

The Untamable Flammable Tongue

James 3:1-12

Key Verse: 10

“Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.”

I heard a story about a young man's first day on the job. He was a new clerk working in the produce department at Dominick's when a lady came up to him and told him that she wanted to buy a half a head of lettuce. He tried to tell her that they only sell lettuce by the head but she was determined to get what she wanted. Not knowing what to do, he told her that he would have to talk to his manager. And as he made his way to the back of the store he didn't notice that the woman was following him. When he found the manager he said, “There's some stupid old bag out there that wants to buy a half a head of lettuce. What should I tell her?” Seeing the horrified look on his manager's face he turned around and saw the woman standing there right behind him. He quickly added, “And this nice lady wants to buy the other half. What should I do?”

It's amazing that such a small part of our body can cause so much trouble. Who knows what I'm talking about? I'm talking about our tongues. Our tongues are of great concern to James so much so that he addresses their use throughout his book. In chapter three he uses it as a test of living faith because the genuineness of a person's faith will be demonstrated by their speech. For the things that come out of a person's mouth come from their heart. (Mt 15:18)

Let's take a look at verse 1. “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” James begins this chapter by talking about the influence of teachers. What he is saying here is that we shouldn't rush to become a teacher because of what they do. Sometimes people will want to become a Bible teacher because they like to get all the attention and praise that comes from others when they do. But James wants his readers to know what they are getting into before they do it. Teachers are held to a higher standard for what they say and do because of their influence. No one is perfect and sometimes we say things that we shouldn't have said and we wish that we can take them back but we can't. And what you say publically can have devastating results. For example this week Pat Robertson a Christian broadcaster made some statements about it being ok for a man to commit adultery simply because he was a man. Afterward the Christian Broadcasting Network issued an apology. The comments on the internet were tearing up Christians because of Robertson's comments. Teachers can have good influence as well as bad, however sometimes people only remember the bad. Actions like this are bad influences and maybe they were not intended that way but Jesus gives a solemn warning to those who do cause others to stumble because of their bad influence. Jesus said, “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”⁷ Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!⁸ If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.⁹ And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the

fire of hell." (Mt 18) Being a bad influence has consequences. Therefore we must be careful especially if we have been entrusted with a position of leadership.

Paul showed in Titus 1, v5-9 what qualifications a teacher must have. Verse 9 says, "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." One who teaches must also be able to be taught. They must be teachable. But above all he must be able to hold firmly to God's word and encourage others based upon sound doctrine. James is saying that before you run off to become a teacher you need to consider what they do. Their tongue is their primary tool and when they speak they need to be skilled in what they are saying because of the devastating potential the tongue has. When we take the position of a teacher we should have a sense of the seriousness involved. Whether we are teaching in children's ministry, college ministry, group Bible study, one to one, or preparing a message, we must give our heart over to God's word and allow the necessary time for God to prepare our hearts so that we know what we are going to say. When I first began to preside at the main center my heart trembled because I viewed it as if I were standing before God and so, more than anything, I wanted my heart and tongue to be right before God. How much more so now as I deliver messages. Teachers will be judged more strictly because they have been responsibility and will be held accountable. [heb 13:7 –eph 4:11]

Verse 2 says, "We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check." When he says that we all stumble - what James means is that we sin. We sin in many ways, but here James is dealing specifically with our tongue. And if you notice he uses the present tense which implies that it's continuous, we never stop doing it. However he gives us a little encouragement because he goes on to say that if we can control our tongue, then we will have the discipline to control our whole body because our tongue is the hardest thing for us to control.

Take a look at verse 3. "When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal." From what I understand, bits are the metal pieces that go into the horse's mouth and it's used to control them. The way a bit works is when it's put into their mouth it presses down on their tongues. And the harder it presses down the easier it is to control the horse. So when a horse is young, they have a bit that presses down harder but after the horse is broke they use lighter bits because they don't need that much pressure. If you don't have control you are at the mercy of the horse and you go where ever the horse goes. And sometimes it's not where you want to go. The same is true for your tongue, if you don't have control of it, it will lead you where you don't want to go.

Take a look at verse 4. "Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go." The next example he gives is the rudder of a ship. Imagine the Nimitz class aircraft carrier. They displace about 101,000 tons, 1100 feet long, nuclear powered, they hold about 5700 personnel and 85 aircraft and that massive vessel is piloted by one person, essentially by the rudder. What we learn is that the bit and the rudder have the power to direct which means that they affect the lives of people. The tongue, although it is small, just like the bit and rudder, it has power to control the body. And James is saying is that we must get a bridle over our tongue. Proverbs 4:24 "Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips." When we become a

Christian our speech should change. We shouldn't take part in rude jokes, or vulgar speech like swearing because it doesn't give a good influence to the people around us.

The example is in verse 5. "Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark." The tongue has great power. The tongue has power to destroy. It is like a small spark that starts a huge fire. Proverbs 16:27 "A scoundrel plots evil, and on their lips it is like a scorching fire." Every summer we see many forest fires throughout the south west US. These fires cause terrible destruction and they all start from a small spark. Sometime our tongues can make great boasts. And these boasts can unintentionally turn a person's life in a direction they never intended. Take for example King Herod. One time at his birthday party his daughter danced for the crowd. He was so pleased and boasted in front of the crowd, "Ask for anything you want and I will give it to you, up to half my kingdom." But when she asked for John the Baptist's head on a platter he was greatly distressed. (Mk 6) But because he made such a boast in front of the crowd, reluctantly he fulfilled her request. The Bible encourages us not to boast and Jesus simply said, "Let your yes be yes and your no be no." (Mt 5:33-37)

Verse 6 says, "The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." As a church we are the body of Christ. We are all connected to one another because of our Lord Jesus Christ. What we do affects each other. The tongue through gossip or negative attitude from one person can start a whole church on fire. And it takes so much effort to put it out. Jesus said it's not what goes into a person that makes them unclean, but rather it's what comes out of their mouth that defiles them. (Mt 15:11) Not only does it defile you but everyone you come in contact with. It corrupts the whole body, that's why it's like a fire. At the end of verse 6 it says, "set on fire by hell." The tongue can be set on fire by the gracious spirit of God to produce the peaceful fruit of righteousness or it can be set on fire from the pit of hell. If you do a search for the word tongue in the Bible you'll find it listed about 133 times. And this is what I learned about what our tongue can do. The tongue flatters, curses, boasts, betrays, accuses, speaks deceit, uses devious words, lies, seduces, speaks perversion, it's spiteful, plots destruction, has the potential for death, no wonder one writer said, "God put the tongue in a cage behind the teeth walled in by the mouth because of its great potential to do damage."

Verses 7-8 say, "All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind,"⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." Mankind has been able to tame all kinds of animals. Once my family went to Medieval Times, for Mike's birthday, and they displayed how they trained their horses and a falcon to do what they want. And not too far from us we have the Shedd Aquarium where we can see their train dolphins do their tricks. But the one thing that we have not been able to tame through all these years is our tongues. James says that it is a restless evil full of deadly poison. How many times have you either walked away from someone grumbling under your breath? Or you've gotten angry and said something that you wish you hadn't? This happened to the actor Alec Baldwin. He and his wife divorced and one time during a family dispute he called his young daughter (11-12 years old) and left her such a mean, insulting, cursing, vile message on her cell phone. Do you know what she did? She sold it to the tabloid magazines. He was humiliated. But imagine what his message did to his daughter, it must have been like poison to

her heart. Even though no man can tame our tongues, God can. For what is impossible with man is possible with God. (Mt 1:26, Mk 10:27, Lk 18:27) God can tame your when you submit your will to his when you meditate on God's word and study the Bible. When I did the word search for tongue, I also found out that our tongues can defend, speak justice, rejoice, sing, speak of righteousness, bring healing, speak wisdom, build each other up and one day every tongue will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Take a look at verses 9-10. "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness."¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be." James says that we praise God and curse men with the same tongue. On one hand we can thank God for the blessing that he has given us, like we do on Sundays. But then during the week we curse the people we come in contact with. Why do we do this? However we're not alone, this happened to Peter. At one point Peter declared the Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. (Mt 16) but then a few weeks later, he cursed vehemently saying that he didn't know the man. (Mt 26) But do you know what I find amazing, not only do we do this, sometime we can do it at the same time. Sometimes when I'm driving to work, I'll listen to sermons on the radio and I catch myself thanking God for what he has done and then suddenly someone will cut me off and I will curse them, or wish evil on them. And James is saying that this is not right, it shouldn't be. This shouldn't be a part of our life. We have a new tongue, if we are a believer. As Christians we should be new creations, with a new character. Romans 12:14 says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." This is part of being transformed as we mature in spirit we must gain control of our tongue. We should not curse anyone because they are made in the image of God.

And what James is saying here is if we are not acting like this we have to consider the source. Take a look at verses 11-12. "Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?"¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water." Everyone knows that salt water and fresh water can't flow from the same source. It's either one or the other. James is saying that we will know what kind of tree it is by what kind of fruit it bears. So if we claim to be Christians and yet we talk like this, maybe we are not who we claim to be. Last week we heard the message where it said that our actions must match our faith. If we have faith, then we will do what God commands. But if we claim to be living for God but our actions don't match after a while our speech will give that away and when it does, we will be a bad influence to others and called hypocrites. In conclusion let's take to heart what St. Peter told us. He said, "Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble."⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."¹⁰ For, "Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech."¹¹ They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it."¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." (1 Pet 3:8-12) If we claim to believe in Jesus, then our actions must match our words and they should be good for we are Jesus' representatives here on earth. Others will look to us, to see what God is like, and so we should act like Jesus, and control of our tongues is a great place to start. May God bless you as you learn to tame your flammable tongue.