



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Verbal Arsonry NOVEMBER 10, 2011

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James 3:1-12. How we use our tongue says a great deal about who we are. One whose mouth is filled with insults and anger comes from a heart that is filled with these. The tongue exposes what is within, and it is a powerful instrument.

This little epistle challenges us to look at our profession of faith, and here James exhorts us to examine our words. What do our words say about us?

Proverbs 18:21 says that, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” Speeches, declarations, verdicts, conversations, arguments, insults, curses or blessings—all of these come from the tongue. It is the instrument that most effectively gives vent to our thoughts and desires. Whether by intention or by accident, what comes out of the mouth has awesome potential... and we hardly realize it.

Two men who did realize this power were Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler. Hitler seized upon the vulnerabilities of his people with speech after speech of a glorious new empire. In ten short years, he arose from prisoner to Chancellor. So powerful were his words, he ascended to become the revered Führer in 1935. Germany was his, and the people were ready to die for Hitler’s every lie.

On the other side of the English Channel stood a Prime Minister who raised his faltering nation to its “finest hour.” The British had appeased Hitler and were ready to fall to his demands until Churchill was appointed in 1940. The resolute power of his words instilled hope, and his people soon believed they would ride out the storm to victory.

The hearts of hundreds of millions had been moved to make war or to fight against it. How did the world come to this? By the power of the tongue. Its ability to do good or evil far surpasses its small weight and size. Like a spark that destroys an entire forest or a rudder that turns a great ship, James warns of the tongue. The way a man uses this instrument massively impacts the course of his life and affects countless others in ways he never imagined.

ACTIONS AND WORDS

The Bible has a thick catalogue on the uses of speech. Our tongues can be used for lying, deception, slander, flattery, gossip, blasphemy, complaining, foolishness, cursing, sensuality, filth, scheming and boasting. The first sin after the fall came from the tongue (cf. Gen 3:12), and ever since the tongue has inflicted an awful scourge of devastation upon the world.

Scripture is not literally referring to that lump of muscle within the mouth. The tongue is no more than an organ, but it is the organ used for speech. And where does speech come from? The heart. The heart directs our speech just as the heart also directs our actions. It’s the source of all we ever say or do (cf. Matt 15:18-19).

But why focus on the tongue? Because the tongue is free to communicate all that the heart contains. Suppose a coworker buys a beautiful SL65. Out of jealousy, you might hope his new car is a money pit that breaks down. Even though your heart speaks and jokes of doing harm, it is far less likely to actually do harm.

There are limits on our actions that do not exist on our speech. We are free to say practically anything—not free to do half as much. What doesn’t come out of the heart in action flows so smoothly out of the mouth.

Matthew 12:36-37—“I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

The tongue is the most accurate window into a person’s heart. Though we are saved by grace alone (cf. Eph 2:8-9), our words reveal what’s within and expose the kind of faith we have. This is why James so heavily focuses upon this subject. An unredeemed tongue evidences an unredeemed heart.

THAT ELUSIVE POWER

The tongue is an elusive instrument. If anger resides within, your tongue is prone to let it escape. James likens it to a beast, something “no human being can tame” (cf. Jas 3:8). The tongue can be controlled to a degree, but a believer who has great control of his tongue strongly evidences the power of God within.

The idea is that a mature Christian has mature speech. James is not saying that a mature Christians merely controls his words. One can bottle up an evil heart and look well for a time. Maturity in speech, however, means a mature heart. The tongue cannot be tamed by withholding the waters of evil within. Eventually the dam will break as all rushes forth. The tongue is only tamed when the heart has been transformed.

BIBLE STUDIES

VETO SESSION: THURSDAY AT 7:30AM, GOVERNOR’S OFFICE

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Many of James' readers wanted to become teachers. He warns that not many should because their tongues had betrayed them (cf. Jas 3:1-2). As in James' day so in ours, there's no shortage of people desiring to teach in the church. The desire may be good (cf. 1 Tim 3:1), but has it been tested? James wanted his readers to test their teachers by the quality of their words (cf. Jas 3:1). From casual conversation to the pulpit, what characterized their speech?

Paul wrote of teachers who used their tongues to teach different doctrines (cf. 1 Tim 1:3, 6:3). Other preachers were quarrelsome with talk that "spread like gangrene" (cf. 2 Tim 2:17, 23). Unqualified people were flocking to the ministry. For many, their tongues revealed a heart "puffed up with conceit" (cf. 1 Tim 6:4). Sinful actions have destroyed many ministers and discredited countless churches. Sins of the tongue have devastated far more. A minister should have a heart that's been transformed by the gospel, and his tongue should clearly show it.

WHAT A SPARK CAN DO

James likens the tongue to the rudder of a ship or the bit that guides a horse. The one who has control of his tongue likely has control of his life as well (cf. Jas 3:3-4, Prov 21:23). Why? Because the tongue is more difficult to control than our hands and feet.

When a person lets their tongue flap freely or shoots their mouth, he or she unleashes a bit of Hell on Earth. That might seem harsh, but what is the source of all unrighteous speech? Hell (cf. Jas 3:6). The tongue is a "world of unrighteousness", "staining the body", "setting on fire the entire course of life", a "restless evil", "full of deadly poison" (cf. Jas 3:6, 8). James says it is a small member of the body, but like a spark, the tongue can set ablaze a great forest of evil (cf. Jas 3:5).

WHEN THE HEART IS FILLED WITH BITTERNESS,
ANGER, JEALOUSY OR THE LIKE, THE TONGUE IS
FREE TO CREATE A MICROCOSM OF EVIL.

James calls our speech a "world of unrighteousness". More literally, it can be a "system" or "cosmos of iniquity" (cf. Jas 3:6). The idea is that the tongue can create an orderly system of destruction. A little gossip here or an insult there may be the snowflake that begins an avalanche of ruin in another's life.

Never in the entire Bible is any member of the body condemned so severely as the tongue. Sins of the hands and the feet (actions) are described vividly (cf. Prov 1:16, 6:17). Yet, sins of the tongue have a destructive power that exceeds these. Words roll so easily out of the mouth and often become the source that incites our hands and feet to action.

While "setting on fire the entire course of life" and ravaging all a man once held dear, the tongue can stain and defile us as well (cf. Jas 3:6). How? By paving the way for even worse actions. Words vented from an evil heart can set in motion undreamed opportunities for evil actions.

CONSISTENTLY INCONSISTENT

Do you want to burn your own house down? Just start talking. The tongue can cut like a razor or pierce as a sword (cf. Psa 52:2, 57:4). Its many victims may act unscathed all while dying of wounds on the inside. How do you use your tongue?

James finishes this section by addressing the inconsistency of speech. The tongue can sing the glories of Heaven or unleash Hell. James was concerned to find people in the church who did both (cf. Jas 3:10). They would bless the Lord on Sunday while cursing His creation on Monday.

Prov 26:23—"Like the glaze covering an earthen vessel are fervent lips with an evil heart."

Since man is the image of God, we should speak to one another as if God Himself were standing before us (cf. Jas 3:9; Matt 25:34-46). To do less is a contradiction of nature. This is the crux of all James has said on the tongue. If the tongue so clearly reveals the heart, what kind of heart produces speech that afflicts and harms? We all stumble in many ways, but lips that regularly do evil come from an evil heart.

The thesis of James' epistle is that true faith shows itself. The pattern of our actions and words will either commend or condemn our profession faith. James asks: "Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?" (Jam 3:11). Of course not. When we see apples, we assume the tree is an apple tree. When we find grapes, we assume the vine is a grape vine. When we see a person walking so regularly in sin, why would anyone say: "There's a Christian!" According to James, we should reason the very opposite.