

"THE TONGUE CAN NO MAN TAME"

James 3:1-12

James now introduces a different subject, although it is closely related to that of faith and works. He has been writing about a say-so faith that does not produce good works. Here he takes up idle talk which does not produce anything.

Many things are said about the tongue throughout the Bible. This third chapter of James is a classic on the tongue. The tongue seems to be his principal subject, and he mentions its sins in every chapter. Sins of the tongue must have been very prevalent in James' day; in fact, they always have been and are so today. This portion of the epistle is especially against those who substitute words for works. In this, as in other matters, Christ is our great example. His tongue was always controlled. It was always a great power for good, never evil.

Implying that serious abuses of the privilege of free speech in the meetings of the church already existed, James advised his readers not to strive to become instructors in the public assemblies of the brethren.

Jesus Christ was the greatest teacher of the ages. Most frequently He is spoken of as Teacher. In the Jewish synagogue teaching was as prominent an element as worship. Teaching received tremendous emphasis in the early churches. There were multitudes of roving teachers with every sort of "ism" to dispense to the public. Teachers are absolutely necessary. There is no escape from the fact that teaching has to be done, but some learners are needed also. James is here concerned with irresponsible, officious and self-appointed teachers. He points out the fact that there are serious dangers connected with the rash assumption of the position of a religious teacher--dangers for those who take the position of a religious teacher--dangers for those who take the position and for those whom they undertake to instruct.

It is bad when an assembly of Christians does not have sufficient teachers, but even worse when the wrong ones want to teach. Unfortunately, some who are gifted to teach are not willing to exercise the talent which the Lord has given them. They are so occupied with other things that they are not willing to take the time to study the Word, or to sacrifice time, money and pleasure in order to be of service to the Lord and His people.

Those who teach have a tremendous responsibility. People must not be too eager to teach what they do not know. The percentage of teachers who are incompetent is far too high. The Lord will hold each teacher responsible for what he does and what he teaches. If you teach the unsaved wrongfully, the Lord will hold you responsible for their souls. If you teach the Lord's people wrongfully, He will hold you responsible for the pitfalls into which they stumble. Every teacher must ask for wisdom as to what and how to teach the people. It is bad enough to break one of the least commandments, but whoever does, and "shall teach man so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:19.

Those who teach the Bible must have experienced the new birth, have an intimate acquaintance with the Lord, have a thorough knowledge of the Word, live a consistent Christian life and have an ability to impart God's truth. To be a God-sent and God-directed teacher will bring great satisfaction and reward, but to be a self-appointed and flesh-directed teacher will bring His disapproval at the judgment seat of Christ.

Others besides teachers have pitfalls. As James says, "for we all often stumble." Thus he includes himself in the category of erring ones. He made no attempt to exempt himself. He realized that everyone including himself stumbled in many things. You may go through the Word of God and pick out the holiest of men, but you will not find one of them who ever claimed sinless perfection. There were imperfections in God's choicest saints.

The one outstanding character of the Old Testament against whom there is nothing recorded is Daniel. Yet, we read that he prayed unto the Lord and made his confession, "We have

sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments.

The Apostle Paul was a man of unimpeachable character, and he remarked, "I know that in me there dwelleth no good thing." While he was not living in any intentional sin, yet, he realized that the Lord saw within him that which was evil. We know from our own experience that "in many things we all offend."

Speech is the one thing in which we are most likely to stumble. There is not anybody who does not sin with his tongue. Men with their tongues do sin against God. With their tongues men sin against their neighbors. In Psalm 106:33 we read of Moses, "he spake unadvisedly with his lips." Because of this, he was not permitted to lead the children of Israel into the promised land. Who knows how often our lips have caused the Lord to withhold His blessing from us!

It is our responsibility to keep our tongues in check. In Psalm 34:13 we read, "Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile." It will be a real battle to control the tongue. A doctor looks at the tongue to judge his patient's health. The tongue is also a guide to one's spiritual health. A Christian's spiritual health can be noted by his talk.

Man is inclined to be very easy on himself and very hard on others. We should learn to be hard on self but easy on others. One who does not offend in speech is a mature or well-rounded Christian. Our Lord Jesus was the only One who could absolutely control His tongue. Nothing but gracious words proceeded out of His mouth. Under great provocation "he opened not his mouth." Isaiah 53:7. "Neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again." I Peter 2:23. Oh, that we were men like Him! James says, if you can control your tongue, you can control the whole body. The tongue is the most difficult, so if you can control that, you can master the rest.

We are reminded that the Israelites' chief sin was the wrong use of the tongue. They compassed the land with their blasphemies against God. When Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up and His glory filled the Temple, he cried, "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." Saul of Tarsus acknowledged that he was a blasphemer, and that he spoke continuously against the Lord.

Like his Lord, James constantly turned to natural objects to illustrate his lessons. In these verses he used four different objects to illustrate the lesson of verse two. In verse three we have a bit in the horse's mouth controlling the animal. In verse four we have a helm in the steerman's hand controlling the whole ship. In verses five and six we have a little fire kindling the whole forest. In verses seven and eight we have the possibility of taming all kinds of animals, but not the tongue.

Although a bit is a very small and insignificant thing, it is absolutely necessary in order to control a horse. To the bit are attached reins by which we hold the horse in check, and guide him in the way we want him to go. The moment we lose our hold on the reins, we lose control of the horse. We see a young spirited horse prancing, chafing under restriction, anxious to go, he cares not where. He needs checking; he needs guiding. The bit and the bridle will do it. Many a Christian is like that. Especially his tongue needs checking. Put the bridle in the hands of the Lord Jesus and ask Him to govern you.

There are some bits especially made for unruly horses. They are designed to hurt the tongue when he resists the driver's or rider's pull on the reins. If we resist the curb the Lord puts on our tongues, He will see to it that our tongues will hurt us. An uncontrolled or unyielded tongue can and usually does hurt others, but it will always hurt the owner even more. A tongue controlled by the Lord can be a great blessing, even as a controlled horse can be a great help on the farm, but an uncontrolled tongue can do a lot of damage.

We are also like vessels sailing over the sea of time. It will not always be smooth sailing. Rough and violent winds are sure to engulf us at times. Satan is sure to tempt us. Trials and troubles may sweep over us like they did Job. He stood fast in his integrity and did not charge God foolishly, but he did speak rashly when he cursed the day he was born. If the tongue is controlled, our whole path will be controlled as we sail over this sea of time. A single rash statement may prevent a great blessing or bring untold trouble.

Who is the steersman who has his hand on the helm of your life? Ask the Lord Jesus to keep His hand on the wheel, so that He may govern your whole life and ever keep a watch over your lips. Say what He would have you to say, and do what He wants you to do.

James turns from discussing the controlled tongue to one that is uncontrolled. Controlled it can do much good, but uncontrolled it can do much harm. The tongue can be a great power for good or for evil. Sad to say, its natural bent is toward evil. For this reason it must be curbed constantly.

James refers to boasting. Men boast of what they have done in the past, what they are doing now, and what they intend to do in the future. The little word "I" is the most used word in the English language. There is nothing people like to talk about so much as themselves. That fact proves that there is pride in their hearts. Our Lord hates boasting. Because He does not want any of it, He completely eliminated works as a means of salvation. All we have and are and hope to become we owe to Him.

In picturing the dreadfulness of the tongue, James compared it to unchecked fire. A little fire sets a great forest all ablaze. The great Chicago fire in 1871, which burned one-third of the city, was started by a cow kicking over a lantern. It destroyed 17,450 buildings, caused 250 people to perish and 100,000 to be left homeless. A little fire and a little talk can start a terrible conflagration. It is doubtful if anything is more painful than a burn. Even a little burn can cause great suffering. Even so, a little word may cause great pain to some human heart. It can pierce like a sword and cut like a razor. Some have been mortally wounded by unkind words. An evil tongue has destroyed many a work for God. Like fire, uncontrolled speech pains, sears and ruins.

In verse seven James takes another illustration from nature to show the sinfulness of the tongue. He says that all manner of wild animals may be tamed by man, but not the tongue. It can be tamed only by the Lord Himself.

James gives a fourfold classification of these inferior creatures. First, we have the animals, such as the horse, the lion, etc. Then, we have the birds, such as the eagle and the vulture. Then, there are the creeping things, such as the snake and the scorpion. Last, we have the underwater animals, such as the shark, the eel and all manner of fish. Some from each of these classifications have been tamed by man. But "the tongue can no man tame." There is only One Who can give the victory over this unruly evil.

It is hard to exaggerate the power of the tongue. It is able to sway multitudes for good or ill, to stir the wildest passions of men to uncontrollable fury or to exalt men to the highest emotions of their natures. The tongue can speak words of tenderest love or of venomous hate. People are more apt to offend in word than in anything else. The tongue is "full of deadly poison." It is like a serpent highly charged with venom, and from which no one can extract the fangs.

With the tongue we bless God. To bless and praise the Lord is a good thing to do. But, here James is showing the inconsistency of praising the Lord with one breath and cursing one's fellowman in the next. The Lord is displeased with and will not accept worship from a double-tongued person. Neither will others have any respect for such a one.