

Self Control

James 3:1-12

Little things count – on the way back from Crystal on Thursday I spilled a piece of chocolate on my yellow blouse and the beautiful blouse was no longer the center of attention, but the big mess I made when I tried to wipe off the chocolate. James tells us that we can mess up in a big way when we do not control our tongue. First he points out that most of us should not be teachers. Apparently, everybody in the assembly wanted to teach and be a spiritual leader. Perhaps they were impressed with the authority and prestige of the office, and forgot about the tremendous responsibility and accountability!

In the early church the teachers are mentioned with honor. The apostles and the prophets were always on the move, as their field was the whole Church; and they did not stay long in any one congregation. But the teachers worked within a congregation, and converts were handed over to the teachers for instruction in the facts of the Christian gospel and for building up in the Christian faith.

The Christian teacher took the place of the Rabbi in Judaism. The very name means, “My great one.” Everywhere he went he was treated with the utmost respect. It was actually held that a man’s duty to his Rabbi exceeded his duty to his parents, because his parents only brought him into the life of this world but his teacher brought him into the life of the world to come. It was actually said that if a man’s parents and a man’s teacher were captured by an enemy, the Rabbi must be ransomed first.

But those who teach the Word face the stricter judgment. Teachers must use their tongue to share God’s truth, and it is easy to commit sins of the tongue. So

teachers must practice what they teach. Great damage can be done by a teacher who is unprepared, or whose spiritual life is not in line with what they teach.

But teachers are not the only ones who are tempted and sin; every Christian must admit that “we all make many mistakes” (James 3:2). For James sins of the tongue seem to head the list. The person who is able to discipline the tongue gives evidence that they can control their whole body. They prove that they are a mature (perfect) person.

We might think James is making too much by connecting sins of the tongue with sins committed by “the whole body” but our words usually lead to action. A person makes an unguarded statement and suddenly finds themselves involved in a fight. The tongue has forced the rest of the body to defend itself.

In the same way the tongue controls the body, the bit and the rudder are two items that are small of themselves, but they also exercise great power. A small bit enables the rider to control the great horse, overcoming the wild nature of the horse. And the small rudder enables the pilot to steer the huge ship, fighting the winds and currents that would drive the ship off its course. The tongue is a small member in the body, and yet it has the power to accomplish great things. There are circumstances around us that would make us say things we ought not to say. Sin on the inside and pressures on the outside try to control of the tongue.

This means that both the bit and the rudder must be under the control of a strong hand. The expert horseman keeps the mighty power of his steed under control, and the experienced pilot courageously steers the ship through the storm. When Jesus Christ controls the tongue, then we will not say the wrong things—or even say the right things in a wrong way! Solomon warned: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov. 18:21). And David prayed, “Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Ps. 141:3–4). David knew

that the heart is the key to right speech. “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). When Jesus Christ is the Lord of the heart, then He is also Lord of the lips too.

The bit and rudder have the power to direct, which means they affect the lives of others. A runaway horse or a shipwreck could mean injury or death to pedestrians or passengers. The words we speak affect the lives of others. A judge says “Guilty!” or “Not Guilty!” and those words affect the destiny of the prisoner, his family, and his friends. The President of the United States speaks a few words and signs some papers and the nation is at war or at peace. Even a simple yes or no from the lips of a parent can greatly affect the direction of a child’s life.

Never underestimate the guidance you give by the words you speak or do not speak. Jesus spoke to a woman at a well, and her life and the lives of her neighbors experienced a miraculous change (John 4). Peter preached at Pentecost and 3,000 souls came to salvation through faith in Christ (Acts 2).

On April 21, 1855, Edward Kimball went into a Boston shoe store and led young Dwight L. Moody to Christ. The result: one of history’s greatest evangelists, a man whose ministry still continues. The tongue has the power to direct others to the right choices.

Next James compares our tongue to a fire. There is that song: It Only Takes a Spark. This reminds us, as James does, that the tongue has the potential to bring light and warmth, or the tongue can destroy. A fire can begin with just a small spark, but it can grow to destroy a city. A fire reportedly started in the O’Leary barn in Chicago at 8:30 P.M., October 8, 1871; and because that fire spread, over 100,000 people were left homeless, 17,500 buildings were destroyed, and 300 people died. It cost the city over \$400 million.

Our words can start fires. Like a fire, the tongue can “heat things up.” David wrote: “I said, ‘I will guard my ways, that I sin not with my tongue.’” (Ps. 39:1, 3). A hot head and a hot heart can lead to burning words that later we will regret. David had a temper, and he had to have God’s help in controlling it. No wonder Solomon wrote, “He who restrains his word has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding” (Prov. 17:27, NASB).

Fire not only starts small and grows, and creates heat; it also defiles. Ruth Young has been displaced from her apartment for months because of a fire and the smoke and fire damage. Fiery words can defile a home, a Bible study class, a church. The only thing that can wash away that defilement is the blood of Jesus Christ.

Fire burns and hurts, and our words can burn and hurt. One of the sorrows Jesus had to bear when He was here on earth was the way His enemies talked about Him. They called Him a “glutton and a drunkard” (Matt. 11:19) because He graciously accepted invitations to dine with people the Pharisees did not like. When He performed miracles, they said He was in league with Satan. Even when He was dying on the cross, His enemies could not let Him alone but threw vicious taunts into His face.

Fire spreads, and the more fuel you give it, the faster and farther it will spread. James suggests that all of life is connected like a wheel, and therefore we cannot keep things from spreading. A person’s entire life can be injured or destroyed by the tongue. Time does not correct the sins of the tongue. We may confess our sins of speech, but the fire keeps on spreading.

Now James reminds us that animals can be tamed; and, for that matter, fire can be tamed. When you tame an animal, you get a worker instead of a destroyer. When you control fire, you generate power. The tongue cannot be tamed by

humans, but it can be tamed by God. Your tongue does not have to be “set on fire of hell” (James 3:6). Like the Apostles at Pentecost, it can be set on fire from heaven! If God lights the fire and controls it, then the tongue can be a mighty tool for the winning of the lost and the building up of the church. The important thing, of course, is the heart. If the heart is filled with love, God will light the fire.

James now turns to water. The fountain, of course, provides the cool water that humans need to stay alive. In Oriental countries, the presence of a freshwater fountain is a great blessing to a village. Humans need water not only for drinking, but also for washing, cooking, farming, and a host of other activities so necessary to life. Water is life-giving, and our words can give life. However, if water is not controlled, it brings death and destruction. Water becomes a flood, which can destroy both lives and property. Water also cleanses. God’s Word is the spiritual water that cleanses us (John 15:3; Eph. 5:26–27). But our words to others can also help to cleanse and sanctify them. Our words ought to be like a river that brought life to everything it touched.

The tongue can also like a tree. In Bible lands, trees are vitally important to the economy: they help to hold down the soil; they provide beauty and shade; and they bear fruit. Our words can help to shelter and encourage a weary traveler, and can help to feed a hungry soul. As we share His Word with others, we feed them and encourage them along the way.

If you and I are going to have tongues that delight, then we must meet with the Lord each day and learn from Him. We must get our “spiritual roots” deep into His Word. We must pray and meditate and permit the Spirit of God to fill our hearts with God’s love and truth.

But James issued a warning: a fountain cannot give forth two kinds of water, and a tree cannot bear two different kinds of fruit. We expect the fountain to flow

with sweet water at all times, and we expect the fig tree to bear figs and the olive tree to bear olives. With the tongue, James says, we bless God. This was especially relevant to a Jew. Whenever the name of God was mentioned, a Jew would respond: “Blessed be He!” Three times a day the devout Jew repeated eighteen prayers, every one of which begins, “Blessed be thou, O God.” But the very mouths and tongues which had frequently and piously blessed God, were the very same mouths and tongues which cursed others. To James there was something unnatural about this; it was as unnatural as for a stream to gush out both fresh and salt water or a bush to bear opposite kinds of fruit.¹

If the tongue is inconsistent, there is something radically wrong with the heart. The story is told of a person who professed to be a Christian who got angry on the job and let loose with some oaths. Embarrassed, he turned to his partner and said, “I don’t know why I said that. It really isn’t in me.” His partner wisely replied, “It had to be in you or it couldn’t have come out of you.”

The tongue that blesses the Father, and then turns around and curses people made in God’s image, is in desperate need of spiritual medicine! It is so easy to sing the hymns during the worship service, then get into the car and argue and fight all the way home! “My brothers and sisters, these things ought not so to be.” The problem, of course, is not the tongue; it is the heart. As we fill our hearts with God’s Word, and yield to the Holy Spirit, God can use us to bring delight to others, and we will be refreshing fountains and trees.

Have you heard of the “Twelve Words That Can Transform Your Life.” If you use these words and sincerely mean what you say from your heart, you will find

¹ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Letters of James and Peter*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1976 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 79

that God will use your tongue to be a blessing and encouragement to others. There are only twelve of them, but they work.

“Please” and “Thank you.” When you use these three words, you are showing appreciation and treating others like people and not things.

“I’m sorry.” These two words have a way of breaking down walls and building bridges.

“I love you.” Too many people read “romance” into these words, but they go much deeper than that. As Christians, we should love our brothers and sisters and even love our enemies. “I love you” is a statement that can carry tremendous power.

“I’m praying for you.” And be sure that you are. When you talk to God about people, then you can talk to people about God. Our private praying for people helps us in our public meeting with people. Of course, we never say “I’m praying for you” in a boastful way, as though we are more spiritual than others. We say it in an encouraging way, to let others know that we care enough for them to meet them at the throne of grace.

Yes, the smallest but largest troublemaker in the entire world is the tongue. But it does not have to be a troublemaker! God can use our tongues to direct others into the way of life, and to delight them in the trials of life. The tongue is a little member, but it has great power.

Give God your tongue and your heart each day and ask God to use you to be a blessing to others.^{2 3}

²Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Jas 3:1

³Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:827