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COLORADO

James 3:3-5a True Faith: Who is in Control?

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Without the bridle of God's Word and the work of the Holy Spirit, the tongue can easily have its way. James directs our attention to what real maturity is...a man or woman who doesn't stumble or sin with their words. To be able to control the tongue reveals evidence of extraordinary, spiritual maturity. The "perfect man" the mature man is able to keep his tongue under check. And if he can keep his mouth in check, he possesses the ability and maturity to keep the rest of his life obedient to Christ. While it is incredibly difficult to control our words and speech, if we do, we are able to control, hold in check and govern the rest of our life as well. If a believer's tongue is controlled, then a general self control will result. If a person can control his tongue, his speech, then that reveals maturity and the result should be a curb of evil in his or her life. It is clear that there is a connection between speaking and doing. Our actions will follow our words eventually because our words reveal our heart. If one possesses a true and living faith, it will be demonstrated by a tongue that is bridled and controlled by the Spirit.

TRUE FAITH: WHO IS IN CONTROL? - JAMES 3:3-5A

The mark of a mature man or woman will be evidenced by a controlled tongue in speech and words. To have a bridled tongue reveals maturity as a believer. It is our duty to guard our tongue and the tongue can be a powerful force which can be either for good or evil. Here in James 3:3-5a we will learn that the direction of our tongue whether for good or for bad depends on one thing; who is holding the reins, who is controlling the rudder of our ship. Ultimately, the question is this: ***Who is in control?***

"Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things." James 3:1-5a

A. 1ST ILLUSTRATION: BIT AND HORSE- JAMES 3:3

"Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well." James 3:3

Here in these verses James uses two examples that illustrate how the tongue, though small, has the power to control one's whole person and influence everything in life. These examples would have been understood by all for they represent the major things controlled by men in those days; horses and ships. James begins with the horse.

Horses are amazing animals! They are an awesome, powerful, half-ton of raw power and beauty. Yet, if you bridle this animal with a bit in its mouth, this naturally wild and untamed animal can be subdued and controlled to carry out the desire of the rider by means of a very small bit.

James continues his discussion of the tongue from the previous verse by further developing his example of the horse. James 3:3 begins with "Now". This is a first class conditional clause in the Greek stressing the point that there is no doubt to this illustration. James is saying there is a corresponding parallel between controlling the mouth of a horse and the mouth of a man. Since a bridle is effective in controlling the whole horse, (there is no question of this fact) so also, control of the tongue. To have a bridled tongue, a controlled tongue results in maturity and that's the goal. The mark of a mature believer is evidenced by whether the tongue is controlled.

James 3:3a says, "Now if we put bits into the horses mouth...". Notice that the word "horses" is plural. This is to emphasize that the same control which comes as a result of the bridle can be applied to all horses and thus the same is true with all tongues. The control which comes as a result of God and His Word can be transformational for all tongues... for all believers.

The "bits" were placed into the horses' mouth. Keep in mind the bit was only effective if it was placed on top of the tongue in order to control the head and thus the whole body of the horse. Again, James 3:3a says, "Now if we put bits into the horses mouth..." The word "put" is in the present tense indicating that this consistent practice leads to a certain result.

"put" Greek word "**ballomen**," means to put or place, to throw. It has a mild tone.

It's interesting to note that "put" has a mild tone with it. It's not that a power greater than the horse is used to control it. No, because horses are strong and powerful animals and we can't out muscle them! It is by understanding how to use the small bit in the hands of the skilled rider that makes all the difference. Who better able to control the bit and reins in our life than the hand of Jesus Christ?

The whole goal of the bit is clearly "to make them obey us", James 3:3c. Again, the objective is not just to control the head of the horse, but the whole, entire 1000lb. body as well. In life, the goal isn't just to manage the tongue, but to have a properly controlled tongue that is revealed by maturity in all areas of life. James makes this clear in James 3:3d when he writes, "we direct

their entire body as well.” Just as controlling the horses’ mouth with the bit results in directing the movement of the whole body, so also the tongue. If we can control the tongue which is so easily influenced to sin, then controlling and submitting everything else in our lives to the glory of God can follow. Just as a horse to be useful must be under control, so also our tongue controlled that our lives can be useful and purposeful for our Lord’s work. Just as an out of control horse can be dangerous and worthless, so also a believer whose tongue is not submissive to God and His Word can be dangerous and harmful. The question becomes, **who is in control? Who holds the reins of your life?**

B. 2ND ILLUSTRATION: SHIP AND RUDDER- JAMES 3:4

“Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.” James 3:4

James continues to illustrate his point by giving an example of ships. Even in his day, ships were “so great”! James connects this illustration with the first one by saying “Look at the ships also”. By saying “Look”, he invites us to pay special attention to what follows as he continues to show the tremendous power of small things.

James first notes the immense size of the ships, “though they are so great”. But with this emphasis, James has in view the contrasting smallness of the rudder. Even in James’ day, ships were large. Acts 27:37-44 gives the description of the ship that carried Paul as a prisoner on his way to Rome. This ship held 276 prisoners along with a load of wheat plus all the supplies and equipment for their journey. So this description points to the great size of the ship making them difficult to control.

Then James says in 3:3c, “though they are so great and are driven by strong winds”. Not only are they large, but they were driven by strong winds.

“strong” Greek word “*skeleron*,” means stiff, fierce, hard, tough, suggesting that winds cannot be made to swerve from their course.

Not only are ships difficult to control on water because they are large, but they also are subject to fierce forces of wind that can move and control ships and easily cause their destruction.

Then James drives home his point in 3:3d, “are still directed by a very small rudder”. The words, “very small” emphasizes a contrast between the size of the ship and the smallness of the rudder. Even with the fierce and violent winds that can cause a ship’s ruin, even with the tremendous size of such a vessel, yet they are directed and controlled by a very small rudder.

In fact, this little rudder sends these ships “wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.” (James 3:4e) It is important to note that the direction of the ship is **not** determined by the size of the boat nor the strong winds that blow, but rather by the pilot and where he so desires.

“pilot” Greek word “*tou euthunontos*,” means the one guiding straight.

The present tense of “desires” indicates that the one in control of the rudder, tiny though it may be, determines the course of the whole ship. Even in the harshest of winds, the vessel will turn in the direction the pilot steers.

Like the bit in a horses’ mouth and the rudder of a ship, so the tongue has the power to control our lives as well. These two illustrations show how the tongue, though small has the power to control one’s whole life and influence everything in it. We are able to turn horses and ships with such little instruments, and just so the tongue, being comparatively small can produce such a great effect in our life and others for good or bad. J.A. Motyer wrote this, “the control of the tongue is more than an evidence of spiritual maturity; it is the means to it.”¹

C. SMALL TONGUE, GREAT BOASTS- JAMES 3:5A

“Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.” James 3:3-5a

James concludes in 3:5a that like the bit for the horse and the rudder for the ship, the tongue is small in relation to the body but “boasts of great things.” 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. And when James says, “boasts of great things” there is clearly a negative tone which transitions us from a discussion about the power of the tongue to an understanding of the danger and evil of the tongue and its need for control. 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 think about your own life. How have you been hurt by words? How have you hurt others with your words? Before we proceed with our study, ask yourself: *Who holds the reins to your heart and Who is the pilot of your ship?* Your tongue will reveal what’s true.

¹ Motyer, J.A., *The Message of James*. Intervarsity: Downers Grove, Illinois, 1985. Pg.121.