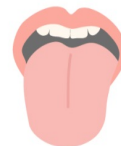




Sunday Bible Study Lesson: James 3:1-12

June 14, 2020

To think about:



How do our words define who we are?

When has your life been changed by wise and loving words?

When have you seen or experienced the effect of negative words?

In this chapter, you will see what James has to say to the early Christians about the tongue.

Read James 3:1. In the early church, teachers commanded high prestige. Evidently, some early believers were becoming teachers without fully understanding the responsibility of teaching the Word of God. James states that teachers will be judged more strictly than those who do not teach. A biblical teacher is responsible to help people understand biblical truth, not dole out personal opinions. More importantly, biblical teachers are expected to live the truth, **not** just teach it. The teacher is held to a higher standard; it's a sobering thought for all who teach.

In **James 3:2**, what does James say about the person who does not stumble (sin) in what he says? _____

(Note: the word "perfect" in this verse means "mature.")

In **verses 3-6**, James gives us three analogies for the power of the tongue. What does James say about a bit? _____

What does he say about a rudder? _____

How is the tongue like a bit and a rudder? _____

Both the bit and the rudder must overcome contrary forces to direct the horse and the ship. A horse is a powerful animal that can do much useful work, but only if it can be directed. A ship is a useful means of transporting cargo or people, but if the rudder is broken, it will be at the mercy of the wind and waves, and could result in a shipwreck causing the loss of life and cargo.

To work properly and accomplish good things, both the bit and rudder must be under the control of a strong hand that knows how to use them properly. In the same way, the tongue must overcome the contrary force of the flesh and be under God's wise control if it is to accomplish anything good.

James' third analogy points out the potential danger of the tongue. In **verses 5-6**, what does James say about the tongue? _____

James says that **the tongue is a fire**. Can you recall the destructive images from the Australian bushfires? According to the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, "As of Feb. 15, 2020, more than 46 million acres of land were burned. At least 80 percent of the Blue Mountains World Heritage area in New South Wales and 53 percent of the Gondwana World Heritage Rainforests in Queensland were burned. At least 34 people died, and University of Sydney ecologist Chris Dickman estimates that more than a billion animals were killed. One third of the koala population died. The Insurance Council estimated that bushfire losses were approximately \$1.3 billion in insured claims."

That's destruction. Look again at the phrases James uses in **verse 6** to describe the little two-ounce muscle tucked behind our teeth:

- It is a world of iniquity (sin).
- It defiles the entire body.
- It sets on fire the course of our life.
- It is set on fire by hell.

A full range of sin can spring from the tongue. Bitterness, hatred, hurt, degradation, insult, rejection, slander, anger, lies, gossip, sarcasm the list goes on. James says that the tongue is set on fire by hell. The believers of his day were familiar with the Greek word Gehenna which translates "hell." It refers to the Hinnom Valley in Jerusalem where the residents stacked and burned all the garbage and filth. In Chuck Swindoll's commentary, he states that James seems to be saying, "You know that stinky, smoldering trash dump south of town? Our tongues are just like that. When we start our uncontrolled blathering, the garbage in our hearts is set ablaze. And like the putrid smoke that reminds us that garbage is burning in Hinnom Valley, our tongues let everybody hear the wickedness in our hearts" (70).

Too often, we tolerate gossip, slander, deceit, half-truths, sarcastic put-downs, and other sins of the tongue as if they were no big deal. James says that all such sins have their origin in the pit

of hell. They defile the one committing them. They destroy others. As believers in Christ, we must confront these sins in ourselves and be bold enough to confront them in others.

In **James 3:7**, what has been tamed by the human race? _____

In **James 3:8a**, what can no mere man tame? _____

So, if we are helpless to tame our tongues, is the situation hopeless? Absolutely not! James does not say the tongue cannot be tamed. He says it cannot be tamed by a mere man. However, we can transfer control to the Holy Spirit. Each time we speak, we can allow Him to filter and influence our words. With our permission, He can give us victory over a wicked tongue the same way He can give victory over any other sinful behavior. **The rudder drives the ship, but the captain controls the rudder.** When we invite the Holy Spirit to control our speech, our words reflect the fact that **He** is guiding what we say.

How does James describe the tongue in **verse 8**?

Why would James describe the tongue as being restless and evil? _____

Read how David describes the tongue in **Psalms 140:1-3**.

The human mouth is like that of a poisonous snake, always poised to strike and inject its poison.

How many of us have been victims of that poison?

In **James 3: 9-12**, James makes the point that “the depth of the wickedness of the tongue is found in its inconsistency” (*The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, 123). What examples does James provide to illustrate the tongue’s being inconsistent and hypocritical?

These inconsistencies are blatant. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, who often lectures on the power and negative impact of our words, states that, ““There is no area of life in which so many of us systematically violate the Golden Rule.”

Application:

James does not use such harsh words about the tongue to condemn us for all that we have said in the past. He uses his examples to prevent us from continuing to use our tongues in ways that are harmful and hurtful...in ways that do not bring glory and honor to our Lord Jesus Christ.

First, recognize that your words are not right, and repent. (If you do not think you need to repent, spend 2 days monitoring your conversations. Record every time you say something negative about someone or to someone. As a matter of fact, go even deeper and record every time you think something negative about someone.)

Second, invite God to clean your heart because the mouth speaks out of the overflow of the heart. Read **Psalm 51** every day for a week and focus on asking God to purify your heart. **(When our heart changes, so does our speech.)**

Third, remember that no mere man can tame the tongue. Therefore, transfer control daily to the Holy Spirit. In your mind, focus on the Holy Spirit acting as a filter for your thoughts as well as for your words.

Heavenly Father,

In a nutshell, I am guilty. I repent and ask your forgiveness for every careless, hellish, hateful word I have spoken. I recognize that I am helpless in taming my own tongue, so I ask you to take control of the rudder of my ship and the bit in my mouth. If I have a word on my tongue that would be hurtful and negative in any way, Father, please be my filter; and do not let it pass my lips. Change my heart, O God, so that my words will be a reflection of your love, your grace, and your mercy. May every word that I say be uplifting, encouraging, and honoring to you. In Jesus' name, and in the power of the Holy Spirit I pray, Amen.

Extension:

Think of a time when someone made a difference in your life by using kind and loving words.

Make a plan to use kind, loving, encouraging words to someone this next week - either in person, by phone, email, letter, or card. The person I choose is _____.

Additional Resources:

The Book of James in the New Testament reminds us that words can direct, delight or destroy (ch. 3). Is this true? Look no further than to what happened in Germany in WWII. For every word in Hitler's poisonous book, Mein Kampf, it cost the life of 125 people.

Here are some words to use today that will delight and not destroy: Please, thank you, I'm sorry, I'm proud of you, I'm praying for you...I love you.

Mark Twain, "It takes your enemy and your friend working together to hurt you to the heart; the one to slander you and the other to get the news to you."

There's an old story that the Jewish rabbis tell. As the story goes, one day a rabbi asked his servant to go and buy some good food for him in the market. When the servant returned home, he presented the rabbi with a tongue. The next day, the rabbi told the servant to go the market and buy some bad food. Again, the servant returned with a tongue.

The rabbi then asked the servant why he returned with a tongue on both occasions. The servant answered and said, "Good comes from it and bad comes from it. When the tongue is good there is nothing better, and when it is bad there is nothing worse."

General Robert E. Lee was once asked what he thought of a fellow officer in the Confederate Army, an officer who had made some mean-spirited remarks about him. Lee thought for a moment, then rated him as being very satisfactory. The person who asked the questions seemed troubled. "But General, I guess you don't know what he's been saying about you." Oh yes, answered Lee. I know. But I was asked my opinion of him, not his of me" controlling our tongue is one of life's greatest challenges. The tongue is very small but very powerful. The primary function of the tongue is to chew, swallow, and to speak. Animals such as the lizard, ant-eaters, frogs, use their tongue for food gathering. The human tongue has over 9000 taste buds. Most people think that the bumps on our tongue are the taste buds. They are on the surface, but smaller than the bumps on the tongue. The medical term for the bumps are papilla and they are used to create friction between the tongue and the food. 85 % of the people can curl their tongue into a tube. Tell the truth You just tried it The Guinness world record for the longest tongue is not Gene Simmons from the band KISS. It is Stephen Taylor at 3.74 inches long. The tongue muscles that guide your food are the same muscles you use to speak. From there the problems deepen. As babies we teach our children to talk, waiting anxiously for them to say their first words. As they get older, say teenagers, we wish they could be quiet, say till they are 30 years old. Words are like dynamite, if used properly and in the right place they are beneficial. Used improperly and in the wrong place they can produce a lot of damage. Which words would you like to hear? I love you, you're important to me, thank you, you look nice. Or you disgust me, I hate you, never speak to me again. James wants us to understand something

here this morning. Words are powerful. They can tear down or build-up. They shape our lives and define who we are by the words we use.

From a sermon by Anthony Zibolski, Taming the Tongue, 2/6/2010

Piccard and Richard Conniff writes in National Geographic that on January 12, 1997, two Swiss men, Bertrand Piccard and Wim Verstraeten, set out to be the first to CIRCLE THE EARTH in a balloon. Their aircraft was called the Breitling Orbiter, and it was high-tech masterpiece, complete with solar power panels and an airtight capsule for pressurized flight at high altitudes that would enable them to fly the jet stream at two hundred miles and hour. Price tag: \$1.5 million.

Shortly after liftoff, however, calamity struck. With the cabin sealed tight and pressurized, the pilots suddenly noticed strong kerosene fumes.

Soon they e-mailed their control center: "Kerosene's coming through each pipe on both inside tanks and we cannot tighten them anymore. It is a nightmare....Answer quick."

They were advised to lower their altitude, open the capsule, and hold on until they could reach the coast of Algeria. The fumes proved overwhelming, however, and they were forced to ditch in the Mediterranean and lost the craft.

The cause of the kerosene leak? A clamp, like those used on an automobile radiator hose, had failed. Price tag: \$1.16.

It doesn't take much to undermine a great enterprise.

God intends that the Christian life be a triumphant journey, but often we allow small things like our tongue to scuttle God's grand plan for us.

Then he points out that what often happens among Christians is contrary to all of nature. The same spring does not send out fresh water one minute and bitter water the next. He asks rhetorically (3:12), "Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh."

His point is the same as that of Jesus ([Matt. 12:34](#)), "You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart." Jesus also said ([Matt. 15:18](#)), "But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man." The mouth is simply the opening that vents whatever is in the heart. If there's raw sewage in the heart, there will be raw sewage gushing from the mouth! That's why [Proverbs 4:23](#) exhorts us, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life."

Have you ever thought about how terribly embarrassing life would be if there were a direct open line between your thoughts and your mouth, so that you blurted out loud whatever you were thinking? Instead of your polite, "I'm pleased to meet you," out comes, "I couldn't care less about meeting you!" After listening to someone drone on about something, instead of, "Yes, that's very interesting," you blurt out, "How can I get away from this bore?"

I'm not suggesting that we should abandon politeness and become brutally blunt. I'm only pointing out that even if you control your tongue, you often have a heart problem. If you want to tame the terrible tongue, the place to start is with your heart. Work daily at taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ ([2 Cor. 10:5](#)). Walk daily under the control of the Holy Spirit ([Gal. 5:18](#)). Renew your mind by memorizing Scripture ([Rom. 12:1-2](#); [Ps. 119:11](#)). Memorize [James 1:19-20](#): "This you know, my beloved brethren. But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God." Memorize [Ephesians 4:29](#): "Let no unwholesome [lit., *rotten*] word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear."