

The Power of the Tongue

I. The Most Difficult Member to Control

James chapter 3 speaks of the power of the tongue for both good and evil. In this chapter, James emphasizes the fact that our tongue is part of our witness before the world and other Christians. One minute our tongue can yield to God, the next minute to our flesh, and then to the devil. Out of the same mouth can come blessing and cursing. The good news is that we can yield our tongue to God and His Word and in doing so have power over *both* our tongue and our circumstances.

James 3:1-6, 9:

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, 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 of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

In this chapter, James has shifted from addressing his congregation to including himself in with the congregation as he teaches. By including himself, James is implying that no one is exempt from sins of the tongue. Of all the members of the body, the tongue is the most difficult to control. Controlling your hands, your feet, or your eyes will not guarantee that your tongue will be controlled. But by controlling your tongue, you can control every other member of your body.

II. The Church at Jerusalem

What was so special about the church at Jerusalem? The Jerusalem church was probably the finest of all churches. It served as a model for all other churches. Jerusalem was where Jesus performed His ministry. It was the same place where Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection occurred. Jerusalem was the place where Jesus appeared for forty days after His resurrection and it was also the place of His ascension into Heaven. This city was where the outpouring of the Holy Spirit occurred in the upper room and where both the universal church and the first local church began.

Acts chapter 3 recounts the beginning of miracles in the city of Jerusalem through the hands of the disciples following the resurrection of Jesus. It was the location of a great revival. On the day of Pentecost, three thousand received the Lord. After the healing of the man at the Gate Beautiful, another five thousand were saved. The church at Jerusalem became the spiritual hub of all other churches. Whenever a local church would have problems, they would contact the Jerusalem church.

Churches often corresponded with the church at Jerusalem but there are two specific examples of the influence of this church. One instance involved Peter and the other involved Paul.

Acts 11:2-3:

And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him,

Saying, thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them.

The elders at the church at Jerusalem confronted Peter about ministering to Cornelius and his household. Not only was Cornelius a Gentile, he was also a Roman citizen. They were upset because Peter had ministered the Gospel to those who were not Jews. But Peter reminded them of Jesus' words in Acts 1:8, which said that believers would receive power to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and *the uttermost parts of the earth*. After this reminder, they rejoiced at what God had done!

Paul was also confronted by the elders in the church at Jerusalem for ministering to the Gentiles as recorded in Acts 15 and in Galatians chapter two. The Jerusalem church kept being infiltrated with legalism, returning to Jewish law and Jewish pride. But God was working to destroy that legalism and pride by pouring out His Gospel and the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles.

Galatians 2:3-4:

But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised:

And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage.

Titus was not circumcised and because of this, he became a great object of controversy. However, when the elders observed the anointing on his life and in his ministry, they realized that Jewish law had nothing to do with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of God.

Many of the renowned apostles lived in Jerusalem. Can you imagine going to the church at Jerusalem, looking down your row and seeing Peter? This is the man who physically walked with Jesus for three years and this was the man who actually walked on water! As James, the brother of Jesus is preaching, you might look down the row and see Paul and Peter. Can you imagine how prestigious it was to be a part of the church at Jerusalem? The best of the best came through the Jerusalem church.

Galatians 1:15-24:

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace,

To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood:

Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days.

But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother.

Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not.

Afterwards I came into the regions of Syria, and Cilicia;

And was unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ:

But they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preaches the faith which once he destroyed.

And they glorified God in me.

One of the most prestigious places to preach was Jerusalem, but notice that Paul did not go to Jerusalem after his conversion. Instead, he went to Arabia and then to Damascus. In the natural, the best thing Paul could have done was to go to Jerusalem to preach. When he finally did go to Jerusalem, it was three years after his conversion and the only two he saw were Peter and James. Paul then went to the regions of Syria and Cilicia. When he went to Judea, the believers did not recognize Paul by face but had heard of his conversion. This was some thirteen or fourteen years after his conversion. The reason Paul was unknown by face was because he hadn't preached at the church at Jerusalem.

III. Do Not Compare Yourself to Others Nor Strive to be Teachers

People who attended the Jerusalem church began to hero worship those who spoke from the pulpit. Everyone wanted to become a teacher. They desired to be teachers because of the prestige. But James instructed his people that many should not desire to be teachers because they would receive greater judgment when they stood before the Lord.

James 3:1:

My brethren, be not many masters (teachers), knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

The Bible says that it is not wise to compare ourselves to others.

1 Corinthians 10:12:

For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.

We should not seek to be a carbon copy of others. In fact, Ephesians chapter 5 tells us that we are to imitate only one Person and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. Since the Jerusalem church had always had the “cream of the crop” speaking from its pulpit, many in the congregation were aspiring to become teachers. James was admonishing his congregation to quit imitating others and instead, discover what God wanted them to do. Again, he instructed them that ministers would receive greater judgment and be held accountable for what they ministered to the people.

IV. Bridling the Tongue

James 3:2-6:

For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, 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 of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, withersoever the governor listeth.

Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

Verse 2 tells us that learning to control the tongue is what brings maturity. Verse 3 describes how our tongue affects us. Verse 4 is the affect of the tongue on circumstances. Verse 5 describes the power of the tongue despite its small size. Finally, verse 6 describes the results of an unbridled tongue.

Notice, James said, "*For in many things we offend all.*" The "we" to which James is referring includes teachers of the Word, ministers from the pulpit, and those who sit in the congregation. We have all offended with our tongue and if we learn to conquer in this area, we will conquer in all areas of our lives.

When James says, "*...in many things we offend all,*" this literally means in many areas we all stumble. In the first two chapters James has been instructing and admonishing his congregation. But now he includes himself and says, "I understand how difficult it is to control the tongue. I am not just speaking to you, I am also speaking to myself!" Whenever a minister shares the Word of God, God is not only speaking to the congregation through the minister's message, He is also speaking to the minister himself!

When a person learns how to bridle the tongue, they are approaching maturity.

In verses 3 and 4, something very small controls something very large. The bit goes in the horse's mouth but controls the horse's entire body. The rudder on a ship is very small in comparison to the ship, but it turns the entire vessel.

Sometimes it seems that your mouth is not even attached to your will. Sometimes negative words will slip out of your mouth before you even seem to have time to stop them. But it's not up to the Lord to bridle our tongue; it is up to us!

V. The Difference Between the Horse and the Ship

The main difference between the horse and the ship is that a horse has a will and a ship does not! The horse is a type of man and the ship is a type of the circumstances of life. Which turns around more quickly, a horse or a ship? Of course, the answer is the horse. We can turn ourselves around by what we speak more quickly than we can turn circumstances around. The confession unto salvation takes moments not weeks. Repenting from sin takes moments and then our lives are headed in the right direction again! But with the circumstances of life, it sometimes takes a little time for things to change. Just as the rudder of a large ship gradually turns the ship, as we begin to speak to our circumstances we will see them turn around. As we speak to our circumstances, it may be a number of weeks or months, but we can be assured that the circumstances are turning our way instead of us turning their way.

In these verses, James is pointing out how very powerful the tongue is. And even though a small member, with it we can turn the whole world around!

VI. The Tongue is a Fire

Our tongue can actually turn the world around for good or for evil. James 3:6 says that it can "*set on fire the course of nature.*" But even though our tongue can set a fire, it can also extinguish them! Out of our mouth can come both good and evil. From the same mouth we can speak blessing or cursing. We should determine to allow only blessing to proceed from our lips.

Verse 5 says again, "*Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!*" This is a poor translation. The phrase "*how great a matter a little fire kindleth*" could be better translated, "Look how much wood a little fire can kindle." An entire forest could be burned to the ground because of a little kindling.

Again, verse 6 says, “*the tongue is a fire and a world or cosmos of iniquity.*” The word “*cosmos*” is referring to that part of the world we cannot see with our physical eyes. We do not wrestle with flesh and blood but against the invisible principalities and powers. There is a *cosmos*—an unseen world—behind the physical world in which we live. This verse is saying that the tongue is a fire—a world of wickedness. Verse 6 tells us that the tongue “*defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature.*” Literally, it “sets on fire the cycle of existence.” Jesus said we are the light of the world *and* the salt of the earth. In other words, we affect both worlds. We affect the unseen world, which cannot be seen, and we affect the natural world, which can be seen.

The bit in a horse’s mouth cannot be seen and the rudder of a ship beneath the cannot be seen. Whatever is in the invisible world controls the visible world. The tongue will control the body just as the bit controls the horse and the rudder controls the ship. The tongue can change the entire cycle of the existence of things. The tongue speaks words that cannot be seen but those unseen words have the power to devastate what can be seen!

VII. The Power of the Tongue

We don’t fully comprehend or realize the awesome power that is available to us through our words. Even though the words we speak are invisible, once spoken, those words are in the cosmos and are affecting the earth we see around us. This is the reason James is so strong in saying that out of the same mouth can come blessing and cursing. What has been spoken in secret has the potential to destroy entire societies. Many have been hurt by words spoken about them in secret. Sometimes those words can have a devastating affect months or even years later.

Proverbs 4:24:

Put away from thee a forward mouth, and perverse lips put far from thee.

Putting words away is up to us, not God. The words we speak are subject to our will. God desires our will to be subject to His! We must choose to put away words that can cause hurt and damaging affects on others.

VIII. The Seven Sins God Hates

Proverbs 6:16-19:

These six things does the Lord hate, yea, seven are an abomination to him:

A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,

An heart that devises wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief,

A false witness that speaks lies, and he that sows discord among brethren.

Out of the seven sins God hates, three of them are sins of the tongue: a lying tongue, a false witness that speaks lies, and he who sows discord (through gossip and slander) among the brethren.

Proverbs 10:19:

In the multitude of words there wants not sin: but he that refrains his lips is wise.

Where there are a multitude of words being spoken, sin will rise up. Those who refrain their tongue—who control what they speak, are wise.

IX. Our Words Can Bring Healing or Harm

Proverbs 12:18-19:

There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health.

The lip of truth shall be established for ever: but a lying tongue is but for a moment.

Our words can either bring hurt or healing to others. Good words—words of truth last forever. But when hurtful, lying words are spoken, the pain of those words need only last a moment as we apply the truth of God's Word to them!

Proverbs 13:3:

He that keeps his mouth keeps his life: but he that opens wide his lips shall have destruction.

Just as James said out of the same mouth comes blessing and cursing, this verse is saying that either life or destruction can come from our lips.

Proverbs 18:8:

The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly.

Proverbs 18:21:

Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.

Those who love God will strive to speak the right words—words of life. Again, death and life are in the power of the tongue and both death and life can apply to our individual lives, to circumstances, or to those around us.

Just as the bit is unseen in the horse's mouth and the rudder is unseen below the ship, and just as a small amount of kindling can put an entire forest ablaze, our tongue is unseen but can either bring great encouragement and life or it can bring great destruction. According to James, learning to control this small member of the body is the first step into maturity. We need to apply the Word of God to our tongue. Our conversations should be centered around the things of God.

Psalms 19:14 says, *“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.”*

X. The Curse

James 3:7:

For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed of mankind:

The word *“tamed”* in this verse means “subdued.” Man has learned to subdue even the wildest of animals. Even though the nature of some animals is ferocious, man has learned to keep them under his power for short lengths of time.

Next to God, Satan is the most powerful creature that exists. As Lucifer, he was the most powerful angel in heaven. He didn't lose his power when he was cast out of heaven, neither did he lose any of his abilities. Satan simply perverted all of his power and ability and turned them against God. Since the fall of Adam, there has been a curse in the earth. But the day is coming when God, Who created Lucifer, will completely subdue him and his influence in this world.

There are three different levels of the curse. First, there is a curse on nature. Next, there is a curse on man. And finally, there is a curse on Satan.

The curse is on three different levels—in an ascending order. The lowest curse was on nature—on everything made from the dust of the ground. When man and woman sinned, the ground was cursed and thorns and

thistles began to sprout up. Then animals that once lived in peace with one another suddenly began to turn against each other. The next level of the curse was on man. Man was cursed more than the nature around him. But the final level of the curse was on Satan. Satan was cursed above all the animals of the earth and even above man and woman.

Nature will be redeemed at the Second Coming. Romans 8 says nature will be released from its bondage of corruption. The trees will clap their hands when the Lord returns. The valleys will cry out and the mountains will sing.

There is also redemption for man. Our spirits are redeemed when we receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Our ultimate redemption will be at the Rapture of the Church when we receive our resurrection body.

But for Satan, the demons, and the fallen angels, there is no redemption. Satan received the worst curse and he will eventually be thrown into the Lake of Fire for eternity. The fallen angels, the demons, and all of those who chose to reject Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior will spend eternity with Satan in the Lake of Fire!

Satan is compared to two types of creatures in the Word of God. In 1 Peter 5:8 he is compared to a lion, and in Revelation 12:9 he is compared to a serpent. Serpent was the title used to refer to him when he deceived the woman in the garden. Psalm 91:13 says, “*You shall tread upon the lion and the adder...*” An adder is a cobra, one of the most deadly snakes in the world. Satan is compared to two of the most potentially vicious animals and yet man has been given the power not only to subdue these animals, he has been given power to subdue Satan himself!

XI. Two Types of People Who Can't Control the Tongue

James 3:8:

But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

The Greek word for “*unruly evil*” actually means, “a restless or unstable evil filled with all types of deadly poison.” In our own strength, we cannot control the tongue. How much power does it take to control the tongue? Verse 13 gives us the answer.

James 3:13:

Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

The only thing that can subdue the tongue is knowledge of the Word of God. Through knowledge of the Word and the application of that knowledge, the tongue can be controlled.

Two types of people cannot control the tongue. The first is the sinner and the second is the carnal Christian.

XII. Taming the Tongue

Again, James 3:8 says, no man can tame the tongue. It takes more than natural ability to tame the tongue. The flesh may be able to hold back for a short time, but even born again, Spirit-filled believers are surprised by what comes out of their mouth every once in awhile! The longer we walk with the Lord and in His Word, it becomes easier and easier to control the tongue. In the past, you might have gotten angry and had words fly out of your mouth that you later regretted. But the longer you walk in the Word, you realize an unseen power is working in you, and in situations from your past where your tongue may have been unruly, you find your tongue has become tame.

James 3:9-12:

Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?

Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? Either a vine figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

In this passage, we find the contradiction of the tongue. For the first two chapters James talked about the contradiction of people. People would come to church, worship God, talk about how wonderful He was and how much they loved Him, but as soon as a challenge arose, they would yield to the pressures of the flesh and the pressures of the world. A rich man came in and suddenly the crowd split, people were forced to move from their seats, and the rich man was given a special place. Then a poor man would enter and they would either make him stand for the entire service or sit on the floor. James was teaching his people that they should not cater to outward appearances. Believers need to realize every sinner who walks through the door, whether rich or poor, black or white, influential or not influential, from the good side of town or the bad side, Jesus died for *all* men and we need to extend His love equally.

James is bringing this same contradiction he addressed in the previous two chapters into the area of the tongue. People in the church would praise and worship God with their lips saying, “I love You Lord, I praise You, I lift up my voice and bless You!” But as soon as they were outside the doors of the sanctuary, they would begin speaking evil of fellow believers or even the pastor. James said, “This ought not be so.” Even nature displays that the same fountain doesn’t shoot out fresh water one minute and salty water the next. Even nature knows that one tree doesn’t produce two or three different kinds of fruit! James has many carnal believers in his church. James says, “You come in here and bless God and then you leave the service and immediately curse men who are made in God’s image.”

There are certain personality types that mesh. Perhaps you have similar interests, similar lifestyles, or even similar personalities. Many mistake these things for Christian fellowship. Sinners can get along with those who have the same interests and live a similar lifestyle! The real love of God is displayed when you clash with others but choose to look past the outward to the inward man and realize that the person you are criticizing with your lips is made in the image of God just like you! They may do things differently than you do. They may raise their children differently than you raise yours. You may have different opinions in different areas. But we must not judge others or look down on them because they may not do things in exactly the same way you do. The person standing next to you in church may raise one hand rather than two to the Lord, and you may think, “Wow, they sure are carnal—they only raise one hand,” when in fact, you are the carnal one for judging them! You may bless God with your mouth and the moment you walk out of church, viciousness comes out of your heart. “Did you see that ghastly dress? Praise and worship was horrible. As a matter of fact, the sermon wasn’t that great either!” You begin spewing all of that poison from your lips.

XIII. The Tongue Reveals What Is In A Man’s Heart

Matthew 7:15-17:

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

Even so every good tree brings forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit.

In both 1 Corinthians 3 and Ephesians chapter 5, Paul makes comparisons of the carnal believer with the unbeliever. It is almost impossible to distinguish the two because they behave and look the same.

Verse 15 of Matthew 7 warns about people that are wolves in sheep's clothing. Jesus says to beware of people with facades—people that are hypocrites. Verses 16 and 17 say that we can know what a person is like by the fruit they bear. What is in the heart will come out. A carnal Christian can try all they want to act spiritual, but what they are will eventually show through. The same is true for a sinner.

Matthew 7:18-20:

A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

Every tree that brings not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

What is inside the tree will eventually be produced. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit. A good tree may produce a piece of bad fruit every once in awhile, but that is not the character of the tree. The character of the tree produces good fruit over and over again. When verse 19 says, “*Every tree that brings not forth good fruit is hewn down,*” the Greek actually says, “Every tree that does not *habitually* bring forth good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire.” For the carnal believer this can mean the sin unto death. For the unbeliever it means the Lake of Fire.

Romans 3:13:

Their throat is an open sepulcher; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips.

Paul is pointing out the power of the tongue and how what a person speaks is a good indication of what is in their heart. A person might say the right things in church, but their lifestyle must be watched. What is in their heart will eventually come out.

An asp is another word for a cobra. When this person opens his mouth, it reveals a graveyard on the inside. Every time this person opens their mouth, a gravestone is removed and the stench of death is expelled. Even though men might not initially smell the stench, God smells it. When your heart is carnal, carnality rules rather than the Holy Spirit.

So often, we judge spirituality by what a person does in church. But God judges spirituality by what a person does in life. You may call yourself a worshiper of God and then go outside and malign the people you have just finished worshipping beside.

Maturity doesn't come because you know how to praise God. Maturity doesn't come because you know how to worship God. Maturity comes when you know how to control the tongue. The greatest step to spiritual maturity is controlling the tongue! This is only possible through the power God offers in His Word and by the Holy Spirit, and walking it all out day by day.

XIV. We Should Bless, Not Curse Others with Our Words

Again, verse 9 of James chapter 3 says that with our tongue we can bless God, our Heavenly Father, and then turn around with that same tongue and curse men who are made in God's likeness and image. Second Corinthians 4:7 says "*we have this treasure in earthen vessels...*" and what James is saying is we need to look past the outward vessel and look to the treasure inside. If you won't repent of talking badly about people, I hope the worst enemy you have in the body of Christ has a mansion next to you in heaven! Soon, all of us will be together for eternity in heaven. We can learn to love one another in this life. You may not agree with the things someone else does or how they do them, but they are as much a child of God on the inside as you are. They have the same Holy Spirit on the inside of them as you do. They have the same anointing and are called just like you are. They have the same image of God down on the inside of them as you do. And they are just as much a part of the family of God as you are!

James says in verse 10 of chapter 3, "*My brethren, these things ought not so to be.*" This verse emphasizes both the love James had for his congregation and the challenge he had as well. Right in the middle of correcting his congregation, James says, "*My brethren.*" James looks at his congregation and realizes these people are his spiritual brothers and sisters. We must remind ourselves often that not only are we all members of the body of Christ, we are also all members of the same family.

In verses 11 and 12 of James 3, James asks several rhetorical questions. "*Does a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?*" The answer is no. "*Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries?*" The answer is no. "*Can a grapevine produce figs?*" Again, the answer is no.

James 3:13:

Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

This verse is saying that the only way to demonstrate by your outward life what is in your heart is through knowledge of the Word of God. The word “knowledge” is a poor translation. The Greek word is “understanding.” In other words, what you learn in church you begin to do. The person who receives the Word and then applies that Word will not walk hypocritically before others. This person will praise God in church and speak well of men outside the church.

The wise person walks in the knowledge of God. Jesus said if we had anything against our brother, we should go to him and not others so we can gossip about him. The one who is truly wise and who walks in maturity is the one who has power and control over the tongue. Again, lions and cobras are easier to tame than the tongue! But when you have the Word of God, you begin to discover just how much power is in the Word. The blood of Jesus Christ and God’s Word are the two most powerful forces on the face of the earth!