

## James 3:1-12

The tongue is one of, if not the easiest, and most common ways that we sin.

In the Scripture there are many negative words used to describe the tongue – wicked, deceitful, perverse, filthy, corrupt, deceitfully flattering, slanderous, gossiping, blasphemous, foolish, boasting, complaining, cursing, sensual, vile, and a host of other words!

The majority of positive ways the word “*tongue*” is used in Scripture is to express praise to God. When the word “*tongue*” is used in the negative way or evil way it is most often used to speak against God, in particular speaking against or in violation of what God expects or commands. That is the exact opposite practice of the positive use of the tongue.

*“The tongue is you in a unique way. It is a tattletale that tells on the heart and discloses the real person. Not only that, but misuse of the tongue is perhaps the easiest way to sin. There are some sins that an individual may not be able to commit simply because he does not have the opportunity. But there are no limits to what one can say, no built-in restraints or boundaries.”* [John MacArthur]

Moses struggled with angry words. ***Psalms 106:32-33***, “<sup>32</sup> *By the waters of Meribah they angered the Lord, and trouble came to Moses because of them;* <sup>33</sup> *for they rebelled against the Spirit of God, and rash words came from Moses' lips.*” In ***Isaiah 6:5a***, Isaiah speaks of his struggle with his tongue. “*So I said: ‘Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips...’*”

Our words are not to be treated as trivial. God will judge our words. Jesus said in ***Matthew 12:36***, “*But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the Day of Judgment.*”

### I. The Power of the Tongue (Vs. 1)

There are two dangers that teachers of God’s Word need to be aware of and to avoid at all costs.

1. **There is the danger of teaching our own opinions and prejudices and distorting the meaning of God’s Word**  
Teachers must have a commitment to teach God’s Word truthfully and accurately.
2. **A teacher must constantly avoid contradicting with his life what he is teaching with his tongue**  
The more light, the more truth we have, the higher is our responsibility to apply it. Teachers have a higher accountability because they have been given more light.

### II. The Possibility of the Tongue (Vs. 2)

This Greek word translated “*perfect*” (*teleios*) means perfection. Its most basic meaning is “*to achieve its end.*” Again, in this case, would be moral perfection. James is saying here that a person who would claim not to stumble with words is a person who believes they have reached perfection. From the text James is saying that a person who believes they do not stumble with their words is delusional in this belief (same as chp. 2 verse 20).

The last part of the sentence says this: if a person cannot stumble with their words then they should also be able to control their entire body. That would mean they are able to control all of their urges, emotions, desires, attitudes, passions, and thoughts. There is no one that can accomplish that. This is addressed in ***1 Kings 8:46***, “*... for there is no one who does not sin.*”

Since it is impossible to be perfect and James is addressing our tongue in particular in these verses, we need to understand our responsibility about our tongue. ***Psalms 34:13***, “*Keep your tongue from evil, And your lips from speaking deceit.*”

It is also true that spiritual maturity is tied to a controlled tongue (i.e. the heart). ***Matthew 12:34b***, “*For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.*” Heart, as it is used here, is referring to the soul – the mind, emotions, and will.

As we allow the Holy Spirit to fill our heart, reign in our emotions, control our will, and guide our mind, we will speak with our tongue that which pleases God and keep growing in spiritual maturity.

The word “*bridle*” in verse 2 is translated “*control*”.

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### III. The Pictures of the Tongue (Vs. 3-5a)

#### A. The Bit in the Horse's Mouth (Vs. 3)

When the bit is attached to the bridle and reigns the rider can make the horse obey. The rider who controls the horse's tongue controls the horse's entire body. When our tongues are under the Holy Spirit's control, we can be useful in the work God has given us to do, but when the tongue is out of control we only do damage.

#### B. The Ship and the Rudder (Vs4, 5a)

The illustration of the ship and the rudder is the same as the bit and the horse – something very small can control something very large. How many Christian lives have been sunk because of an out of control tongue?

Just as the pilot controls the ship's rudder and ultimately the ship, the heart controls the tongue and when the heart is controlled by the Holy Spirit, the tongue is under the Spirit's control.

### IV. The Potential of the Tongue (Vs.5b-9)

#### A. The Potential to Corrupt (Vs.5b-6)

Passing on gossip and starting rumors has caused suffering and damage to lives that is beyond calculation. *Psalms 52:2-4*, <sup>2</sup> *Like a sharpened razor, your tongue devises destruction, working treachery.* <sup>3</sup> *You love evil instead of good, lying instead of speaking truthfully. Selah* <sup>4</sup> *You love any words that destroy, you treacherous tongue!*

Verse 6 can be translated, *"sets on fire the course of life."* It is translated "set on fire the course of existence." The tongue can destroy our very existence. An uncontrolled tongue sets all of your life on fire; it contaminates your whole life.

The grammar of that phrase, *"it is set on fire by hell"* means that demonic spirits gives the tongue its power for evil. In the Greek tense it indicates continuing action. The solution is to look to the Holy Spirit for power to hush the tongue and do as *2 Corinthians 10:5*, says, *"...bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."*

#### B. The Potential to Contaminate (Vs.7-8)

James' point here is that while no man can tame the tongue, God can. Because the tongue has such potential to poison and thus contaminate a life, there is an urgency to tame the tongue. Surrender to the control and empowerment of the Spirit who lives in you to help control the tongue. When you fail, repent and resolve in God's power to walk in victory.

### V. The Purifying of the Tongue (Vs.9-12)

Verses 9-12 James uses several examples as he speaks of the hypocrisy of the tongue (blessing and cursing).

#### Application:

The battle with the tongue is an ongoing battle that will continue until we leave these fleshly bodies. Here is an action plan that will help enable dealing with the tongue:

1. Allow the Holy Spirit to fill your life. The word "*fill*" (used in *Ephesians 5:18b*, "... *but be filled with the Spirit*") means to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, to be permeated by the Holy Spirit, and to be controlled by the Holy Spirit.
2. Ask God to allow you to talk less. *Proverbs 10:19*, *"In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise."*
3. Commit your speech to the Lord at the beginning of every day. *Psalms 141:3*, *"Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips."*
4. Confront in love. *Ephesians 4:15* *"Speak the truth in love"* and refuse to listen to an "untamed tongue."
5. *Colossians 4:6*, *"Let your speech always be with grace..."* May our tongues always glorify God!

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