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In the last lesson, we discussed the importance of taming the tongue. Scripture has much to say about the importance of what we say, and its effect for the better or for the worse. Controlling one's tongue is an important matter indeed, and a sign of maturity.

We have discussed how words have the power to direct. James likens this to how a rider controls a horse with a small bit in the mouth, or how a captain steers a huge ship with a relatively small rudder.

Then in *James 3:5-6*, the tongue is likened to a fire. What begins as a tiny spark can explode into a very destructive roaring blaze. Just as a fire can destroy a forest, a neighborhood, or even much of a city (for example, the great Chicago fire of 1871), the tongue can corrupt or destroy a person (and others).

Words can fuel fires or be used to extinguish them. *"Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife." (Proverbs 26:20-21)*

An uncontrolled hot temper can lead to burning words we can regret. But *"he who restrains his word has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding." (Proverbs 17:27)*

Like a fire or a hot coal, our words can burn, they can hurt, and they can scar. Lives can be injured or even destroyed by the tongue.

In *verse 7*, we see the tongue also likened to a wild, dangerous animal. Like such it can seek out its prey and then pounce for the kill. Some animals inject poison into their victims while others devour them.

But just as fires can be controlled and used to generate power for good, and animals can be tamed and become productive workers or soothing companions, a tamed tongue can become a great force for good. God wants our tongues to be used for His honor and glory.

What comes out of our mouths reflects what is inside. A pure heart gives rise to pure speech: *"a tree is known by its fruit... for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." (Matthew 12:33-34)*

Continuing through *verse 12*, we see further illustrations. Just as the tongue has the power to direct and the power to destroy, here we see that it has the power to bring delight and refreshment. A spring or a fountain (*v. 11*) is a source of such refreshment and meets the need of thirst. It can also delight the senses with its beauty and peaceful sound and appearance.

More Proverbs illustrate pure speech to fresh water that is life giving. *"The words of a man's mouth are as deep waters, and the wellspring of wisdom is a flowing brook" (Proverbs 18:4). "The mouth of a righteous man is a well of life" (Proverbs 10:11). "The law of the wise is a fountain of life to depart from the snares of death" (Proverbs 13:14).*

Another important use of water is to cleanse. This was illustrated in the OT tabernacle and temple where there was a laver for the cleansing of the hands and feet of the priests. God's Word is the spiritual water that cleanses us. Christ *"loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word" (Ephesians 5:25b-26).*

Likewise, our words can be cleansing. We can use them to clean messes rather than cause them or make them worse.

James also likens the tongue to a tree (*v. 12*). Trees are a source of beauty and shade, they stabilize the soil around them, and they bear fruit. *"The lips of the righteous feed many" (Proverbs 10:21).*

To be healthy, a tree must have a healthy root system with roots that run deep to stabilize and nourish the tree. If we are rooted in God's Word that can cleanse our hearts, our words will be fruitful. James warns that a fountain does not give two kinds of water or a tree two kinds of fruit. An inconsistent tongue is a sign that something is wrong. Daily yielding to the Spirit will bring consistency to our hearts, and to our tongues.

James 3

The Untamable Tongue

3 My brethren, not many of you should presume to be teachers, knowing that we who are teachers will be judged more strictly. **2** For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he *is* a perfect (mature) man, able to bridle the whole body as well.

3 Now if we put bits into horses' mouths so that they may obey us, we can direct their entire body as well. **4** Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. **5** Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.

Consider that a great forest can be set on fire by a little spark. **6** The tongue *is* also a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the 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* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. **9** With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God.

10 Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. **11** Can both fresh water and saltwater flow from the same spring? **12** My brethren, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a saltwater spring yield fresh water.

Heavenly Versus Demonic Wisdom

13 Who *is* wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by works done in the humility that comes from wisdom. **14** But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. **15** This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, unspiritual, and of the devil.

16 For where envy and selfish ambition *exist*, there is disorder and every evil thing. **17** But the wisdom that is from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and without hypocrisy. **18** And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Memory Verse

“a tree is known by its fruit... for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Matthew 12:33-34)