



CAPITOL COMMISSION

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COLORADO

James 3:5b-6 The Vicious Nature of the Tongue: Part 1

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Though small, the tongue is powerful for good or evil. We must never doubt or underestimate the power of the tiny tongue nor its tremendous effect over all of life. Think about it, the tongue can teach, encourage, comfort, and soothe or it can crush, destroy and leave a wake of destruction in its path. It would be difficult to even exaggerate the effects of the tongue and you wouldn't have to look very far to see the effects of it. In fact, take a moment to read the following true story which clearly demonstrates the power of words.

“In 1899 four newspaper reporters from Denver, Colorado set out to tear down the Great Wall of China. They almost succeeded. Literally. The four met by chance on a Saturday night in a Denver railway depot. Al Stevens, Jack Tournay, John Lewis, Hal Wilshire. They represented the four Denver papers: the *Post*, the *Times*, the *Republican* and *Rocky Mountain News*.

Each had been sent by his respective newspaper to dig up a story—any story—for the Sunday editions; so the reporters were in the railroad station, hoping to snag a visiting celebrity should one happen to arrive that evening by train. None arrived that evening, by train or otherwise. The reporters started commiserating. For the, no news was bad news; all were facing empty-handed return trips to their city desks.

Al declared he was going to make up a story and hand it in. The other three laughed. Someone suggested they all walk over to the Oxford Hotel and have a beer. They did. Jack said he liked Al's idea about faking a story. Why didn't each of them fake a story and get off the hook? John said Jack was thinking too small. Four half-baked fakes didn't cut it. What they needed was one real whopper they could all use. Another round of beers.

A phony domestic story would be too easy to check on, so they began discussing foreign angle s that would be difficult to verify...China was distant enough, it was agreed. They would write about China. John leaned forward, gesturing dramatically tin the dim light of the barroom. Try this one on, he said:

Group of American engineers, stopping over in Denver en route to China.

The Chinese government is making plans to demolish the Great Wall; our engineers are bidding on the job.

Harold was skeptical. Why would the Chinese want to destroy the Great Wall of China? John thought for a moment. They're tearing down

the ancient boundary to symbolize international goodwill, to welcome foreign trade! Another round of beers. By 11:00 pm, the four reporters had worked out the details of their preposterous story. After leaving the Oxford Bar, they would go over to the Windsor Hotel. They would sign four fictitious names to the hotel register. They would instruct the desk clerk to tell anyone who asked that four New Yorkers had arrived that evening, had been interviewed by reporters, had left early the next morning for California. The Denver newspapers carried the story. All four of them. Front page. In fact the *Times* headline that Sunday read: GREAT CHINESE WALL DOOMED! PEKING SEEKS WORLD TRADE!

Of course their story was a phony, a ludicrous fabrication concocted by four capricious newsmen in a hotel bar. But their story was taken seriously, and was picked up and expanded by newspapers in the Eastern U.S. and then by newspapers abroad. When the Chinese themselves learned that the Americans were sending a demolition crew to tear down their national monument, most were indignant; some were enraged. Particularly incensed were the members of a secret society, a volatile group of Chinese patriots who were already wary of foreign intervention. They, inspired by the story, exploded, rampaged against the foreign embassies in Peking, and slaughtered hundreds of missionaries.

In two months, twelve thousand troops from six countries joined forces and invaded China with the purpose of protecting their own countrymen. The bloodshed which followed, sparked by a journalistic hoax invented in a barroom in Denver, became the white-hot international conflagration known to every high school history student...as the Boxer Rebellion.”¹

The power of words...the destructive power of the tongue. You don't have to look very far to see its ravaging effects. It is clear from James 3 that God wants us to understand the dangerous and evil nature of the tongue. The tongue is destructive and devastating. With words the tongue can spread lies, consume and destroy lives in its very wake. Consider the story above. Unchecked, the tongue has such potential for great harm! Clearly, James does not want us to be ignorant nor deceived about the vicious nature of the tongue! God does not mix words regarding the malicious, destructive nature of the uncontrolled tongue here in James. And we better sit up and pay attention to the serious warnings and instructions given in James 3.

¹ Aurandt, Paul, ed., *More of Paul Harvey's the Rest of the Story*. New York: Bantam Books, 1981. Pg. 136-138.

VICIOUS NATURE OF THE TONGUE - JAMES 3:5B-6

“See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity, the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of life, and is set on fire by hell.” James 3:5b-6

Here James continues with the contrast between the great and the small. How small is a spark that grows to an all consuming fire just as words and speech can consume and inflame lives, communities and nations. These sobering verses will give a concise illustration of the evil results and the vicious nature of an uncontrolled tongue.

A. THE TONGUE; A ROARING INFERNO- JAMES 3:5B

“See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! James 3:5b

James has compared the tongue to bits and horses, ships and rudders in referring to the control of the tongue. Now he makes a distinct shift as he transitions from neutral examples to destructive forces like blazing infernos.

James begins with “See” or “Consider”. The word calls special attention to the illustration he is about to give regarding the tongue. James begins this paragraph with essentially a proverb. It is easy to understand. He wants us to know that the tongue has tremendous potential for great harm. The contrast of “a small fire”, a small spark, in relation to the resultant great, inferno is striking. James emphasizes the disparity between the deceptively small spark that grows into the overwhelmingly dangerous and all consuming, great fire as he refers to the destructive effects that can result from the uncontrolled tongue. A little spark of unkind words can kindle a fire of such devastating effects. There is a contrast between the smallness of the spark and the greatness of the fire that is caused by the tiny, little spark. So also is the deadly power of the tongue unless it is submitted to the control of the Holy Spirit in the believers’ life.

Yes, the tongue can be a tremendous influence for great good...but out of control it is a source of great evil. It is as though those who misuse the tongue can be guilty of spiritual arson. The results can bring a life to ashes and ruin, cause such harm and chaos all from such a small, minute word. And when James says that “how great a forest is set aflame”, he refers to a fire that is so devastating because *it is not controlled*. We all have pictures in our minds of the fires in California that burn and destroy until they are controlled. Just so, James presents the picture of words and speech that are not controlled and the cruel evil which results. Harsh words can set a blaze that incites, provokes, stirs up and inflames. Just remember the story we began our study with.

B. THE TONGUE: AN UNFOLDING FLAME - JAMES 3:6

“And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity, the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of life, and is set on fire by hell.” James 3:6

James continues with such a seriously strong statement that deals with the tongue. In fact, James gives us a series of pictures, of metaphors that unfold the destructive force of the tongue. An unchecked tongue not only produces corrupt speech, but that in turn corrupts the whole body and sets in motion the wicked course of an entire life. And then James teaches us that such evil speech comes from the pit of hell itself and a tool for Satan.

1. THE TONGUE IS A FIRE + JAMES 3:6A

The first metaphor James uses is “The tongue is a fire”. You will remember a metaphor is used to describe somebody or something with a word or phrase that is not meant literally, but by means of a vivid comparison expresses something about that person or thing. So James uses figurative language to instruct us further about the uncontrolled tongue.

The tongue, by nature, is a fire. It is destructive, it produces ruin and ashes. Fire leaves only desolation and waste and spares nothing. It ignites, consumes, incinerates, reduces to ashes and devours. And the tongue left uncontrolled, like fire, sparks blazing infernos of false lies, spiteful words, cruel insults, venomous slander and evil of all kinds. The metaphor James uses gives us a clear picture of the destructive nature of the tongue. (Psalm 57:4, Psalm 120:3-4, Proverbs 16:27, Proverbs 26:18-21) As if this isn’t enough, James will build on this picture.

2. THE TONGUE IS THE VERY WORLD OF INIQUITY+ JAMES 3:6B

“And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity...” James 3:6b

What a strong statement! Evil finds expression through the uncontrolled tongue. It is characterized by evil and composed of evil and there is no limit of evil and destruction produced by the tongue.

“world” Greek word **kosmos**, “meaning the sinful world system

James refers to the unrighteous character of the tongue that divides churches, families and friends. James calls the tongue the very world of sin. It is a world that is characterized by evil and not righteousness. It kindles lust, stirs conflict and corrupts relationships. How could believers have any part of this for it is against such evil that believers stand and live for? And yet, remember, it is to believers that he writes.

3. THE SINFUL TONGUE DEFILES THE BODY- JAMES 3:6C

“And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body...” James 3:6c

The “tongue”, (he repeats the word again thus giving emphasis to what he will say about the tongue), “is set”, or “makes itself” have a place where? James says “among our members”, referring to the members of our body. And what results from that? The evil, uncontrolled tongue makes a home and “defiles” and corrupts the entire person.

defiles” Greek word **σπιλοω**,” means to stain, to corrupt, a moral leprosy.

This verb reveals the impact of an uncontrolled tongue in a person’s life. We must not be deceived. An evil tongue stains the entire body. It corrupts the whole person. Jesus said in Matthew 15:11, *“It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.”* Do we really understand the serious impact of our careless speech? As believers, our words matter. No other member of our physical body has comparable power and range of influence for evil. It can give utterance to every evil thought and motive and put every evil deed into words. It is a microcosm of evil among our members.²

But true faith, true religion James says in James 1:27 is that which keeps oneself from being “undefiled” or unstained by the world. *“Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of God our Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”* Is that what kind of religion you profess? Is that the kind of faith you possess?

4. THE SINFUL TONGUE SETS ON FIRE THE COURSE OF LIFE - JAMES 3:6D

“And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity, the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of life...” James 3:6d

Not only does the unchecked tongue affect the entire person, but it “sets on fire the course of life.” Like physical fire, the destructive effects of evil speech expand, not only contaminating ourselves but also everything we influence throughout the course of our life. To a large extent, we are known by the way we talk. Over the long haul, what we say gives others a

pretty good idea of who and what we really are. That principle applies to good things as well as sinful, but James’s emphasis here is entirely on the negative aspects of our speaking such as gossip, slander, false accusations, lying, filthy language and stories, and other sins of the tongue that can destroy individual lives, families, schools, churches, and communities.³

4. THE SINFUL TONGUE IS SET ON FIRE BY HELL- JAMES 3:6E

“And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity, the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of life, and is set on fire by hell.” James 3:6

Think about it. Could most of the adversity we experience in this life come from the sinful tongue? The impact of the sinful tongue is so far reaching in each of our lives. But James continues by saying that the tongue “is set on fire by hell” The verb, “is set on fire”, is in the present active form referring to a continuing state. James says that the sinful tongue is continually set on fire by what? Hell itself! That is shocking!

hell” Greek word **γεहेנνα**,” means valley of the sons of Hinnom. This referred to a deep gorge that was southwest of Jerusalem. During the reign of King Ahaz and Manasseh, human sacrifices were made there to the pagan god Molech. But, when King Josiah reigned, he stopped that idolatrous practice, defiled the place and deemed it unclean and unfit to be used. By Jesus’ day, it had become a garbage dump for Jerusalem and fires burned there day and night to consume the rubbish and filth. (See 2 Chronicles 28:3, 33:6, 2 Kings 23:10)

“Gehenna” is used only here and in the Gospels. It was an unclean place that was continually on fire and became a picture of the final punishment of the wicked. Jesus spoke about it in Mark 9:43-44. In Matthew 25:41, Jesus referred to hell as a place reserved for Satan and his demons. It is identified with the “lake of fire” in Revelation 19:20, 20:10-15.

So what is James’ point? The small spark from a sinful tongue that causes great fires of destruction is caused by another fire itself...hell. The destructive forces of a sinful tongue come from the destructiveness of hell. James started with the small spark of a sinful tongue that quickly spreads to a fire of blazing inferno. That’s the destructive force of evil speech. God takes our words seriously. We will be held accountable for every word. Do you take your words seriously?

² Hiebert, D. Edmond, *James*. Moody Bible Institute: Chicago, Illinois, 1992. Pg. 195.

³ MacArthur, John. *MacArthur Commentary on James*. Moody Press: Chicago, Illinois, 1998. Pg. 156.