

The Epistle of James

Lesson # 10 The Tongue: A Restless Evil

James 3:1-12

Date: December 28, 2014

I. Stricter Judgment

James 3:1

The Bible has a lot to say about what we say. How we use our speech to our advantage; to curry favour, to rationalize our actions, to verbally assault others, to commit evil, to evangelise or encourage, to put someone down, to defend another's honour, to conspire to commit a crime, to draw people to our side or support us (as in politics), to craftily get our way or "pull the wool over" someone's eyes, to express love or hatred, to take away freedom (a judge), to enslave, to grieve, to gossip or slander, and on and on. *"James 3:1-12 contains the single most sustained discussion in the NT on the use of the tongue."*

Our mouths and tongues are not separate entities – they are how we express what is inside of us, what is within our hearts. How many times have each of us said something out loud that we wish had remained a private thought, because when we said it, a friend or family member was hurt and a relationship was irreparably fractured?

This 12 verses passage in James addresses the believer and his / her tongue, arguing along an almost parallel line of reasoning to what he has just expressed with regard to a Christian and his / her works. Again, James echoes what Jesus said in a number of places: Matt. 12:33-37; 15:10-11,18-19; and Proverbs – Prov. 18:6-7; 16:27-28; 20:19; 26:20-22; and the Prophets – Isaiah 6:5 & Psalm 34:12-13. The Bible's conclusion? Our tongues are an excellent indicator of what is really inside of us and James wants his readers to understand this so that we gain control over our speech as we strive to be holy. Notice what he says later on in 4:8b; *"Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts you double-minded."* With the agenda James has – to teach Christians how to live as Christians – how can he avoid this issue? He can't, because it's huge.

To begin this section, in v. 1, James gets to a very important, personal aspect of our speech – *"Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."* The first question we have to address here is, "What does stricter judgment mean?" Douglas Moo is helpful, but I think, to my mind, a bit incomplete in his answer to this question.

"Jesus warned, 'From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked' (Luke 12:48). God has given to teachers a great gift and entrusted to them 'the deposit' of the faith (II Tim. 1:14). He will expect a careful accounting of the stewardship. Paul reflects just this sense of responsibility to his task as a herald of the gospel: 'I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to

proclaim to you the whole will of God” (Acts 20:26-27). If Paul serves as a positive example, many of the Jewish teachers of Jesus’ day exhibited the other side of the picture; because of their insincerity and desire for gain, Jesus announced that they would receive the greater condemnation (Mark 12:40 NRSV). Those of us who teach God’s Word regularly need to follow James’s example and apply the warning of this verse to ourselves. When we undertake to guide others in the faith, we must be especially careful to exhibit the fruit of that faith by the way we live. Our greater knowledge brings with it a greater responsibility to live according to that knowledge. Of course, James is not trying to talk people who have the appropriate call and the gift out of becoming teachers. But he does want to impress upon us the seriousness of this calling and to warn us about entering into the ministry with insincere or cavalier motivations.”ⁱⁱ

The choice of these verses by Moo seems to be saying that one may be exposed as a false teacher and thus stand condemned at the judgment as a result. Does it have to mean that, however? What if a person is teaching who is not a false teacher but is simply unlearned on certain aspects of the Bible? Certainly that does not rise to the level of willful mishandling of God’s Word. But then what is the stricter judgment in that case? Is it reserved for the Judgment Seat of Christ (I Cor. 3) or is it a temporal judgment that helps the novice teacher to better understand the Scriptures? Perhaps incidents like Paul’s rebuke of Peter in Galatians 2:11-14, preceded by his and Barnabus’s ordination (in a sense) in Gal. 2:1-10; or the exhortation of Apollos in Acts 18:24-28 by Priscilla and Aquila to help him understand better the gospel he was attempting to teach?

For most Christian teachers, the more likely scenario is that he is referring to the Bema Seat judgment of believers before Jesus Christ, as mentioned in II Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:12, and I Cor. 3:12-15. R. Kent Hughes comments:

“While all Christians will be at the Bema, professed teachers of the church will undergo a greater judgment. Their teaching will be examined with far greater scrutiny...Even more sobering, we teacher’s lives will be measured against what we teach. Do we preach about the tongue and then have roast congregation for Sunday dinner? Do we castigate our people for their materialism and then lust for more? This is strong stuff for pastors, adult teachers, youth workers, and Sunday School teachers. But it is also great encouragement because if the architecture of our souls is built with gold, silver and costly stones, we will receive eternal reward and honor.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We’ve all been influenced in our lives by teachers. Here of course, he is referring to teachers within the context of the church. Think of your journey as a Christian if you’ve been a believer for a long time. Who has influenced your persona as a believer? Sunday school teachers, pastors, perhaps radio or TV personalities like John MacArthur, Steven Lawson, Mark Dever, John Piper, J. Vernon McGee, David Jeremiah, Charles Stanley, James White? Big name preachers like Billy Graham? But what about Jim Jones, David Koresh? For many, these 2 cult leaders alone led hundreds to Hell. What about the Health & Wealth / Word Faith teachers so prevalent on TV today? What is their influence as teachers?

James singles out those who desire to teach first in this passage because of the very real influence teachers have over their students, be it 4 people or 4,000. Perhaps James's concern was that unqualified people were attempting to rise to teaching positions, or those who only wanted pre-eminence or the prestige of leadership – cf. Matt. 23:6-10. Paul, in I Tim. 3:1 comments that the one who desires the position of overseer (elder) that their desire is a noble thing – but then he lists (vv. 2-7) the qualifications that person must have in order to be legitimately considered. Later, in I Tim. 6:2b-5, Paul warns of those whose deceitful characters erupt in false teaching – and they are to be avoided because of the harm they can do to the church. In other places, such people are called “wolves in sheep's clothing” because they rise up from within the church, and can be at first indistinguishable from real believers.

Daniel Doriani says,

“Public speech before a frequently captive audience “provides temptations to virtually every form of evil speech: arrogance and domination over students; anger and pettiness at contradiction or inattention; slander and meanness toward absent opponents; flattery of students for the sake of vainglory”. These problems are all the worse in the church since Christian teachers are expected to be models of virtue.”^{iv}

Here are some other ways for teachers to incur judgment: a novice who can be puffed up by the position of leadership, those having an agenda, incorrect doctrine, insincerity of purpose, Lording it over others, weakness as a leader, too bold, not bold enough, flippant handling of God's word, arrogance, pettiness, doing it for some sort of gain, etc.

Kevin DeYoung points out a very real danger of being a teacher:

“Once I got into a blog exchange with a liberal pastor who questioned the historicity of the virgin birth. We went back & forth several times until we realized we were operating from different conceptual worlds. “Do I think the virgin birth is essential to our creed as Christians?”, he wrote. “That's not really mine to say, is it? As you say, it has been confessed for centuries, and thus I need to take it seriously and to heart and to wrestle with how I understand it.” The ambiguous (and functionally useless) language of taking the virgin birth “seriously” and needing to “wrestle with” his understanding of it was already frustrating. And then I got to his conclusion; “For my part, I take the statement, ‘all things are possible with God’ as more valuable to my faith than, ‘how can this be, since I am still a virgin?’ I don't claim that you need to accept my understanding, nor would I imagine that you would claim that I must necessarily accept your understanding.” My reply was something to the effect that “I do claim that you need to accept my understanding, because it's not my understanding. It's the teaching of the New Testament and the affirmation of the orthodox Christian church throughout the centuries.

Besides displaying a self-defeating logic – if all things really are possible with God, why choke on a miraculous virgin birth? The liberal understanding of history is completely at odds with the Bible's own understanding.”

In his sermon at T4G 2014, where he uses this illustration, here's the application he added: “If you are a 15 year old, or a first year seminary student, and you are wrestling with these things, then by all means let us have remarkable patience; but if you are a preacher of God's word, James 3:1 says, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judge with greater strictness.”, and all you can do with the virgin birth is “take it seriously” and “wrestle with it”, then you're not in a position to be preaching.”^v

As Paul expresses quite helpfully in I Cor. 1:12-17, teachers tend to gather followers, and so, realising this, in Christ's church, those who are teachers or want to be teachers must gear their teaching to exalt Christ, not ourselves. We must wrestle with the hard issues so we don't fall prey to popular positions on controversial subjects because we are too lazy to dig into it ourselves.

II. The Tongue: Tough to Control...Or Impossible? James 3:2-6

Verse 2 is connected to v. 1 by the word, "For". Whether a teacher or member of a congregation, we all have problems controlling our tongues. Doriani rightly comments, "The tongue daily demonstrates both our sinfulness and our inability to reform ourselves. Failures of the tongue are frequent and public, hence undeniable. Scripture has long used sins of the tongue to describe human fallenness."^{vi} Consider all the verses we looked at in the beginning of this lesson, and add this passage – Rom. 3:10-14. For most of us, what we say reveals parts of our thought-life that should be kept silent and dealt with by prayer.

Think of those times – and we all have them – where a snappy remark, a witty comeback, meant to make us look good in an argument, caused some real hurt to the one we were conversing with; or that time when we lied about something and the lie went undiscovered, but we are still haunted by it; or the time when a witty comment meant as a joke – but someone was the butt of that joke – and they were cut to the core by what they heard as a callous attack on their person. We have all said stupid things we wish we could take back.

We have to admit that James is right – "*We all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.*" Do we see this in our own lives? Do we master our speech or does it get the better of us?

James uses 3 illustrations; actually analogies to show the idea of the power of tongue over people's lives. The first is in v. 3 and plays off the word "bridle" in v. 2. A typical horse is a large animal, yet man can tame horses. A horse can be broken by training and taught to wear a saddle & rider, or to carry baggage, haul a carriage or plough a field, & gallop into battle, etc. One of the main tools used to guide and control a horse is a bit. A bit (today) is usually a piece of metal attached to the bridle by rings and is used to control the horse by leverage and pressure against the sides or top the roof of the horse's mouth. Since this pressure causes discomfort or pain, the horse is compelled to turn one way or another or to stop. This small piece of metal thus controls the whole horse. James's point is that our tongue, also a small thing compared to our whole body, tends to control our lives, revealing our inner self.

The second illustration is in v. 4 – the rudder of a ship. The rudder is quite small when compared to the bulk of the ship, yet the ship's pilot or captain, from a remote station on the ship can control that rudder to steer the ship. As the rudder turns to either side, the pressure of water rushing into it, pressures the ship via the mechanical connection, forcing the ship to veer to a new course. The rudder of an

airplane does the same job, but with the force of airflow rather than water. The rudder of any vessel is of utmost importance because by it the pilot can direct it in whichever direction he needs the vessel to go. If it's damaged, or locked in position or missing, the whole vessel is in trouble.

A well-known battle of WW II is the sinking of the German Battleship "Bismarck". It was a massive ship, incredibly armed with guns that allowed it to stay outside of the range of most other enemy battleships, while still getting its own shells on target to sink other ships. A huge hunt was undertaken to track the ship down and sink it after the British heavy cruiser, "The Hood" was sunk by it. Here's a brief explanation of how the Bismarck was finally eliminated;

"A great chase commenced, and the Bismarck was finally doomed when a torpedo destroyed its rudder, causing it to sail haplessly in circles until a barrage of British naval artillery sent her to the bottom of Atlantic Ocean."^{vii}

The third analogy (v. 5) has to do with a forest fire, which often begins with a small spark or relatively tiny flame which ignites dry leaves, moss or cones, and once it gets going, fanned by breezes or wind, can consume many 100's or even thousands of acres of forest.^{viii}

In v. 6, James stops to make his direct connection to the tongue as he compares it to starting that forest fire, *"And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness."* It is quite likely he is referring to gossip here, because careless or malicious words that mar someone's reputation are like that stray spark carried by the wind into dry leaves start a fire that quickly gets out of control and spreads like, well, like wildfire! Note again Prov. 16:27-28 & 26:20-22.

The tongue's capacity for sin and to suggest sin, or conspire to sin is limited only by the wickedness of the soul it is attached to. Think of the world changing harangues of Adolf Hitler versus the stirring patriotic prose of Winston Churchill – both examples of men's words, but what a different result came about from each. Consider what James is saying in v. 6 – describing the tongue in 3 ways; 1.) It stains the whole body; 2.) It influences the entire course of a life; and 3.) It is set on fire by Hell, so that, with it, we display an allegiance with Satan.^{ix}

1.) It stains the whole body;

Speech is involved in virtually every form of wickedness. This is a big example, but just consider what the evil rhetoric of Adolf Hitler created in the 1930's until 1945. His (surely) Satanically inspired speeches riled up a whole country and ultimately caused the systematic murder of 6 million Jews + a few million Gypsies, handicapped people, homosexuals, Christians and elderly. This is not to mention the war he started that ultimately killed many millions more. Wicked words usually result in wicked deeds.

2.) The Whole Course of Life

The tongue has the power to further the plans of evil and to utter hate. “throughout the changing circumstances of life, the tongue continues to create evils. When we fail we excuse ourselves and blame others. When we succeed or our children succeed, we fuel our pride by boasting.”^x Jesus’s take on it? Matt. 15:11,18 – our mouths corrupt us.

3.) Set on fire by Hell

In a sense, we allow our tongues to be used by Satan, and it seems that James is suggesting that Satan does have some effect on the destructive power of our tongue. It is one place he, or one of his demons seems to key in on to attack our relationship with God.^{xi}

III. Contradictory Words

James 3:7-12

Verse 7 is a proverb-like statement – a truism. Many animals can be tamed – lions, tigers, gorillas, monkeys, chimps, elephants, horses, dogs, whales, etc. But Komodo Dragons, sharks, starfish, octopi...? James’s point is what follows v. 7, “*but no human being can tame the tongue, it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*” James has used the 4-fold division of the animal kingdom, perhaps even alluding to Gen. 1:26 to show man’s dominion over all the animals of earth. We can subdue the animal kingdom because God has given us dominion over them, but our tongue is a different matter, because it is part and parcel of who we are as sinners by birth and by nature.

Notice how James stresses, “*No human being can tame the tongue.*”^{xii} His point, never formally expressed is this: Only God can tame the tongue. Only a Spirit-led life can conquer this expressive body member’s influence, because what we say is an expression, a revealing of what lurks within us. See Rom. 8:5-17. Now, will salvation and the indwelling Spirit perfect us or make us perfectly sinless? Is that the essence of Christianity – to be have a tongue that never expresses sin? No, but it will help to compel us to strive for holiness and to run the race diligently. Even Paul, as holy as we see him to be, claimed Phil. 3:12-16.

James says the tongue is “a *restless evil*” – unstable, perhaps an allusion to the double-minded man” of James 1:8; but it is also “*full of deadly poison.*”, which squares with Ps. 140:3, a verse quoted by Paul in Rom. 3:13. Bruce Waltke comments amusingly, “*A Fool’s tongue is long enough to cut his own throat.*”^{xiii}

From here on in fact, to the end of the paragraph, James uses a number of illustrations to demonstrate (in part) what double-mindedness” looks like when it is related to the tongue. His main point in vv. 9-12 is the absurd notion that we use our tongues to both praise God and to curse others, and he uses a series of natural things to paint that portrait.

First, in v. 9 – “*With it we bless our Lord and father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.*” We feel comfortable blessing God, praying to Him,

singing to Him and about Him, and being blessed by our worship of Him, but then, we go out of a church service, enter our cars and curse the “idiot drivers”, the slow waiter at the restaurant, our own loved ones who cause us to be angry over something usually trivial, and we never consider what James says here in v. 9. This of course, is not limited to Sundays. Sinclair Ferguson again makes sense, when he says;

“We were created in the image of God to bless God. It is blatant hypocrisy, double-mindedness, and sin to bless God and then casually curse those who have been made as his very likeness. But the forked tongue of the double-minded person enslaves him or her. He or she thinks the unthinkable and speaks unspeakable contradictions.”^{xiv}

We forget that people (that includes us) are made “in the likeness of God” and instead tend to think of ourselves as the superior example of the human race, even for a moment, and our pride compels us to verbalize that pride by putting down or cursing others who don’t “live up to” our standards of child-rearing, marriage, intelligence, church attendance, godliness, or who interfere with our progress in some way. Matthew 18, among other passages should give us pause to consider our own sin before we worry about other people’s cf. Beam in our eye vs speck in our brother’s eye). James emphasizes this in v. 10, *“From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”*

Now, in vv. 11-12, he resorts to intensely practical, natural things that prove his point. A fresh water spring cannot produce salt water, a fig tree does not bear olives, a grapevine does not produce figs and no fresh water comes out of a bitter pond. Four natural things that his readers would be quite familiar with, and would be able to answer “no” to. These are rhetorical questions, demanding a negative reply – showing that those who are evil cannot speak both good and evil. It is not natural. These 2 verses are reminiscent of Matt. 7:15-20 in the Sermon on the Mount. Here Jesus warns of false prophets and how to discern their lies. They will invariably produce fruit that exposes what sort of person they are on the inside.

“A pure heart, given over to Christ cannot produce false, bitter, harmful speech.”^{xv} Nor is a person who is out of fellowship with God consistently speak pure and encouraging words. Sooner or later their heart will be exposed by what they say. Only a renewed heart can produce good works and pure speech consistently (not necessarily perfectly). Note Matt. 3:8 & Rom. 7:4. There is an expectation that those who’ve been declared righteous will bear good fruit – including righteous speech from a tongue captured and captivated by Christ.^{xvi}

Martyn Lloyd Jones commented about Romans 3:19, and I think we can apply these words to this section of Scripture in James when we realize that the best course of action many times is simply to keep our mouths shut;

“Paul now points out...that when we realize what the Law says is truly saying to you the result is that “every mouth shall be stopped.” You are rendered speechless. You are not a Christian unless you have been made speechless! How

do you know whether you are a Christian or not? It is that you “stop talking”. The trouble with the non-Christian is that he goes on talking...

How do you know whether a man is a Christian? The answer is that his mouth is shut. I like this forthrightness of the Gospel. People need to have their mouths shut, “stopped”...you do not begin to be a Christian until your mouth is shut, is stopped, and you are speechless and have nothing to say.”^{xvii}

I will finish this lesson off with 3 statements we can discuss or not regarding James’ gospel message as it relates to our speech;

1. Realize that the depth of your sin, the pollution of your heart, and your need of saving grace are all evidenced in your use of the tongue.
2. Recognise that you are a new creation in Christ.
3. Continue in the Word.^{xviii}

ⁱ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Bit, The Bridle, and the Blessing: An Exposition of James 3:1-12*; in “The Power of Words and the Wonder of God”, John Piper & Justin Taylor, Crossway, 2012, location 662 - Kindle

ⁱⁱ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans, Pillar NT Commentary, 2000, p. 150

ⁱⁱⁱ R.Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*. Crossway, 1991 p. 129

^{iv} Daniel Doriani, *James; Reformed Expository Commentary*; P & R; 2007, p. 106

^v Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word*, Crossway, 2014, p. 31

^{vi} Doriani, p. 106

^{vii} Davod Nystrom, *James – The NIV Application Commentary*, Zondervan, 1997, p. 176, footnote # 7

^{viii} Kent Hughes presents an excellent analogy himself to illustrate this on pp. 135 – 136 of his commentary on James, as he shows how careless words began the Boxer Rebellion in China.

^{ix} Doriani, pp. 110-11

^x IBID, p. 110

^{xi} IBID, pp. 110-111

^{xii} Literally, in the Greek “no one of people”, according to Douglas Moo, *James*, p. 161

^{xiii} Bruce Waltke, as cited in Piper and Taylor, *The Power of Words and the Wonder of God*, loc. 723 - Kindle

^{xiv} Ferguson, Loc 822 / Kindle

^{xv} Moo, p. 165

^{xvi} See also Gal. 5:22-23

^{xvii} Cited by Sinclair Ferguson – Kindle / location 788, 806

^{xviii} IBD – loc. 929, 961, 977