

# The Biblical Theology of the Tongue

by Mack Tomlinson

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*The biblical theology of the tongue emphasizes the importance of taming our words and speech to live wholeheartedly for the Lord Jesus Christ.*

**Duration:** 30:07

**Scripture:** Psalm 19:14, Psalm 31:18, Psalm 39:1, Psalm 52:2, Psalm 64:3-4, Matthew 15:18-19, Romans 3:13-14, James 3:1-12

**Topics:** "Taming The Tongue", "Holy Spirit"

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## Description

This sermon delves into the biblical theology of the tongue, emphasizing the power of words to either speak truth or error, highlighting the struggle with words that we all face. It explores passages from James 3, Psalms, and teachings from Paul Tripp's book 'The War of Words', discussing the impact of our speech on relationships and sanctification. The sermon underscores the need for the Holy Spirit to tame and sanctify our tongues, drawing parallels between controlling the tongue and steering a ship or a horse.

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## Transcript

This morning I'm going to speak part two, redeeming the tongue, on the subject the biblical theology of the tongue. Did you know that the tongue is theological? Because we speak either truth or error. We speak either what's right.

We can sometimes speak heresy. And so we are always speaking the struggle with words that we all have. So let's read this morning from James 3. James 3 says, My brethren, be not many masters or teachers, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

For in many things we offend all. If any man offends not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. Behold, we put bits in the horse's mouth, that they may obey us, and we turn about their whole body.

Behold, also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven by fierce winds, yet they are turned about with a very small hem, a very small rudder, whithersoever the governor listeth. Now that's a good old King James. Lee is already cracking up.

It means wherever the captain wants the ship to go. So, in Elizabethan English, whithersoever the governor listeth. Isn't that quite amazing the way they translated it? Even so, the tongue is a little member, and boasts great things.

Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindles. And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. So is the tongue among our members, that it defiles the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature, and it is set on fire of hell.

For every kind of beast, and of birds, and serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by mankind. But the tongue can no man tame. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

Therewith we bless God, even the Father, and therewith we curse men, which are made after the image of God. Out of the same mouth proceeds blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

And then also, you won't need to turn to it, David ends Psalm 19 with a prayer. Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of the thoughts of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my Redeemer. The tongue is the instrument we use the most.

Of course our mind, our brain is working that instrument, but the tongue is the instrument we use the most socially in relationship to others. Either for good, or for evil. Now our church has been studying Paul Tripp's book, The War of Words, and our women's study, and our men's study.

If we summarize the first four chapters of the chapters that we've covered so far, it would be this. Chapter 1, God Himself speaks, and He designed us with the ability to use words. And we must see how the Gospel and Biblical truth can change our communication with words.

Chapter 2, the fall in sin originally was through Satan using words. Satan has mastered words since the Garden of Eden. And one of the tragedies in Eden was that man lost his ability, one of the tragedies, the after effects of man's fall in sin, man lost the ability to speak as God designed him to speak.

Since Eden, as the Puritan Thomas Brooks said, of all the members of our bodies, there is none so serviceable to Satan as our tongue. Chapter 3, the Word who was made flesh came to redeem us in our totality. That includes our speech.

It includes our mind being renewed. It includes our hearts being changed where out of the heart will proceed good words, not evil words. Our minds have been redeemed and out of our minds, words need to flow forth from our tongue that are God honoring.

And chapter 3 tells us the Gospel itself conquers and gives us hope that our tongue can be increasingly tamed by the Holy Spirit. Our tongue has been redeemed and now it must be tamed, changed and sanctified. This universal war of words began in the Garden and paradise was lost including man's pure communication.

Tripp called it a dramatic change with lasting trouble. Satan's words challenged God's authority. Yea, as God said, began the war of words.

And when Adam and Eve believed lying, deceiving communication, all mankind fell and sinned in Adam. Since then, the tongue has been like a fire, James. The tongue has been like a fire James says, a world of iniquity.

Lying words, deceitful words, prideful words, destructive and harmful words, harsh and irritable words, manipulating words, misleading words, seductive words, foolish words, hasty words, God denying and God dishonoring words. Chapter 4 of the Gospel tells us that our words, not I-D-L-E but I-D-O-L, idle

words, our words are shaped and controlled by what our hearts are set upon, Tripp says. Ruling desires of the heart and to quote him, our words are one of the primary ways we seek to gain, maintain and keep what we really want and what we're living for.

I want that. You can watch two-year-olds when my four-year-old is holding four or three still. He's three.

When my three-year-old grandson comes over and my two-year-old grandson's there and toys are in the room, it doesn't matter if one of them is playing with them, if one of them starts, there's a beeline, the war of words is on. So, idles in the heart produce idle, controlling words. In this war of words, the full redeeming of our tongues is a major goal in sanctification because as Thomas Matten, a Puritan, said, most of our sins are in our words.

Now, thoughts, yes, but most of our sins are often in relation to others. Wives to husbands, husbands to wives, parents to children, brothers and sisters to one another. You children listen to me.

Hey boys, you young men, let me ask you a question. Look at me. Do you ever speak wrongly to your sisters and you are sinning with your words? Sisters, you don't get out of this.

Do you ever speak angrily, rudely to your brothers? I'm talking to you older ones too. You're not getting out of this either. We sin often with our words.

It's a heart issue too. Out of our heart, words flow. J.C. Ryle said, our words are the evidence of the state of our heart.

Just as surely as the taste of water is evidence of its stream and its source. A tender heart speaks tender words. A patient heart speaks with patience.

A loving heart speaks loving words. A judgmental heart will speak judgmental words. A hateful heart will speak hateful words.

An impatient heart will speak impatiently. And an unthankful heart will never speak words of thanks. How often do you have to tell your children when they ask you for something or you give them something and they go away and you say, hey.

Sometimes I'll say to Weston, I'll give him something and I'll say, thank you. And he says, you're welcome. He doesn't get it yet.

An unthankful heart doesn't give thankful words. The unclean tongue reflects an impure heart. The heart cannot be pure if the tongue is sinning.

And when you sin with your words, when you speak wrongly, it shows an unclean heart and a yet untransformed mind enough that needs to be changed. As John Lilly said, the tongue is the ambassador of the heart. The tongue represents you to others.

So let's see the Bible's emphasis on the sinful nature of man's tongue this morning. Maurice Roberts in one of his books said this, the tongues of sinners are always attacking and tearing down others. Now let's pause on that.

How much of your speech is either gossiping about, tearing down others, with your words, criticizing, being negative, or how much of it is wholesome and edifying and good? The tongues of sinners are

always attacking and tearing down others, especially against God's children. When I was in Canada last month, I found out that the Canadian Prime Minister recently said publicly, nationally, the greatest threat to Canada today is evangelical Christians. The tongue of the wicked is always tearing down the righteous.

Psalms 31-40 speak of God protecting His people from the strife of tongues. And listen, to live in this fallen world means to be in an arena of strife. And often it's with words, combative words, argumentative words, divisive words, judgmental words, carnal words.

The Bible's theology of the tongue is far bigger and greater and more important than we realize. And we must, if we really want to live wholeheartedly for the Lord Jesus Christ and glorify God daily in our bodies, at home, in our bedrooms, in our kitchens, at the dinner table, in the workplace with colleagues who are listening and watching us, if we want to truly live for Christ, we must realize what a big thing our words are to others. Many passages of Scripture are devoted to this theme.

Just reflect on these. The tongue, the Bible tells us, is a weapon of attack. Psalm 64, 3 and 4. The psalmist prayed, hide me from the secret counsel of the wicked who sharpen their tongues like a sword and bend their bow to shoot their arrows, even bitter words that they may shoot in secret at the upright.

The tongue is a sharp razor, Psalm 52 says. Why boast yourself in your mischief, O mighty man? Your tongue devises mischief like a sharp razor working deceitfully. Psalm 55 speaks of hypocrisy and hypocritical words.

The words of his mouth were smoother than butter. Maybe that's a rich guy, maybe that's a boss, maybe that's a CEO. Smooth, good, nice words, but war is in his heart.

Learn not to trust the words of people out in the world who may be smooth talkers but their heart is full of hatred or hypocrisy or even anger or war. Now the New Testament gives this same picture. The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 15, those things that proceed out of the mouth come forth from where? The heart.

And they defile the man for out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, two other things, lying and blasphemy. And remember what Paul said in Romans 3, the list of man's sinfulness and the various ways man is sinful and depraved. In verses 13 and 14 of Romans 3, Paul says this, he says all that comes out of wicked people's mouths is death and stench.

Their throat, he said, is a what? Open grave. You have a body thrown in a grave. You know, they didn't used to bury them in nice caskets.

They'd put claws around the bodies and maybe dig it and put the body in. But if you don't cover the grave up, and somebody comes back two weeks later, a month later, what's going to be coming out of there? Stench, decay, awful smell. Paul says, when the body is thrown in a grave, wicked men, their throat is an open grave.

Their tongue is deceitful. Their lips produce poison. Their mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.

The tongue, James says, is like a match dropped on the ground or a spark from a campfire. How often has one little spark or one little match dropped set a forest fire destroying thousands of acres and even many homes? I mean, our tongue is so inconsistent, can be. We can sing the praises of God today and criticize people on Monday and put them down, making ourselves feel more holy, making ourselves feel better, condescendingly acting like a Pharisee with our words.

Lord, I thank Thee that I'm not like them. Our words, our tongues, someone said, nothing is so open more by mistake than our mouths. We open our mouths and say things, and then our conscience pricks us, our heart condemns us, and we realize, I should not have said that.

I should not have spoken so quickly. Someone else said, actions don't speak louder than words. Your tongue can destroy all you do.

It's really true. We should walk the walk and talk the talk consistently, because our actions can contradict our words, and our words can contradict and wipe out all our actions that are good. So, as somebody said, we must learn two things about our tongue.

First, how to hold it. Secondly, how to use it. That is, learning how to be silent when we should be silent.

And I think I said this two weeks ago, when you don't really have anything to say that's worth hearing, then say nothing. How often do we speak and we shouldn't have? Learning the science of wise words, and then the greater science of silence. Will Durant said, nothing is often a good thing to say rather than be quick to hear and slow to speak.

Now the world's words, think of the world's words, even in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ. The world couldn't get him at all except with their words. They were always using words to try to trick him, trip him up, deceive him, mislead him, make him stumble, make him do a right thing, and they could never get him.

The world's vicious words toward the Lord Jesus Christ, the world's words attack viciously the only perfect man who ever lived. Now if you've been hurt by words in your life, whether your sister or your brother, or children, or unconverted relatives, the world in those close to us can hurt us with their words. If so, we should look closely at the bitter verbal attacks that Jesus suffered for over 30 years.

He was blasted with the most severe and hateful accusations and lies. Think of some of the things that were said, and they were in horrible attitudes and viciousness. He breaks the Sabbath all the time.

He's trying to overthrow Rome and Caesar. He performs miracles by the power of Satan. He's deceiving the people.

He disobeys all the tradition of the elders all the time. It was said to him, you have spoken blasphemy. What further need of witnesses do we have? He's guilty of death.

And even on the cross, if you're the Son of God, come down from the cross and save yourself. Every kind of verbal stabbing and cruelty he suffered. And don't think for a minute he didn't feel it.

It hurt. He was truly a man with an emotional and spiritual weakness. Mind and soul and feelings, it did hurt.

In fact, the Messianic Psalms say this, Psalm 69, thou hast known my reproach, my shame, and my dishonor. My adversaries are all before you. Reproach has broken my heart.

Think of that. But he turned a deaf ear to it all. He rose above it.

He ignored it. And he kept a wise silence. Psalm 31, I have heard the slander of many, but I trust in you, O Lord.

Psalm 38, I as a deaf man paid no heed. Our Savior in our example willfully turned a deaf ear to the bloodthirsty words of his haters. Peter says when he was reviled, what? He reviled not again.

He answered not back. But he committed himself to him who judges righteously. In the year 2000, some of you may remember this, a Greek ferry boat capsized and sank, killing 82 people.

It happened because the captain of the ferry boat left the vessel on autopilot and did not control the ship, the boat himself. Afterward, he made all kinds of excuses for the accident. And he would not accept personal responsibility for piloting the boat.

Here's the question. Do you pilot your tongue or is it on autopilot? Do you control your tongue or does your tongue control you? James says large ships, even driven by strong winds, are guided by a small rudder. Big strong horses are controlled normally by a small metal object.

It weighs much less and is a lot smaller. Now, somebody is smiling at me because sometimes a bit won't even control a stubborn horse or a mule. But James says ships are controlled by rudders.

Horses are controlled by bits in their mouth. So even the tongue, he says, is a small member. But we must turn our tongues the right way, in the right path of wisdom.

The tongue must be controlled so that all of our life will be controlled. As Nancy DeMoss said, your husband doesn't make you say wrong things. You choose to say wrong things.

Your children don't make you say irritable and harsh things. You choose to. Some of you first time mothers carrying that child in your womb, I'll never speak rudely to my sweet baby.

Yeah, hold on honey. Come back and tell me in about three years how you're doing. Your children don't make you speak harsh words.

You choose to. That prideful, rude coworker doesn't make you say negative things about them to others. You choose to when you could instead say nothing.

That gossip gossipy person at work doesn't make you repeat gossip. We choose to or we choose to refrain. I was told recently that one Pentecostal preacher criticized my Ravenhill biography because I didn't write enough about the Holy Spirit in the book.

Well, immediately a reply entered my thoughts. But instead I chose to give no reply. What would have motivated me to speak? Defensiveness.

So I said nothing. At that time I said nothing. Now, I've known it before.

We choose or we don't choose our words. Our tongues are the primary steering wheel, like the rudder on a boat, like the bit in the horse's mouth. Our tongues are the primary steering wheel that drive our lives.

And only the Holy Spirit can continually renew our minds and sanctify our speech. Only then will our tongue be more and more tame. Because no man can tame his tongue, but it doesn't mean the tongue cannot be progressively tamed by the Spirit of God and the grace of God.

We greatly need help, brethren. And great help is available from the one who sympathizes with you, who always himself spoke every time in a good way. He will continually help you more and more, change you,

strengthen you and establish you in your speech.

David's prayer and his commitment is seen in Psalm 39. This is wonderful. Psalm 39.

I said, I will take heed to my ways that I sin not with my tongue. I will keep my mouth with a bridle while the wicked is before me. It's easier to speak to other believers.

It's harder to speak around lost people. When they are pouring out death and stench and poison in polluted words, it's easy to want to come back with something. Don't.

Hold your tongue. I will keep my mouth with a bridle while the wicked is before me. In closing, Maurice Roberts said this, let every true Christian seek refuge in God's promise when tempted to answer back those who speak sinful words to them.

You will keep me from the strife of tongues. As there's a commercial I've seen once in a while it always closes with this line. What's in your wallet? My question is, what's in your tongue? What's in your mouth? What's coming out of your mouth? May God more and more let the words of our mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in his sight.

Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Let's pray. Right now in these moments you pray for the Holy Spirit of God to sanctify your mind and your tongue and your speech more and more.

Right where it applies to you. He can. He can give you victory and change progressively with your speech and your tongue.

Father in heaven, your word tells us that before a word is ever spoken in our mouths, you know it all together. You know what's coming forth. And Lord, we want what comes out not to be bitter words, harsh words, sinful words.

We don't want it to be bitter water. We want it to be sweet. Change us, oh God.

Help us. We know, Lord, it's a heart issue. As that chorus says, change my heart, oh God.

Make it ever new. Change my heart, oh God. Let me be like you.

Apply your word, we ask. Blessed Spirit, down in the recesses of our spirit, our mind, our hearts, that that which is pure more and more would flow forth when we speak. We bless you.

We praise you today. In the name of Christ, amen.

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