

A SUBJECT THAT IS IN EVERYBODY'S MOUTH

James 3:1-12

When James wrote this epistle many were ambitious to become teachers in the churches. James sought to check these self-appointed, officious and irresponsible persons by reminding them that teaching the Word of God is serious business for which they would be required to render a strict account in the day of judgment. To all self-appointed teachers he pointed out the fact that there are serious dangers connected with the rash assumption of the position of religious teachers, dangers for those teaching as well as the ones taught by them.

It is unfortunate when a church does not have sufficient, competent and dedicated teachers, but it is worse when unqualified, self-appointed and irresponsible persons assume that tremendous responsibility. A self-appointed and flesh-directed teacher will displease the Lord, but a God-sent and Spirit-led one will please and honor Him and bring great satisfaction, joy and reward to the person who applies himself faithfully to the task.

Because of the great power of words, the Bible has much to say about the right and the wrong use of the tongue. The third chapter of James is a classic on this subject. Speech is the one thing which we are most likely to do wrong. There is not anybody who does not sin with his tongue. Down through the centuries men have sinned with their tongues, both against God and against their fellowmen. In Psalm 106:33 we read of Moses, "He spoke unadvisedly with his lips." For that reason he was not permitted to lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land. Many times our lips have caused the Lord to withhold His blessings from us.

Few subjects discussed in the Bible are as relevant to every person as that of the sins of the tongue. We are reminded that the chief sin of the Israelites 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 had spoken continuously against the Lord. James stressed the fact that the tongue, which is so small in comparison with other members of the human body, possesses immense powers for good or for evil. Its influence and effects are out of all proportion to its size. While, on the one hand, it can edify and encourage, on the other hand one minute's activity of the tongue can ruin a life or destroy a soul. In fact, it is impossible to express its capacities for evil.

Like the Lord Jesus Christ, James often turned to natural objects to illustrate the lessons he was teaching. Here he used four different objects to illustrate truths he was imparting.

In the third verse James calls our attention to the effectiveness of a bit in the mouth of a horse in controlling the animal. To this bit, which is a small and insignificant thing, reins are attached and by them the horse is held in check and guided in the way he should go. Though man is inferior to the horse in physical strength, he can control a stubborn horse with such a small thing as a bridle. The horse is swayed and guided by the controlling hands of the person who holds the reins. With such a small instrument as the bit of a bridle, man can regulate the actions of the horse and direct his energies into wise and useful channels.

Likewise, the human tongue needs to be checked and controlled. It is difficult to exaggerate the power of human speech. One can do more harm by his words than he can ever do good by his deeds. Words can break friendships and spoil lives. Many friends have been alienated and many homes have been wrecked by spoken words. A tongue can wound, defile and provoke to wrath. The tongue can be used to hurt and destroy, or to heal and bless. Wounds inflicted with the tongue may never heal. It is very difficult for one to control his tongue, but it is necessary that it be done to avoid injured feelings and damaged reputations.

A bit is absolutely necessary in controlling a horse. To the bit are attached reins by which we hold the horse in check, and guide him in the way in which 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 and controlling. Put the bridle in the hands of Christ and ask Him to govern you.

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

It is a sad but true trait of human nature that it delights to hear that which is unsavory concerning the character and conduct of others and then repeating it. Gossiping endangers self-respect and the confidence of one's friends. It injures others and it grieves God. Its recoil inevitably harms the wielder. Slanderous tale-bearing is the ugliest and meanest abuse of the tongue. One who scourges another with a slanderous tongue is worse than a dog which creeps up behind a person and snaps him. God's commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness," has never been abrogated. All of us would do well to remember the statement of Cato: "I think the first virtue is to restrain the tongue." James teaches us that when the tongue is controlled the whole life is controlled also.

In the fourth verse of this third chapter James calls our attention to the fact that the tongue is to a person very much what the helm is to a ship. Though a ship may be very large, and even though it may be driven by a hard wind, the small helm in the hands of a skillful steersman can turn the ship about. In comparison with the size of the great ship the helm or rudder is very small, but with it the steersman can alter the course of the ship and direct it to safety. The tongue, too, is small, and yet it can direct the course of the body and the life of a person.

We are like vessels sailing on the sea of time. It will not always be smooth sailing as we cross life's ocean. Rough and violent winds are sure to engulf us at times. Often we are driven by the storms and tempests of trouble. Wave after wave of misfortune breaks over us. Trials may sweep over us as they did with Job. He stood fast in his integrity and did not charge God foolishly. If we are going to sail across the sea of time successfully, our tongues must be controlled by the Lord. A single rash statement may bring you untold trouble, or prevent you from receiving a great blessing. As the helm needs the touch of the captain's hand, so the tongue which sways man's whole being needs to be governed or properly controlled. Let the Lord Jesus keep His hand on the helm of your life. Say what He would have you to say, and do what He wants you to do. When He controls your tongue it can and will do much good. If Christ does not control your tongue, it will do much evil. As the rudder directs the course and enables the ship to maintain that course in the face of the counteracting forces of waves and tide, so Christ can control your tongue and direct your life through all the storms that come.

In the fifth and sixth verses James pictures the dreadfulness of an uncontrolled tongue by comparing it with a small fire that sets a great forest ablaze. "Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth." "Life isn't a little bundle of big things; it is a big bundle of little things." A small speck before the eye may destroy the beautiful scenery of a vast, majestic mountain range. The mighty Thames River has its source in the Crestwood Hills. Its beginning is made up of seven springs. The most powerful nation of all time began with a handful of Pilgrims on the bleak New England shore. Little things are of eternal moment.

The great Chicago fire in 1871, which burned a 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 can start a terrible conflagration.

"And the tongue is a fire." A few words can cause great pain to a human heart. A tongue can

Pierce like a sword and cut like a razor. Some have been mortally wounded by unkind words. Like a fire, uncontrolled speech pains, sears and ruins. When used improperly the tongue can inflame all of the passions of the human soul and cause all manner of destruction. No man can control the damage of the tongue. "Three things come not back -- the spent arrow, the spoken word, and the lost opportunity." Once a word is spoken it is gone from your control. Think before you speak because, although you cannot get your statement back, you must certainly answer for it. An immense injury can be inflicted by one unguarded statement. By it you may inflict a wound which will never heal.

In verses seven and eight James tells us that all manner of wild animals may be tamed by men, but that the tongue can be tamed only by the Lord Himself. Man can direct the horse, guide the ship, domesticate the beast, but he cannot control the tongue. But, thank the Lord, Christ can control the tongue. He is the only One Who can give the victory over this unruly instrument. Unless the Lord tames and controls the tongue, man cannot cope with the problems which it creates or causes. Of this unruly member James declared that it is "full of deadly poison." In other words, it acts on the happiness of people and on the peace of society as poison does in the human body. A deadly poison does not have to be taken in large doses, a drop or two will kill; and the tongue does not need to deliver long speeches, it has but to drop a word, and the mischief is set afoot. Thus has a peace been ruined, a reputation been blackened, a friendship been broken, a mind been embittered and a life been blasted. Like a poisonous viper, the tongue can strike without warning, and in a few minutes a reputation is ruined. The body of a woman who had committed suicide was pulled out of a river, Pinned on her coat was a piece of paper upon which she had written just two words: "They said!" It was enough. How many hearts have been broken, and how many lives have been destroyed by the subtle intrigue of the human tongue.

The tongue may be deadly with poisonous insinuations. An insinuation may have a wrong inference altogether. Insinuations are like ghosts rising up from a tomb; like hemlock given one instead of bread; like gallwood put into a fountain; like arsenic put into hot biscuits; like strychnine put into ice cream; like termites destroying foundations. Salacious insinuations are like a rattlesnake coiled at the base of a rose bush. One may speak insinuations with sweetest joy, but they may be turned into wildest woe.

Speaking hastily, bitterly and too freely are sins of the tongue. "Grievous words stir up anger, but a soft answer turneth away wrath." One of the "hints" given concerning the care of a fountain pen is, "When this pen flows too freely it is a sign that it is nearly empty and should be filled." Tongues that flow too freely are signs of empty heads. Undue speech is often allied to certain weaknesses of character. The conceited and the self-assertive individuals are usually very talkative.

Words are vehicles which when used wrongfully wreck homes, separate husbands and wives, and leave a streak of green poison. Foolish and non-important arguments cause limitless trouble. Criticism is a bitter offence of the tongue. Many fill the role of which Pope spoke, "Willing to wound and yet afraid to strike." People who are always criticizing have that much less time to do something worthwhile. One day a boy had a dog hitched to a two-wheel lawnmower. A man passed by and the dog stopped to bark at him. The boy said, "Don't mind the dog, mister; he is just barking for an excuse to rest. It is easier to bark than to pull the machine." It is easier to destroy reputation than to build character. It is easier to hinder than it is to help.

When a person visits his medical doctor, the latter usually looks at the tongue to judge the health of the patient. Often the tongue is an index to the physical health. When one's temperature is taken orally, the thermometer is placed under the tongue, because the temperature there serves as an indicator for the whole body. Likewise, the way that a person uses his tongue is actually a good index to his spiritual well-being. A Christian's spiritual health is revealed in his talk.

There are many cases where the following story is very appropriate:

"A woman once came to one of the old divines of London and told him that the bands which he wore with his pulpit gown were altogether too long, and that they annoyed her greatly. She would like his permission to shorten them, and confident of his acquiescence, she had come armed with a pair of scissors. The minister mildly acquiesced and handed over the offending bands to the woman, who shortened them according to her taste with her scissors, and then handed the fragments back to the minister. When he received them he thanked her, and said, "Now, my good woman, there is something about you that is altogether too long and which has annoyed me greatly, and since one good turn deserves another, I would like permission to shorten it." "Certainly," said the woman, "you have permission to do so, and here are the shears." Whereupon, the worthy divine said, "Very well, madam, put out your tongue."

None of us would think of burning a man's house down, but there are those who think little of speaking words that will cut like a razor, burn like acid, wound like a dagger, destroy happiness, ruin reputation, and destroy usefulness. On the other hand, it is your privilege and mind to speak kind and timely words, good and encouraging words, helpful and hopeful words, comforting and consoling words, edifying and ennobling words. Words can be of rare value. They can accomplish what nothing else can -- words of merited praise, words of wise counsel, words of witness for Christ, words filled with grace and seasoned with wisdom. We should take heed how we speak, when we speak, and why we speak. The manner, the tone, and the purpose of our speaking carry great weight. Solomon spoke correctly when he said, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver" (Proverbs 25:11).