

The Tongue

James 3:1-12

The subject of the first half of James 3 is that the tongue is only a small part of the body -- but it has a large effect. If our tongues are not kept under control our whole persons are out of control.

James 3:1-12 - *“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. ² For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. ³ Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. ⁴ Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. ⁵ Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things.*

See how great a forest a little fire kindles! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. ⁸ But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.”

Background Notes

The theme of James is “Practical Christian Living.” The Epistle of James provides practical and ethical instruction for many areas of life. In chapter 1 we had instruction on the testing of our faith, and a reference to our temptation to sin. In Chapter 2 we had instruction on the sin of showing favoritism to those with wealth or higher social status. Chapter 3 addresses another important area of Christian living: the control of our tongues.

We all face problems with our tongues every day, and we're not talking about eating-- but about speaking. How often we “put our foot in our mouth” by saying the wrong thing?

This is not the first time the epistle of James has mentioned the proper use of the tongue. In James 1:19 we read, *“let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.”* And in James 1:26 we read, *“if anyone among you thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart; this one's religion is useless.”* And in chapter 2 verse 12 we read, *“so speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty.”*

Here in James 3 we have a longer section of Scripture about controlling the tongue -- but James is not finished yet! In chapter 4 verse 11 we read “*do not speak evil of one another rather he who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother speaks evil of the law and judges the law.*” And finally in chapter 5 verse 12 we read “*above all my brethren do not swear either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no lest you fall into judgment.*” So the proper control of the tongue is mentioned in all five chapters of James. It is an important practical matter.

In verse 1 of chapter 3, James introduced the topic of the tongue with an exhortation to believers about teachers: “*My brothers let not many of you become teachers knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.*” James' point here of course is not meant to discourage potential teachers in the church, but to emphasize the serious responsibility of a teacher of God's Word. So teachers of the Bible had better know what they are talking about, because of the coming judgment seat of Christ to come. At the judgment seat of Christ, the Lord Himself will review their teaching! If teachers don't know the Word and teach it properly, they will stumble and sin with their tongues. In fact, any believer (not just teachers, but any believer) who cannot control his or her tongue stumbles in their walk with the Lord.

Doctrinal Points

1. The tongue is a small part of the body, but it has a big effect!

In verses 3-6, three different illustrations are given to emphasize how something as small as the tongue can result in a great effect. The first illustration (v3) is about a bit in a horse's mouth. We put bits in the mouths of horses so they may obey us, and so that we can turn their entire body. Just as a little piece of metal in a horse's mouth can control the entire body of the horse, so this little piece of flesh in our mouth called the tongue can control the entire body of a human! If you can't control your tongue, you can be sure that your whole person is out of control!

The second illustration (v4) is of a ship's rudder. Although a ship may be large and driven by strong winds, a very small rudder can turn the ship wherever the captain desires. Just as the small hidden rudder of a large ship can keep the ship on course, so the tongue under control can keep your whole body on an even keel. “*Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things*” (v5).

Notice, by the way, how these two illustrations show us that when our tongues are under control we have victory over both **internal forces and external forces**? The bit in the horse's mouth illustrates holding **internal forces** and desires in check. We want to go our way and do our own thing but we are kept under control. The rudder on the ship illustrates staying under control when the **external forces** confront us. During the storms and fierce blasts of life, we often tend to react with an out-of-control tongue. How are we doing at keeping our tongues under control in all circumstances?

The third illustration (v5-6) is of a small fire, basically comparing a match or a small campfire with a large forest fire. *“Even so, the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles. And the tongue is a fire - a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body and sets on fire the course of nature. And it is set on fire by hell.”* Under control, a fire is very useful for cooking and for heat, but an out-of-control forest fire causes great destruction and devastation. You understand the illustration, of course. When it's out of control, the tongue destructive and devastating.

The tongue is also deceptive when it boasts great things (v5). Think of how often we use our tongues to exaggerate and brag about our activities – to make ourselves “look good.” Out of control, the tongue defiles the whole body (v6). Think of how our whole personality is corrupted when we use our tongue to lie or slander or swear.

When it's out of control, the tongue contaminates everything! It is hellish in its very character (v6). The tongue is a small part of the body -- but it has a big effect!

2. The tongue is a restless evil -- but it can be controlled.

Verses 7-12: *“For every kind of beast and bird or reptile and creature of the sea is tamed and has been tamed by mankind but no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly or restless evil full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father and with it we curse men who have been made in the likeness of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren these things ought not to be so. Does the spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring is both salt water and fresh.”*

Verses 7-8 state that you can tame all kinds of animals -- but you can't tame the tongue. It's easier to teach a bear to ride a bicycle than it is to tame someone's tongue! The tongue is a fire -- a world of iniquity. *The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body. It sets on fire the course of nature and it is set on fire by hell.* And look at verse 8 again: *“..no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly or restless evil full of deadly poison.”*

Where in these verses do we see that the tongue can be controlled? Well, the very fact that with our tongues we can both bless God and curse men (v9-10) is a hint that the tongue can be controlled. How is it possible for the tongue to both bless and curse? This is contrary to nature! A spring, for example, doesn't send out both fresh and bitter waters (v11). And a fig tree doesn't bear olives, and a grapevine doesn't bear figs (v12)!

So what's different about the believer's tongue? The difference is that the believer has **two natures**. We have the fallen sinful nature that we were born with, but we also have a new nature because we've been born again. We have a new nature because we have new life in Christ. Because of our sinful natures, our tongues can be a restless evil. Because of our new natures, our tongues can be controlled and used to praise God and edify one another.

We can learn to control our tongues by doing what it takes to grow in Christ-- that's the secret! Bible study. Prayer.

Christian fellowship. If you're really involved in these activities, your life in Christ will thrive -- and your tongue will be governed by your new nature, not by your old nature. This is the key to controlling your tongue. The tongue is a restless evil--but it can be controlled.

Practical Application

It's easier not to say it than to try to take it back!

Did you ever try to take something back that you said when you were angry or when you were only thinking of yourself? It's not easy to do, is it? You may apologize and say that you take the statement back, but once the words are out of your mouth you can't really put them back, and they may never be forgotten.

The problem of carelessly spoken words is serious, because in Matthew 12:36 our Lord said, "*...for every idle word man may speak they will give account of it in the day of judgment.*"

Here's some practical advice if you have a problem with careless words: **Keep your mouth closed!** It's easier not to say it than to try and take it back. Proverbs 26:20 says, "*Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases.*"

In Psalm 141:3, David prayed, "*Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips.*" This is a good prayer for all of us, because it's easier not to say those careless words in the first place than to try to take them back!