



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

The Book of James, Taming the Tongue

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Greg Beaupied / cell: (919) 710-9147 / Greg.Beaupied@capitolcom.org / 206 New Bern Place, Raleigh, NC 27601

James 3:1-12

¹ Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ² We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

³ When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 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. 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. ⁶ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸ but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Introduction

James begins a long discourse on the tongue. This is obviously an important subject for James as he mentions the tongue in every chapter of his epistle, but now he gives our speech a focused treatment.

James has already demonstrated how deeds can reveal what is happening in the heart. He challenges us to let our faith be brought to life by good works. Here, we have a similar treatment—public behavior revealing the unseen inner person. Our speech is likely the best measure of what is happening to us inside. The tongue is so directly connected to our inner thought life that it is difficult to hide one's true spiritual agenda when the tongue is engaged. The tongue is employed in the displaying of evil intentions, but it can also offer blessings and praises.

Jesus lists sins of the tongue with other sins we might think more horrific. *For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander (Matthew 15:1).* In this verse we find *false testimony* and *slander* (two sins of the tongue) listed along with murder, adultery, sexual immorality, and theft. We may not see ourselves as murderers or thieves, but we should not discount sins of speech.

Paul agrees with Jesus and James as he considers sins of the tongue. *But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips (Colossians 3:8).* Paul also gives us the corrective in Colossians 3:16-17. *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

Our Study

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

If teachers are to be judged more strictly then it stands to reason that teachers ought to carefully prepare the content of their teaching. But, content is not the only consideration—teachers should examine their motivations to be teachers in the first place. The Scripture is clear that new believers should not be in positions of authority such as teaching.

James is not saying no one should teach, but he has in mind a sober consideration of one's skills, knowledge, motivation, experience, and spiritual maturity. There is a calling from the Lord that is given to each of us about the vocation of our lives. Teaching is a particular calling.

Teaching in this context is referring to believers teaching other believers spiritual, theological and lifestyle truths. It is a necessity to have some maturity in these areas, and to ask God for a sanctified heart. The warnings and reports in Scripture

BIBLE STUDIES

LEGISLATORS: MONDAYS, 5:00 PM, ROOM 1425

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James

about false teachers are evidence of many who would aspire to teach but lack the qualifications for the position

James keeps a tension throughout his letter between what we are required to do and our actual performance. Obviously, we all stumble in many ways, but this reality does not excuse any lack of maturity or violation of God's Law.

The perfect man is used here to describe the mature believer and not some over-idealized concept of what a perfect man is. A perfect man practices self-control.

Two Examples

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.

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.

James is ingenious to give us examples before the teaching point. Here, he tells us something that is true and easy to accept. A horse's bit is used to control the entire animal and a small rudder can steer a large ship.

Now he has us leaning into the truth that is his main point...

Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

Bits, rudders, and tongues can be seen as intermediaries. They receive instruction based upon the will, but then they execute that instruction producing a significant effect. The tongue impacts our immediate environment, and a few words can literally alter our destiny.

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

The tongue is in a spiritual battle. It can be taken over by evil desires and used for hellish purposes. James warns us it is like

a spark that can burn down an entire forest. We must not be too casual about its destructive potential and allow it to ignite a great fire.

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

The tongue is a wild thing—wilder than many of the animals. The tongue cannot be fully controlled, and here we have again a tension in James. We are told to command our tongue in one statement but in the next we are told it cannot be tamed. James calls us to move toward being the perfect person knowing we will never reach our fullest potential.

Two things: If we are not able to reach perfection; we can move in the right direction being aware that course correction is always a necessity. We have not arrived. Second, we will need to be forgiven by God and by other folks, and we will need to be generous with our forgiveness to others.

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness.¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

The tongue is the primary instrument of hypocrisy. We can say we have faith and not show it, and here James gives a more pointed condemnation. Imagine, we can go to worship and praise God with our tongue, and turn around and curse our fellow men whom God has created in His likeness.

Ponder this...

1. Can you recall a biblical character that created serious trouble using the tongue?
2. Recalling our sinful speech is often the first thing we neglect when we confess our sins.
3. We cannot praise and curse at the same time. Which should we concentrate on? Where is praise initiated?