

Authentic Christianity
The Tongue
James 3:1-12

November 1, 2020 am

HDBC

It is a ***two-ounce slab of muscle, mucous membrane, and nerves*** that enables us to chew, taste, swallow foods, and articulate words. Of course I'm speaking of **the tongue**. James has redefined it (in non-technical terms) as a *beast*, that must be brought under careful control. The tongue is the tattletale that tells on the real you. It discloses the real person because it reveals what is truly in the heart.

The Bible refers to the tongue as **wicked, deceitful, perverse, filthy, corrupt, flattering, slanderous, gossiping, blasphemous, foolish, boasting, complaining, cursing, contentious, sensual and vile.** *As John MacArthur has written, no wonder God put the tongue in a cage behind the teeth, walled in by the mouth!*

James has a great concern for the tongue. It is mentioned in every chapter of this letter. In this passage James says how one uses the tongue is a test of one's faith, a marker of the authenticity of a person's faith. Again, what's on the inside will eventually make it way to the outside through the tongue. **The rabbis in Jesus's day referred to the tongue as an arrow rather than as a dagger because of its ability to wound or kill even from a distance.**

In this passage James warns of the danger that comes when a person's tongue is out of control. This is a clarion-call for us to control our speech, and essentially all our communication. In doing so James offers five powerful truths about the tongue when make it so destructive and harmful.

1. The Power to Condemn (1)

James begins discussion in most unusual way. Challenging hearers to refrain from desire to be teachers. In that day, it was prestigious for family to have son studying to be a rabbi. Position offered power and status, and motivation to seek it.

In some Jewish circles, rabbis were held in such high regard that one's duty to his rabbi was considered more important than his duty to his parents. The

parents brought him into the life of this world but the rabbi led him to the world to come. **It was written that if a man's parents and his rabbi were both captured by an enemy the rabbi was to be ransomed first. It was held in such high esteem that it was alluring to many.**

James is encouraging them to lay aside that attitude. WHY? Teachers will be judged according to a stricter standard. WHY? **Range of influence** is much greater than non-teacher. Responsible for the information they impart. In fact there is a particular judgment that will come to teachers for the influence they offer. For the false teachers who are not born again this will happen at the Great White Throne Judgement described in Revelation 20. For true believers who teach error, the judgement will come in the form of discipline in this life.

James is not discouraging those who are truly gifted and called to be teachers. It is a challenge to those who seek the position out of pride and to those who may be truly called but who do not take the responsibility seriously. **The Scottish reformer John Knox was so overwhelmed by the responsibility to teach the Bible faithfully that before his first sermon, he wept uncontrollably and had to be escorted from the pulpit until he could compose himself.** Another preacher said of preaching the word . . .

There is no special honor in preaching. There is only special pain. The pulpit calls those anointed to it as the sea calls its sailors, and like the sea, it batters and bruises and does not rest . . . To preach, to really preach, is to die naked a little at a time and to know each time you do it that you must to it again.

The first compelling reason to control our tongues is that they have the power to condemn . . . to bring us into a greater judgment. The illustration James uses is that of teachers. But the Bible makes it clear that we will all be judged by the things we say. Jesus said,

Every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. Mk. 12:36

Scientists maintain that once a sound wave is set in motion, it continues on a never-ending journey, and that, if we had sophisticated enough instruments, each wave could be captured and reproduced at any time. Of

course God needs no such instrument. He knows our words. Every time you speak or communicate with words, you risk bringing greater condemnation. That truth should be enough to cause us to pause before we speak.

2. The Power to Control (2b-5a)

We all stumble in many ways. We all sin. All kinds of ways in which we sin. But at no point are we more likely or prone to sin, than with the tongue. Therefore, James makes the statement that a man who can control his tongue is **well on his way to controlling his entire body**. Controlling the tongue is a sign of maturity. The power of the tongue to control is illustrated in three ways:

A. Horse and Bit (3)

Reference back to 1:26. The horse is naturally wild, but can be controlled with small bit. A horse is a half-ton animal filled with raw power. Yet if you place a bridle in its mouth and a 100 pound woman who knows what she is doing can cause him to do pretty much whatever she wants. That's the power of the bit and that is the power of the tongue.

B. Ship and Rudder (4)

Great ships are controlled by small rudders. Keeps them going in right direction and protects them from shipwreck during stormy weather.

Verse 5 clearly states **the point** of the first two illustrations: The tongue is small, but it can boast of great power. And it is not empty boasting.

It can sway men to violence, or move them to noblest actions.

It can **instruct the ignorant,**
encourage the dejected,
comfort the sorrowing, and
soothe the dying.

Crush a human spirit,
destroy reputations,
spread distrust and hate, and
bring nations to brink of war.

We must bring our tongues under the control of the Holy Spirit lest we allow the tongue to control us.

3. The Power to Corrupt (5b-6)

James then moves to discuss the corrupting power of the tongue.

But two things must be remembered:

- 1) James speaks of the tongue in its uncontrolled state.
He does not discount the possibility of bringing it under the control of the Holy Spirit. In fact that seems to be his real concern.
- 2) Real Culprit is the Heart (Mt. 15:11)
Jesus made it clear that heart was real problem.

You are not defiled by what you eat; you are defiled by what you say and do. NLT

Note three things James says about the tongue here.

A. The Tongue is a fire (5b-6)

Under control, fire is blessing. Out of control, curse. James is drawing attention to the great destructive power of hateful, false, heretical, careless words. Great damage can be done by a small source. We sang a song back in the early 70's, ***it only takes a spark to get a fire going.*** It was a song about the power of evangelism. That same power can be seen in a negative light, when it comes to sins we commit with our words.

Fire is such a unique element. It has virtually unlimited power to reproduce itself. As long as it has oxygen and fuel it grows larger and more powerful as it burns. Water has no ability to enlarge itself. Once it is poured out it is depleted. First feeds on itself and grows stronger. Words are like that. They have power to create damage and destruction in exponential ways.

B. The Tongue is a world of iniquity (6)

An uncontrolled, sinful tongue is the personification of the evil in the world. All the evil in the world can find expression through the tongue. The evil which the tongue spreads is vast.

C. The Tongue defiles the whole body

Pollutes man's whole personality. Leaves deadly stain throughout a person's entire personality. Uncontrolled words are like rancid smoke that stains everything that it touches, leaving its nasty stench. If you've ever tried to get smoke smell out of clothes you understand this picture.

Sets on fire course of life. Amplifies the previous phrase. The tongue wields its evil through the whole course of human life.

Course, literally means "***wheel***". ***Symbol in ancient times for cycle of life.*** Some see the picture as a **fire igniting the axle and then running out each spoke until the whole wheel is on fire.**

D. The Tongue is set on fire by hell

Gehenna - used only in Gospels. Valley of Hinnom, outside Jerusalem where trash burned continually. Located just outside the dung gate through which they brought their trash. Much like the putrid smoke that emerges from an open landfill where trash is being burned, negative, critical words can be filthy and putrid. Our uncontrolled words reveal the nastiness of our hearts.

Also the place where the ancient Canaanites offered their children as sacrifices to the god, Molech. Literally burn them to death. Jesus used it to refer to hell. Tongue receives its wicked tendencies from Hell itself. Satan keeps the tongue fires burning.

4. The Power to Resist (7-8)

The tongue is wild and untamable. James offers the sweeping generality that all kinds of animals have been brought under control of men, but not the tongue. It is the one beast that man has not subdued. Even though it may be held in check for a season, it remains a constant threat to escape.

A man working in the produce department was asked by a lady if she could buy half a head of lettuce. He replied, "Half a head? Are you serious? God grows these in whole heads and that's how we sell them!"

"You mean," she persisted, "that after all the years I've shopped here, you won't sell me half-a-head of lettuce?" "Look," he said, "If you like I'll ask the manager."

She indicated that would be appreciated, so the young man marched to the front of the store. "You won't believe this, but there's a lame-braided idiot of a lady back there who wants to know if she can buy half-a-head of lettuce."

He noticed the manager gesturing, and turned around to see the lady standing behind him, obviously having followed him to the front of the store. "And this nice lady was wondering if she could buy the other half" he concluded.

Later in the day the manager cornered the young man and said, "That was the finest example of thinking on your feet I've ever seen! Where did you learn that?" "I grew up in Grand Rapids, and if you know anything about Grand Rapids, you know that it's known for its great hockey teams and its ugly women."

The manager's face flushed, and he interrupted, "My wife is from Grand Rapids!" "And which hockey team did she play for?"

It is a restless evil full of deadly poison. That word **restless** pictures a wild animal fighting fiercely against the restraints of captivity. Evil chafes at confinement and control and fights against it. It is always seeking to escape and spread its deadly poison.

5. The Power to Deceive (9-12)

These verses show the good use of the tongue, the bad use of the tongue, and the absurdity of doing both with the same tongue. Like **Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde**, the tongue has the power to deceive.

The tongues of Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill offer great testimony to the positive and negative power of the tongue. On one side of the English channel Hitler mesmerized his audiences and whipped them into an evil frenzy. On the other side the Prime Minister of England used his words to mobilize his nation to resist evil and win what seemed to be an impossible victory. But those were different individuals. That both could come from the same mouth is certainly a possibility because of the sinful nature of man, but it must not be true of authentic Christians.

Three figures illustrate the principle: A fountain, a tree, water.

The tongue that deceives through its inconsistency is not controlled by the Holy Spirit.

Charles Swindoll is a master at using words to create images and help us understand Biblical truth. Check this out from his commentary on James.

If you ever see a wild animal prowling your neighborhood, you can call your local animal control agency to round it up and haul it away. The dog-catcher can take care of stray dogs. Feral cats can be caught, skunks chased off, raccoons lured away. All these wild and roaming animals can be rounded up. Why not have a catcher and pound for stray words. Now that's an occupation that could earn a decent living in any economy. Imagine a razor-toothed invective cornered by the word catchers: "Careful now, careful—that's a mean one!"

"Who would let such a thing loose?"

"Aw, some guy got worked up and unleashed it on his poor wife."

"I'd hate to see what that gal feels like now."

"Like shredded wheat, probably."

"Well, let's get this pit bull of a word off the street before it bites somebody else."

Now then, let's say you're home and these same word catchers suddenly ring your doorbell. "Excuse me, sir," they ask, "does this word belong to you? We caught it running loose out there, backbiting everyone where you work. Your boss said it sounded like it was one of yours."

You take a long look at their catch and sure enough, you let that little gossip out on Wednesday and by Saturday it's ruined a dozen weekends. Red-faced, you claim your nasty words and send the word catchers away.

The apostle Peter preached the truth of the gospel on the day of Pentecost and 3000 people were saved. Jim Jones proclaimed a lie and it led to the deaths of over 900 people, many by suicide.