

Part Six: Whoa! You Wild Horse (Taming the Tongue)

Written by Bob Stone

If there was ever a member of the body that needed to go to obedience school, it is the tongue. It doesn't need exercise, it needs control—it needs to be tamed. The tongue out of control might say anything. I read with tears of laughter a series of statements given on insurance forms by people involved in car accidents. In times of stress, we often say things in a confused way. Let me share a few of these statements with you.

- Coming home, I drove into the wrong house and collided with a tree I don't have.
- The guy was all over the road, I had to swerve a number of times before I hit him.
- I pulled away from the side of the road, glanced at my mother-in-law, and headed over the embankment.
- In my attempt to kill a fly, I drove into a telephone pole.
- I was on my way to the doctor's with rear end trouble when my universal joint gave way, causing me to have an accident.
- I had been driving my car for 40 years when I fell asleep at the wheel and had an accident.
- The telephone pole was approaching fast. I attempted to swerve out of its path when it struck my front end.
- The pedestrian had no idea which direction to go, so I ran over him.

The description of a tongue

We are going to focus our thoughts on the subject of the tongue. Charles Swindoll describes the tongue in this way:

"To the physician, it is merely a two-ounce slab of mucous membrane enclosing a complex array of muscles and nerves that enable our bodies to chew, taste, and swallow. It is also the major organ of communication that enables us to articulate distinct sounds so we can understand each other... without the tongue no mother could sing her baby to sleep tonight. No ambassador could adequately represent our nation. No teacher

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could stretch the mind of students. No officer could lead his fighting men in battle. No attorney could defend the truth in court. No pastor could comfort troubled souls. No complicated, controversial issue could ever be discussed and solved. Our entire world would be reduced to grunts and shrugs."

We seldom pause to realize just how valuable this little muscle in our mouth really is. James understands its value.

The James School of Tongue Obedience

James expresses himself more strongly about the power and potential of the tongue than any other New Testament writer, with a reference to the tongue in every chapter in his book.

1. 1:19-20—the readers are urged to be slow to speak and slow to become angry.
2. 1:26—man is seen as deceived and his religion worthless, if he fails to control his/her tongue.
3. 2:14-17—introduces a faith, but has no deeds to back it up. Here the tongue might compassionately claim to care, but inaccurately expresses true faith.
4. 4:11-12—James warns his readers about slander and inappropriate judgment of others.
5. 5:12—will urge readers to be honest and consistent in their speech.

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And now, the James School of Tongue Obedience turns to the problem of control. He begins with a command which is an introduction, an illustration of his subject—3:1-12.

The Warning For Would-Be Teachers

vv. 1-2—*"Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers..."*

What is it that James is literally saying to his readers and to us? Don't crowd into being teachers, *or* stop becoming teachers. It's a warning, not a prohibition for teaching of all kinds—pastor, parents, Sunday School teachers, small group leaders, disciples, counselors, friends—see Rom. 12:7. Apparently many were seeking the position without regard to the responsibility. They wanted the prestige, because teaching was a prominent position in Israel. Teachers were honored even after death; a rabbi was actually called, "my great one."

They wanted the perks—the respect, the visibility, the opportunity to influence, the high regard from others. Apparently these would-be teachers didn't understand the costs involved, the vulnerability to stress, the problems and temptation.

- The temptation of pride and envy, rivalry and selfish ambition—Phil. 1:15-17; Matt. 25:23,20.
- The stress of spiritual warfare—Col. 4:3-4.
- The problem of the misuse of teaching—2 Tim. 4:2-3; 2:17; Rom. 16:17; Eph. 4:14; Titus 1:11.

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Apparently, these would-be teachers didn't understand the work of teaching, either: the **care** that is needed (1 Tim. 4:2,11-16; Titus 2:7); the **study** that is needed (2 Tim. 2:15; 4:1-2; James 1:25); and the **struggle** that is needed—Col. 1:28-2:1. My strongest advice is that you not become a teacher of the Scripture unless you are called to it. It is a wonderful privilege and has tremendous benefits, but the work has its temptations, stress and other problems. Be prepared to do at least one term paper a week!

Having said that, there is no greater joy than to share the truth of God's Word and see lives changed. I'm thankful for the grace God has given me to do it.

The biggest reason of all is highlighted by the "because." v. 1b—*"because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."*

This verse gives us the biggest cost to a ministry of teaching, the responsibility of public speaking. Teachers are judged more strictly. If we look only at the book of James, we can see why:

they are responsible for teaching God's Word.

1:21b—

"...and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."

Teachers are responsible for planting the Word of God in people and have the privilege of bringing people to salvation and freedom.

James then gives us another reason teachers are judged more strictly: **they are expected to model what they teach**

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1:22-25—*"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23] Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror 24] and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25] But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does."*

(See also Matt. 23:3; Heb. 13:7-8.)

The most specific reason for judgment is found in 3:2: because we all stumble in many ways, and that includes the teacher. v. 2a—*"We all stumble in many ways."* Stumble means to offend, and the tense of the verb indicates repeated action. We commit sin again and again—all of us. No teacher has it together all the time. They stumble like everyone else. The first pastor I worked with used to sign all his correspondence, "Your stumbling pilgrim."

The result is, the teacher will be judged more strictly (any public speaker, politician, school teacher, professor, etc). A teacher's stumbling is often more obvious because of his visibility. That's what James is saying. The reason for strict judgment is because we (including teachers) are sometimes at fault in what we say. v. 2b—*"If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man...."*

Here's the biggest reason for strict judgment of the teacher. **He stumbles and is at fault**

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sometimes in what he says

. Hence, teachers are not perfect.

The conclusion about the warning comes in v. 2b—*"If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check."*

Here's the high goal for the teacher and speaker in any context. If we are never at fault in our words, we have come to the point where our whole body is in check. If we can do that, we can do anything.

If we *can't* keep a tight rein on our tongue, we are deceived and our religion is worthless (1:26), and our whole body is not in check (3:2c). Teachers or not, we are left with two principles:

Principle #1: **Tongue control reveals our maturity, our control of the body.**

Principle #2: **Our tongue reveals who we are—the good, the bad, the ugly, the perfect and the imperfect.**

Does it sound hopeless? It is, unless we discover how to keep a rein on the tongue (1:27) and take seriously the rest of what James says about the tongue. Now we see that the lesson has not been only for teachers, but has served as an illustration.

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In quick succession and in very picturesque and powerful language, James continues his warning about our speech. In vv. 3-12 we receive a number of warnings:

Warnings About the Power of the Tongue

vv. 3-5a—*"When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 4] 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. 5] Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts."*

What is the tongue like? James gives us several examples from everyday life that the people of his time could readily identify with. **Like a bit in a horse's mouth, the tongue is small but controlling—v. 3** (powerful). "The horse is naturally wild and ungovernable, but it may have its fiery temper subdued and its temper regulated to the temper of the rider" (Curtis Vaughan, p. 68). The rider has but to pull the rein, and the bit manages and controls the whole body. If the horse is not tamed and doesn't respond to the bit, there is no control. The application is obvious: even though the tongue is small, if we can control it we have learned to control all the passions of our nature.

This sponsors a few questions that we hope to answer as we move through this passage:

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- How do we control the tongue, i.e., how do we put a bit in our mouth and control our tongue?
- What happens if we don't control our tongue?
- Is the tongue what controls the body, or is it a reflection of another control center?

Next, James illustrates the power of the tongue with something else that is small.

Like a rudder guides a ship, the tongue can take the course it wants to go—even if it is difficult. v. 4—*"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."*

The illustration points out not only the size of the ships of his day, making them hard to control, but also their exposure to violent storms. Control was accomplished by the rudder and the pilot. The application is obvious: though the tongue is small and the pilot is small (in comparison to the ship and the winds), the tongue can powerfully direct us, even in adverse conditions.

Thus James concludes:

Likewise, the tongue is small, but it can be great in its boasts—aspirations, inspirations, hopes, dreams, etc. v. 5—*"Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts."*

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Moffett translates this: "So the tongue is a small member of the body, but it can boast of great exploits." It is difficult to exaggerate the exploits of speech or the achievements of the tongue. It can sway a group or person to noble action; instruct the uneducated; encourage the rejected and dejected; comfort the bereaved; bring encouragement to the depressed. It can lift one from the depths of despair, to the heights of joy or laughter. It can inspire one to finish the course. It can convict. It can renew our confidence; build a healthy self-esteem; and lift our eyes to Jesus.

Let me share with you a couple of powerful demonstrations of this truth

(by Gary Vanderet, Discovery Pub., Palo Alto, CA). "I read a true story about a teenager with an obvious birth mark covering much of his face. Yet this did not bother him; his self-esteem seemed secure, and he related well with the other students. He seemed to not be self-conscious about this large birth mark, which was noticeable to every-one. Finally, someone asked him how this could be:

'Are you aware of the fact that you have this large birth mark on your face?' He replied, 'of course I am.' 'Can you tell me, then, why it does not seem to bother you in the slightest?'

The young man smiled and said, 'When I was very young, my father started telling me that birth mark was there for two reasons; one, it was where the angel kissed me:

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two, the angel had done that so my father could always find me easily in a crowd.'

He then continued, 'my dad told this so many times with so much love, that as I grew up, I actually began to feel sorry for the other kids who weren't kissed by the angel like I was.'

I'm convinced our world desperately needs believers to use the power of our tongues wisely to heal, encourage, inspire, etc.

Author and counselor Larry Crabb writes of the power of the tongue in his own life. As a child he had developed the annoying and humiliating problem of stuttering.

In the ninth grade I was elected president of our junior high student body. During an assembly of the entire student body, I was beckoned by the principal to join him on stage for the induction ceremony.

Standing nervously in front of the squirming, bored crowd, I was told to repeat after the principal the words, "I, Larry Crabb of Plymouth-Whitemarsh Junior High School, do hereby promise..." That's how the principal said it. My version was a bit different: "I, L-L-L-Larry Crabb of P-P-P-Plymouth-Whitemarsh Junior High School, do hereby p-p-p-promise..."

The principal was sympathetically perplexed, my favorite English teacher wanted to cry, a few students laughed out loud, most were awkwardly amused, some felt bad for me, and I died a thousand deaths. I decided right then that public speaking was not for me.

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A short time later, our church celebrated the Lord's supper in a Sunday morning worship service. It was customary in our congregation to encourage young men to enter into the privilege of worship by standing and praying aloud. That particular Sunday I sensed the pressure of the saints (not, I fear, the leading of the Spirit), and I responded by unsteadily leaving my chair, for the first time, with the intention of praying.

Filled less with worship than with nervousness, I found my theology becoming confused to the point of heresy. I remember thanking the Father for hanging on the cross and praising Christ for triumphantly bringing the Spirit from the grave.

Stuttering throughout, I finally thought of the word Amen (perhaps the first evidence of the Spirit's leading), said it, and sat down. I recall staring at the floor, too embarrassed to look around, and thinking solemnly never again to pray or speak aloud in front of a group. Two strikes were enough.

When the service was over, I darted toward the door, not wishing to encounter an elder who might feel obliged to correct my twisted theology. But I was not quick enough. An older Christian man named Jim Dunbar intercepted me, put his arm on my shoulder, and cleared his throat to speak.

I remember thinking to myself, "Here it comes. Oh well, just endure it and then get to the car." I then listened to this godly gentleman speak words that I can speak verbatim today, more than twenty years later.

"Larry," he said, "there's one thing I want you to know. Whatever you do for the Lord, I'm behind you one thousand percent." Then he walked away.

Even as I write these words, my eyes fill with tears. I have yet to tell that story to an audience without at least mildly choking. Those words were life words. They had power. They reached deep into my being. My resolve never again to speak publicly weakened instantly.

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Since the day those words were spoken, God has led me into a ministry in which I regularly address and pray before crowds of all sizes. I do it without stuttering. I love it. Not only death, but also life lies in the power of the tongue.

- Our speech reveals who we are—our perfection, maturity—v. 2b.
- Our speech displays our control over the body—v. 2c.
- Our tongue is small, but can powerfully direct us and others, even in adverse circumstances - the storms of life—v. 4.
- Our speech can accomplish great and noble things—v. 5a.

That leads us to specific illustrations of the tongue's power if that power is *not* controlled.

Warnings About the Destructive Nature of the Tongue

vv. 5b-8—"*Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 6] The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7] All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, 8] but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*"

As usual, we shouldn't misunderstand what James is saying. He's blunt because the tongue can be so destructive!

It is a small, but deadly fire.

v. 5b—"*Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.*" A tiny spark holds the power to destroy thousands of acres of forest. Ungoverned, it destroys. Contained and focused, it brings warmth and power.

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Fire is an apt illustration of the devastating effects of an untamed tongue, because ungoverned it can scorch, blast, and consume.

Another description of the tongue's destructive nature is:

It's a tool that allows a whole world of evil to find its expression.

v. 6a—*"The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body."* This is a tough verse; we'll divide it as the NIV does. Verse 6 says the tongue is the place where all the evil of the world eventually finds its expression; much evil can be found and produced by the tongue:

- it can encourage lustful action
- it can blaspheme
- it can stir up strife
- it can divide churches and families

Other passages tell us the tongue sometimes frames deceit (Ps. 50:19); devises destruction (Ps. 52:2); devours (Ps. 52:4); is a sharp sword (Ps. 57:4); breaks bones (Prov. 25:15); backbites (Prov. 25:23); and flatters (Prov. 28:23). A lot of evil finds expression through the tongue. James also mentions three more specific examples of the tongue's destructive potential.

Wrongly used, the tongue can pollute man's whole personality and nature.

v. 6b—*"It corrupts the whole person..."* by permitting itself to be used as an instrument of sin, destruction and evil—thus corrupting and staining the whole person.

Sets the course of a person's life on fire.

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v. 6c—"*...sets the whole course of his life on fire.*" The tongue can obviously destroy the whole course of a person's life and bring destructive fire to another

person's life as well.

Why does it have such a destructive capability? James gives us the source of its evil.

The tongue can be set on fire by the unending fire of hell.

v. 6d—"*...and is itself set on fire by hell...*" (Hope: Isaiah 5:6-7) In this context, hell is "Gehenna," which was in James' day an actual valley outside of Jerusalem used as the garbage dump for the city.

Therefore, just as all the filth of the city accumulated in Gehenna, the evil of a sinful heart expresses itself by the tongue. The rotting, evil decay of the heart and the influence of Satan is expressed by the tongue.

The warning is still not complete. James changes images again.

It is like a wild beast and untamable.

vv. 7-8a—"*All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, 8] but no man can tame the tongue.*" Bring in the circus for an illustration. All the animals are tamed by their trainer, but if we were to put the tongue in the zoo, no one could tame it. "Tame" here means to overpower, to subdue, to conquer. It was used to describe bringing horses under control, breaking them. No man, however, can tame the tongue.

It is an unruly evil.

8b—"*It is a restless evil...*" ever stirring, eluding all attempts to control it. This may be an allusion to the restless nature of a snake.

Again, these pictures sponsor a lot of questions concerning the tongue.

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- If man can't tame it, who can?
- Is this an excuse for undisciplined speech? No! (See Eph. 4:29)
- Can the Spirit tame the tongue? Yes! That's why tongue control is the best evidence of the Spirit's control.

But James is not giving us solutions yet. He relentlessly goes on to give us one more description that shows how impossible it is to tame, train and affect the tongue. The tongue now shows the destructive nature of a poisonous snake.

It is a deadly poison. 8c—"*...full of deadly poison.*" Like the tongue of a snake, man's tongue can also be poisonous, and kill or seriously injure. Just like the victims of a snake bite, we can be affected by poisonous speech. John Adams once said, "Poisonous speech wounds affection, blasts character, ruins peace, and even in a few cases, destroys life itself. Many drop and die, pierced by its fatal (poisonous) arrows."

Psalm 140:3 affirms this: "*They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's; the poison of vipers is on their lips.*" You have likely felt the poisonous effects of destructive speech:

- verbal abuse—Prov. 12:18; 1 Sam. 20:30
- demeaning remarks/put downs/sarcastic remarks—Prov. 12:18
- vicious words—1 Sam. 20:30
- angry words—Prov. 15:1; 15:18
- perverse and twisted words of lust and sexual abuse—Prov. 10:32b
- words that are lies, have hidden agendas, or are manipulative—Prov. 15:4; 26:23-28; Ps. 50:19-20; Ps. 52:3-4

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- words not communicated that later speak loudly to you, wrongly teaching you one of two things: you are not valuable and not worthy of attention and love, or the only way to get attention and acceptance is through proper and improper achievement/means—crime, comedy, politics, pastoring, service, education (e.g., King David neglected Absalom—2 Sam. 14:23-28. Notice what he did!).

What an unbelievable and destructive nature the tongue has! Listen again from 5b-8—*"Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 6] The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7] All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, 8] but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."*

An Illustration of the Impact of Destructive Words on the Family

Negative Words

- If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn.
- If a child lives with hostility and angry words, he learns to fight and be abusive.
- If a child lives with ridicule, he learns he isn't worth much and withdraws.
- If a child is demeaned, criticized and belittled until he/she accomplishes what a parent wants, he may learn to become a workaholic with very little joy or emotion in his/her work or life.
- If a child lives with shame, he learns to feel guilty.

Positive Words

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- If a child lives with encouragement, he learns to be confident and to achieve many worthwhile goals.
- If a child lives with praise—i.e., praise of himself/ herself and God, he learns to be appreciative.
- If a child lives with fairness, he learns justice.
- If a child lives with the security of prayer, he learns to have faith.
- If a child lives with approval, he learns to like himself.
- If a child lives with acceptance and friendship with godly parents, he learns to find God's love and human love in his world.

What's the answer, then? How do we see the tongue's power used for good rather than destruction?

We must plant a garden of praise!

The Warnings About the Inconsistency of the Tongue or Speech

vv. 9-12—*"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. 10] Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. 11] Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12] My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."*

The tongue is a powerful, untamed, poisonous and destructive beast—but only sometimes. Most often it is a classic illustration of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Sometimes we mend bones instead of breaking them. Instead of breaking down, the tongue builds up. Sometimes instead of causing death, the tongue brings life; and instead of cursing men, we praise our Lord and Father—v. 9.

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The mouth can bring forth praise *and* cursing.

v. 10a—*"Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing."* Should we feel good about this? James tells us the inconsistency of the mouth is wrong.

"My brothers, this should not be"

—v. 10b.

The word "not" (or "ought," KJV) is found only here in the New Testament. It denotes fitness or congruity. The thought, then, is this:

"It is abnormal for a man to praise God in prayer and praise, and yet speak evil of God's family" (Curtis Vaughan).

It is contrary to grace and nature.

More than the fitness of blessing and cursing being together, however, there is another problem with a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde tongue: it is inconsistent with belief, the facts and theology. v. 9 states: *"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness."* Th

the correction, then, is in the area of the facts and our theology—our view of man.

The reality of the relationship of God to man is brought into focus here. To praise God and curse a brother is an offense to God and our belief in Him.

Remember, "Inconsistency in speech is corrected by changing our thoughts, our theology, and our beliefs."

This is the only way the wild tongue is controlled...

by new input in the mind and heart, i.e., a change.

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In case we haven't got it:

The inconsistency is again illustrated from nature.

vv. 11-12—*"Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12] My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."* Unlike us, nature is consistent. Fresh water and saltwater do not flow from the same spring; fig trees don't bear olives; and grapevines don't bear figs

The construction of the Greek conveys that the expected answer is "No, neither can a salt spring produce fresh water." Like produces like in nature; and praise and cursing shouldn't come from the same mouth. It's abnormal, inconsistent and contrary to nature! So if it should not be, why does it happen? And more importantly, how can we do something about it? The answer is simple: Plant a Garden of Praise!

Here's what our words can do to help:

Prov. 12:6—*The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the speech of the upright rescues them.*

Prov. 12:18—*Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

Prov. 12:25—*An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up.*

Prov. 16:24—*Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the*

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bones.

Prov. 15:4—*The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.*

Prov. 25:11—*A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.*