

FPFWC Christian Development



Faith and Wisdom in James

August 2020

Winter Quarter

August 22, 2020

Lesson #4 – Taming the Tongue

SCRIPTURE TEXT – James 3:1-12

Key Verse - The tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things.

Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! James 3:5

ICE BREAKERS

1. What is so difficult about taming the tongue? (vs. 7-8)
2. What are some safeguards Christians can adopt to prevent boasting?

LESSON BACKGROUND

As we saw in previous lessons, some practices of James's audience ran counter to what they voiced in speech. Up to the point of today's passage, James has written about negative modes of speech, such as the self-justifying claim that one is tempted by God (James 1:13), the flattering speech that reveals partiality toward the rich and shames the poor (2:3-6), the careless speech of those who wish the poor well but do not help them (2:16; see lesson 11), and the superficial speech of the one claiming to have faith but lacking deeds (2:18; see lesson 11).

Other examples of improper speech occurring later include those of judging and slandering (James 4:11), boasting (4:13-16), and grumbling (5:9; see lesson 13). Sandwiched in between is today's text.

Since today's lesson draws heavily on figures of speech, some background information in that regard is in order. Figurative language adds interest and excitement to writing; chief among figures of speech are metaphors. A metaphor takes an idea and imposes it on an unrelated but familiar idea to help explain the qualities of the original. One easy example is the phrase "Joseph is a fruitful bough" (Genesis 49:22). This does not mean that this particular son of Jacob was literally a grapevine or other vegetation. It means, rather, that he was productive in some way.

James's use of metaphor in speaking of the tongue reflects how other biblical writers use metaphor in speaking of the heart. Indeed, heart and tongue are used in poetic passages to stand parallel to one another.

The tongue of the just is as choice silver: the heart of the wicked is little worth.

—Proverbs 10:20

Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad.

—Acts 2:26

Biblical writers use the imagery of the heart to speak of what defines and reveals our true, inner nature. In the same way, the tongue is more than just a part of the body. The tongue is equated with speech, of course. But James's insight extends beyond that. How one uses the tongue reveals the nature of the heart as motives are connected with speech and actions

LESSON COMMENTARY –

Power of the Tongue (3:1-12)

3:1. Chapter 3 introduces James's second division of the body of his epistle (see 1:19). In trials, the tongue can veer out of control, evidencing pride, anger, and false wisdom. The tongue has positive (vv. 2-5b) and negative qualities (vv. 5b-12). Many of the Jewish Christian readers longed to become Bible teachers. James was a Bible teacher and knew that he, along with all teachers, would incur a stricter judgment at the judgment seat of Christ (see commentary on 1:12, 20; 2:12-13).

3:2. We (James includes himself) all stumble or sin in many ways (Pr 10:19). To be a perfect person (teleios) means to be "mature." If one can bridle the tongue (1:26), the most insubordinate body part, he will be able to control the rest of his body as well.

3:3-4. Small things can control much larger objects, like bits in horses' mouths or a very small rudder in a large ship. Inclination (Gk. horme) carries the nuance of "impulse." Like the whim of a ship's pilot, impulsive words can shipwreck one's life.

3:5-6. The tongue boasts of great beneficial things, such as encouraging others (Pr 10:21; 12:18). Negatively, the power of the tongue is like a small fire that has set aflame and destroyed an immense forest. One rumor can destroy numerous churches. Since most sins are initiated by speech, the tongue is the very world of iniquity (v. 6). It sets on fire the course of our life, such as provoking a broken marriage.

3:7-8. From earth to heaven, every species of beasts and birds has been tamed. From the ground to the sea, every variety of reptiles and creatures of the sea has been subdued by the human race. James is surely speaking hyperbolically. There may be some species not yet tamed. His main point is that, in contrast to domesticating the animal kingdom, no one can tame the tongue. It can be caged (controlled), yet it is always restless. Believers dare not let the tongue out of the cage.

3:9-10. With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father in church or private prayer. Moments later believers may curse people, all of whom have been made in the likeness of God (Gn 1:26-27; 9:6). This is hypocritical and radically illogical. God is blessed, but one with God's image is cursed. This passage teaches that sin has not destroyed the image of God in people, including the unbeliever. Therefore, every person is to be treated with respect.

3:11-12. Nature itself demonstrates the absurdity of a forked tongue. A fig tree and a vine produce just one kind of fruit. God determined that productivity would be after its kind (Gn 1:11-12, 24-25). Just as there is consistency in nature about what trees, plants, or springs produce, so God's people must learn to speak with consistent goodness.

LESSON NUGGET – What will the consequences be? Are you starting a fire that may get out of control and do a lot of damage? Are you turning loose a dangerous beast or poisoning a refreshing spring? Once your words are spoken, you cannot take them back, so look ahead.

Sources: *Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary*