

The power of the tongue

(James 3:1-12)

The letter of James is very practical and has the good intent to draw us near to God. But one tremendous challenge is controlling what we say. James gives his full attention to this topic in chapter 3 of his letter, although he had alluded to it earlier (cf. 1:13, 19, 26; 2:12) and will do so again later.

I. *A dangerous and challenging presumption (3:1-2)*

There is a definite connection between teaching and speaking. People who talk too much act like they want to be teachers, telling others what they think they know. It is right for maturing believers to strive to teach (cf. Hebrews 5:12). But all who would teach should remember that teachers will be judged more strictly. They also carry the tremendous responsibility of directing others. Saying too much can lead to sin (cf. Proverbs 10:19). Therefore, do not lightly presume to teach, just to talk.

II. *Illustrations concerning the power of the tongue (3:3-5a)*

James compares the bit in the mouth of a horse and the rudder of a ship to the tongue. All are small yet control something much larger. There are two aspects to the illustration, which we can consider.

1. *The concept of relative size:* The tongue is small, but “boasts” (v 5) of great things, that is, it does things much bigger than its little size would make us think.
2. *The aspect of control:* If we control the tongue, we control our whole bodies and affect others as well as ourselves.

Consider the examples in the book of Proverbs. It warns against flattery (5:3; 7:5). It advises soft answers (15:1). It describes the senseless self-reasoning of the lazy person (22:13) and the self-deception of the apathetic (24:12).

We are presented therefore with a very great power. The tongue, though small, can accomplish great things, whether good or bad.

III. *Dangers of the tongue (3:5b-12)*

1. *The tongue with few words can cause great destruction (3:5b-6).*

The tongue is like a small spark of fire that can set an entire forest on fire. It affects not only others, but the person himself. People tend to believe what they say. The more they say it, the more they believe it.

The tongue is “a world of evil”. It manifests this present evil world system. “Hell” has set the tongue on fire. “Hell” is literally “Gehenna”, a valley outside of Jerusalem where trash was burned. It became a figure for eternal punishment. Lies, bitterness and hateful speech show the character of the type of person heading to eternal punishment.

2. *The tongue cannot be tamed (3:7-8).*

Though man can tame animals, man cannot tame the tongue in the same way. We cannot simply command it. At times there seems to be no pattern to its actions. There is nothing in the tongue which we can take hold of to control it.

3. *The tongue acts inconsistently (3:9-12).*

People praise God but at the same time can curse men, whom God created in His own image. God is currently conforming believers into the likeness of Jesus Christ. The Apostle John asks how we can say that we love God and yet hate our brother? It is inconsistent.

The illustrations point out that the same spring cannot bring forth both fresh and salt water. A tree only bears its own type of fruit. Similarly, the heart must be evil, if the tongue speaks evil.

James gives us a hint in his last illustration to the solution of our problem with the tongue. He goes on to develop it in the following verses and chapters. The heart is the source for that which comes out of our mouths. The heart produces jealousy and selfish ambition (3:14). The heart produces quarrels (4:1).

Jesus taught that evil comes from the heart (*Mark 7:21-23*) and the mouth speaks what is in it (*Luke 6:45*). Whatever is in our hearts can slip out of the mouth. The tongue cannot be tamed.

Instead of taming the tongue, we must work on the heart. A good heart will produce good speech. Seek to control what you say, but the real battle is the heart.

(1) Pray that God would protect what we say (Psalm 141:3). Guarding our speech is part of our spiritual battle.

(2) Plan to be silent. Cf. Proverbs 17:28; Psalm 39:1, 9. Because we are sinful, it is better at times to plan to be silent than to rehearse saying something to hurt or even justify ourselves.

(3) Guard your hearts (Proverbs 4:23). The heart is the wellspring of life. Be careful what you put into your heart, because what we put in will come out. Be careful what we think about and what we desire.

We should put God’s words into our hearts. Desire what God desires. Let God by His word renew our minds and transform our lives. Then what comes out of our mouth will be fresh water from fresh springs, good fruit from good trees.