here this morning have work to do. The place to start is: Some of you need to sit down eyeball to eyeball and make some things right. Some of you need to sit down with your spouse and say, "I have a mouth that's out of control and, because of that, I have deeply wounded you and I'm asking you for your forgiveness." Some of you parents need to sit down with your teenagers and say, "I've had a mouth that's out of control and it has deeply wounded you and I'm asking you to forgive me." Some of you teenagers need to talk to your parents and say, "I've had a mouth that's out of control and it has injected deadly poison and I'm asking you to forgive me." Some of you need to go to work tomorrow morning and talk to somebody there, somebody in your life group, somebody here at church. I don't know who it is but I am telling you this: If you're unwilling to do that, nothing's going to change. If you're still so arrogant that you can't admit that, there's no hope for you to change. This is the cycle that's going to destroy your life and scorch the people you love. That has to be the first step.

Where do we go from there? We need to look deep inside. Each of us needs to look deep inside and assess our own lives. What we don't need is psychotherapy; what we don't need is a counselor on this one. This isn't complicated. If you have a mouth that's out of control, it's clearly an indication that you're still your own god; you're still running your own show. That's why it's coming out your mouth. You don't need a counselor; you need brokenness and surrender. You need a willingness to come before God in brokenness and humility and say, "God, I'm tired of being my own god and I need You to step in and do for me what I could not do for myself." Controlling your tongue is ultimately an issue of brokenness and humility before God.

One of the things that grieves my heart—and I knew this, coming into the weekend. I've been doing this long enough to know there are people here this morning, regardless of the intensity of the text, regardless of my best effort to reflect the intensity of the text—possibly those who need to hear this the most—will walk through these doors totally unaffected. Some of you checked me out twenty minutes ago. In your mind you have become so deluded; you're so self-deceived that you cannot see the scar tissue all around you on the people that you love and you simply cannot acknowledge you have a problem. I don't know how to help you other than to pray that the Spirit of God penetrates your heart and opens up your eyes to something you need to deal with. I have absolutely no doubt, before the sun sets tonight, someone in this room will have their tongue set on fire by hell itself and you will so severely scorch someone else that twenty years from today that person will still feel the pain. The only question is, "Will that person be you?"

Our Father we're thankful this morning that You love us. You love us so much that You tell us the truth. Lord, this is a rather brutal text. I don't think anybody here likes it. Lord, it's brutal because it just kind of drives deep into our hearts something that we all struggle with. Lord, I pray that Your Spirit would penetrate deep into our hearts and minds that we would see the truth, in many cases the truth that everybody else sees, but somehow we've become blinded and deluded to our own problem. Lord, I pray that we would be defined by brokenness and humility that will be clearly evident by an ability to control our mouths. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2010 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.

October 23/24, 2010

A Restless Evil

Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James

James 3:1-12

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Do you think issues concerning the tongue (including email, texting, Facebook, etc…) are a big deal? Why or why not?

2. Have you ever been deeply wounded by someone's words? Share what happened, how long ago was it, what was the affect?

Bible Study

1. Read James 1:26. What is true of someone who can't control his or her tongue?

2. Read James 3:1-12. Why should people not rush to assume a role as a spiritual teacher?

3. List all the metaphors James uses in this text. What is the meaning or point of each metaphor?

4. What would be the language James uses in this text to indicate how serious this issue of the tongue is? According to the text how serious is this problem?

5. Compare Matthew 12:33-37. What did Jesus have to say about this issue?

6. Specifically what is James saying in 3:9-12? Can we truly bless God and curse people made in his image out of the same mouth? Why or why not?

Application

1. On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the most serious, how serious is this issue according to James?

2. Do you think most people take this issue as seriously as they should? Are people more likely to address this behavior or excuse this behavior?

3. On a scale of 1-10 how much of a problem is controlling your tongue for you? Based on this text what changes need to happen?

4. How can your small group help hold you accountable for making necessary changes?

Copyright 2010 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.