

## The Treachery of the Tongue (Part 2 of # 13)

James 3: 1-12

We began to consider this passage in our last study, dealing with those who taught the Word of God. James understood the importance of rightly dividing the Word of truth, as well as proper communication of that truth. The wisdom one possesses will not benefit others if it is not conveyed in a way in which it will be received. We are called to reach others for Christ, not turn them away from the faith through our actions or hasty words.

Let's take a moment for a quick review of last week's study:

### **I. A Warning Concerning Teaching (1-2)**

**A. The Caution (1a)** – James warns against pride and covetousness in teaching.

**B. The Condemnation (1b)** – Those who teach the Word will give account to God.

### **C. The Communication (2)**

**1. The Reality (2a)** - Regardless of our best intentions, each of us has offended someone at some point in time.

**2. The Restraint (2)** – We all fail and come short, but we must learn to restrain our passions.

**3. The Reputation (2)** – Those who obtain spiritual maturity will be known and respected.

Tonight we come to that great discourse on the tongue. As we see in the text, the tongue is an unruly member. Untold damage and harm has been done to relationships and influence due to the tongue. This is true in our personal lives and within the church as well. We desperately need to learn the lessons James teaches in this passage. I want to continue considering the [warnings](#) revealed in the text as we contemplate: [The Treachery of the Tongue](#).

**II. A Warning Concerning the Tongue (3-12)** – As we have come to realize, James is very straightforward and to the point in his teaching. This passage is no different. He speaks of:

**A. The Influence of the Tongue (3-5a)** – The tongue is a little member, but it has great influence. Consider:

**1. The Illustration (3-4)** – [Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.](#) [4] [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. James offers very simple and yet profound illustrations of the influence of the tongue. Horses are large, powerful animals. They possess more strength than any human, and yet they are brought into submission by placing a bit in their mouth. When the mouth of the horse is controlled, the entire body is controlled. Similarly, a large ship's course is directed by a small helm (rudder) according to the desire of the captain. Ships weighing several tons are controlled by a very small rudder.

- The same principles are true in our lives. When the tongue is controlled, the body will usually follow. Great egos and personalities can be brought under control by simply controlling the tongue. We also need to understand, the tongue can be beneficial. Just as the rudder guides the ship through rough seas, the tongue can bring guidance and encouragement in troubling times.

**2. The Proclamation (5a)** – *Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things.* This phrase is directly tied to the previous verses. Here we discover the beneficial influence of the tongue. On the surface it appears the tongue is arrogant and prideful, and it certainly can act that way at times. However, we need to consider the depth of the text. *The tongue is a little member.* The word *member* is translated from the Greek word *mélos* and has two meanings. The first of which is "*a limb, a member, a part of the whole.*" The second meaning of the word is "*melody, the music to which a song is set.*"<sup>1</sup> If the body and tongue are in tune together, as they should be, the tongue will provide a melody, music that is soothing and comforting, rather than harsh and offensive.

- We also need to consider that *the tongue...boasteth great things.* Here this does appear to reveal arrogance through boasting. Again a closer look is necessary. The word *boasteth* does have the idea of *bragging exceedingly or to boast greatly*, but *it is void of hypocrisy.* In this context, the tongue is speaking of that which the body has done. In essence, the talk is matching the walk. Just as the bridle and rudder provide beneficial results, a tongue submitted to God will also be beneficial. This boasting will not be offensive, but encouraging and uplifting. This is foreign to our thinking because much boasting we hear is hypocritical in nature. This is in reference to boasting in God and glorifying Him with our tongue. *Psalm 34:1-3 – I will bless the Lord at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth. [2] My soul shall make her boast in the Lord: the humble shall hear thereof, and be glad. [3] O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.*

**B. The Iniquity of the Tongue (5b-6)** – James has dealt with how the tongue can be a blessing, beneficial to others, and now he addresses how the same tongue can be detrimental. Notice:

**1. The Destruction (5b-6a)** – *Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! [6] And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity:* Again we find a stirring illustration. Fire by its very nature is

destructive. It always consumes the fuel it feeds off of. Take just a moment to consider the devastation of a raging forest fire. We see the pictures and reports each year. Many times they consume thousands of acres, leaving ruin and devastation in their wake. Often these fires are started with just a small spark, a campfire that was left unattended, or even a discarded cigarette. They begin small, but quickly grow to a raging monster that is difficult to contain and extinguish.

- James speaks of an unruly tongue in the same way. It is a fire, a world of iniquity. It is capable of all manner of wickedness and devastation. We need to be reminded of the great harm and destruction the tongue can cause.

**2. The Defilement (6b)** – *And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body.* Just as a raging fire brings destruction to all it touches, often consuming large tracts of landscape, the tongue defiles the entire body in much the same way. The fire was located within the forest, but in the end, all the trees and landscape were defiled by its touch. The tongue is a little member, in relation to the overall size of the body, but it has the power and ability to defile the entire body.

- Again we go back to the words of our Lord: *Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh.* Our words have influence. If we take the time to listen, they will reveal the true nature of the one who speaks. Men may try to present themselves in a particular way, but often their words betray them. One may look clean and pure on the outside, but when they speak, their depravity is revealed. Words spoken out of order have lasting effects. People are judged, isolated, and even condemned by their choice of words.

**3. The Devastation (6c)** – *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.* Words have devastating effects, with the ability to affect our lives and the lives of others. Once words are spoken, they cannot be taken back. Many lives have suffered immediate and continual ruin due to an unruly tongue. Children and future generations have faced the devastation brought about by the words of another. Innocent lives have been touched by slanderous words. We must understand the power and influence of words.

- James also presents a sobering truth in regard to an evil tongue. *It is set on fire of hell.* Harsh, degrading, hurtful, condemning words are born of Satan. One is never in the will of God while speaking from an evil tongue. Those who speak evil words are influenced of Satan himself, and if salvation is not obtained, their evil words will follow them to hell, the source of their iniquity. It is no wonder our world is filled with such hatred and slander. Millions are under the influence of Satan, the enemy of God.

**C. The Insubordination of the Tongue (7-12)** – As we close our study, James reveals the insubordinate nature of the tongue, rebelling against all that is godly and pure. Consider:

**1. The Illustration (7-8a)** – *For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: [8] But the tongue can no man tame;* Here we find another simple and yet profound illustration. Humanity has the ability to tame practically every animal upon the earth, but the tongue is untamable. Regardless of efforts to educate and reform, the tongue continues to be an unruly evil, producing heartache and despair. It is amazing that such a small organ is that difficult to manage, and yet it is.

**2. The Rebellion (8b)** – *it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.* That seems harsh, but we know it is true. If left unguarded, the tongue has the ability to inflict great pain. It is filled with deadly poison, like a venomous viper, spreading damaging toxins to all it comes in contact with. The reaction to this poison is much the same for all people. Some are able to handle harsh words and criticism better than others, but we have all been hurt and damaged by the poison of the tongue.

**3. The Confusion (9-10)** – *Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. [10] Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.* This was written some 2,000 years ago, but things have not changed in this regard. James had encountered those who, with the same tongue, praised the Lord and cursed men. The same mouth produced blessing and cursing. *These things ought not so to be.* Isn't it amazing what the tongue is capable of? We have likely been guilty of this sin as well. Have there not been times when we have attended a worship service, lifting our voices in praise to God, and before we got home (maybe even before we left the house of God) we spoke against a brother or sister in Christ. We must be cautious that our tongues are reserved for praise unto the Lord, not for ridicule of our fellow man!

**4. The Conclusion (11-12)** – *Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? [12] Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.* I love the simplicity and truth within this passage of scripture. James concludes with a stirring truth. Springs of water do not produce sweet and bitter water from the same source; they do not produce both fresh and salt water. Fig trees do not produce olives, and grape vines do not produce figs. Each bears of its own. It only has to ability to produce what is within.

- So it is with us and the tongue. The tongue will reveal what is on the inside. If our hearts are right with God, walking in communion with Him, our words will be sweet and acceptable. If our hearts are not right with God, the sin within us will be revealed through our words. If you find yourself continually being negative, judgmental, or degrading to others, it would be a good idea to check your heart. Those who are right with God will be known by their words, just as those who are far from Him will be revealed by their words. Our communication will reveal the condition of the heart. I want to produce fruit that pleases my Lord.

**Conclusion:** This has definitely been a challenging passage of Scripture. It deals with an issue that we all face. Some have more trouble than others, but we all have had problems controlling our tongue. Those who are born again in Christ ought to speak in a way that reflects the new birth. We have a wonderful opportunity to share our faith and encourage others with our tongue. We also face the challenge of keeping it under control. May we seek the Lord to guard our mouths, so that we only speak in a way that pleases Him?

If you are having problems controlling your tongue, seek the Lord for help in that area. Take the time to pray and meditate upon the things of God. If our hearts are focused on Him, we will be less likely to have a negative attitude that leads to hurtful words. If you have never been saved, you will find it almost impossible to speak properly. Seek the Lord in salvation and He will guide you in all truth.

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<sup>i</sup> Faith, Love & Hope: An Exposition of the Epistle of James