

## JAMES ON THE TONGUE

The story has been told that once a young man was sent to Socrates to learn oratory. On being introduced to the philosopher, he talked so incessantly that Socrates asked for double-fees. "Why charge me double?," asked the young fellow. "Because," replied the great orator, "I must teach you two sciences: the one how to hold your tongue, the other how to speak." The words of Socrates should bring to one's mind what James said when he began his letter: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak..." (1:9).

When a person goes to a physician, one of the things a doctor invariably does is ask the patient to stick out his tongue. Why? Because he can tell a lot about one's physical health by looking at this little member of our bodies. Likewise, Jesus pointed out that our speech reveals the condition of our hearts, spiritually speaking (Matthew 12:34-37 & 15:17-20). This article, then, gives its attention to the teaching of James about this small, yet powerful member of the human anatomy.

**James spoke about the dominance of the tongue: "If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires" (3:2b-4).**

**If one is able to control his tongue, that ability is a sign of a mature Christian.** How does one control his tongue? By controlling the origin of its expressions: the mind. The most difficult discipline in life, as well as the most important, is that of controlling our thoughts. Paul wrote about taking "captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (Second Corinthians 10:5b, NIV). David wrote, "Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile" (Psalm 34:13). By the phrase "a perfect man," James had reference to spiritual maturity or to a mature Christian.

**If one is able to control his tongue, he's able also to control the remainder of his body.** If one keeps in mind that when James spoke of the tongue he was ultimately referring to the mind, then he can clearly understand what James meant throughout his discussion in this passage: if a person can bring his thoughts under control, he can then, naturally, control every member of his body, all which are controlled by the mind! It's this writer's conviction that James used the tongue in this passage as if it has a will of its own (he personified it), when we know, of course, that it doesn't: it's controlled by the mind, as is every other member of our anatomy; the tongue is the most closely connected member to the mind because it expresses its thoughts, which also explains why James didn't go into explaining why what he affirmed is true—it's common sense logic.

After this logical affirmation, he simply went on to illustrate this commonly known truth by the use of the bridle and the horse (a land animal used by the rural person) and the rudder and the ship (a vessel used by sailors). If James wrote this today, he might have used an airplane or car which, though large and powerful, are controlled by a small stick or steering wheel. However, there are very few sins that people commit without their tongues expressing the passions of their hearts. Socrates pointed out the power of words when he said, "Such as thy words are, such will thine affections be esteemed; as such as thine affections, will be thy deeds; and such as thy deeds, will be thy life." If we want to control our lives, we must get control of our tongues.

**James spoke about the dynamism of the tongue: "Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature and is set on fire by Hell" (3:5-6).**

**By speaking about the tongue as a fire, James was seeking to demonstrate what a power for evil the tongue may become.** Fire may be a most destructive thing, but fire is not a necessarily evil—it's an evil only when it gets out of control; otherwise, it's a great good. It's such a great good that the ancients reckoned it as having been stolen from Heaven. How powerful fire is! If all fires were to go out tonight, the machinery of the world would stop. The tongue may be that kind of fire: it may

heal, help, and comfort. However, like a small spark that can start a destructive fire of woods and forest, so a small tongue (again, ultimately 'the mind') can defile one's entire body and destroy the lives of many (see Mark 7:21-23).

Lois Wille wrote, "The summer of 1871 was unusually dry in Chicago. Only about a fourth of the normal amount of rain fell between July and October. With all its wooden buildings, Chicago was like kindling. Then on the evening of October 8, 1871, a fire started on the southwest side of the city. Historians believe the fire started in a barn owned by Mrs. Patrick O'Leary. According to legend, a cow kicked over a lighted lantern in the barn. Fanned by strong winds, the flames raced north and east through the city. They leaped across the river and chased panic-stricken families fleeing north toward Lincoln Park. Hundreds of other families fled into the chill waters of the lake. The fire raged for over 24 hours. It wiped out the downtown area and most north side homes. It killed at least 300 people and left 90,000 homeless. The fire also destroyed about \$200 million worth of property" (Chicago: The Great Chicago Fire, World Book, 1993).

**Just like a small spark or fire can practically destroy an entire city the size of Chicago, so the tongue can destroy the lives of many people through various means, but especially through gossip.** Although the word "gossip" can't be found in the King James Version of the Bible, the concept is definitely found such as in the words "tattlers," "whisperers," and "backbiters."

Tattler: Grimm (Thayer) says the Greek word "phluaros" comes from "phluo" which means "to boil up," "throw up bubbles"; and since bubbles are hollow useless things, he went on to say, "to indulge in empty and foolish talk" (#5397). The word is translated as "gossips" in First Timothy 5:13 in the New King James Version where Paul said gossips say "things which they ought not."

Whisperer: "A secret slanderer" (Grimm #5588).

Backbiter: "A defamer, evil speaker" (Grimm #2637), the word often used for Satan himself.

Of the preceding two types of people, Paul said "that those who practice such things are worthy of death" (Romans 1:29-30). One can be slandered in various ways: speaking negatively about someone's actions; speaking negatively about someone's character; or speaking negatively about (or judging) someone's motives. The phrase "speaking negatively" is meant to refer to speaking about anything which would make people think negatively about another person, whether what's said is true or false. Solomon wrote, "A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter" (Proverbs 11:13), and "An ungodly man digs up evil, and it is on his lips like a burning fire" (Proverbs 16:27). Even James, in 4:11, wrote, "Do not speak evil of one another, brethren." Remember, "Only you can prevent forest fires."

*A careless word may kindle strife.*

*A cruel word may wreck a life.*

*A bitter word may hate instill.*

*A brutal word may smite and kill.*

*A gracious word may smooth the way.*

*A joyous word may light the day.*

*A timely word may lessen stress.*

*A loving word may heal and bless.*

**Just as all other sins originate and are caused by the forces of Hell, so the sins of the tongue originate and are caused by the same.** In other words, "The tongue is one of Satan's greatest tools of destruction." Jesus once said of Satan, "He...does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it" (John 8:44). Likewise, in 3:14-15, James wrote about lying "against the truth" and how that "this wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, and demonic."

**James spoke about the domestication of the tongue: "Every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the**

**tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison” (3:7-8).**

**Man’s intelligence and skill have been able to tame animals, but his intelligence and skill have never been able to control his own little tongue.** 450 years before James, Euripides wrote, “Small is the power which nature has given to man; but by various acts of his superior understanding, he has subdued the tribes of the sea, the earth, and the air.” James and Euripides were both saying that man, although small in strength compared to numerous animals, has been given the power to tame all sorts of wild animals; yet man has been utterly unable, on his own (that is, without God), to domesticate his thoughts and tongue. When James said that no one can tame the tongue, he simply meant that a person can never come to the place in his life when he can say, “I’ve tamed my tongue; I can now forget about it and move on to something else.” He must always keep the bars up. Perhaps man hasn't been able to tame his tongue because he doesn't use the same procedure on it that he uses on wild animals. Perhaps he needs to recognize that it, too, is indeed a vicious creature, that it, too, will take time and patience, and that it, too, will require outside assistance.

**Man’s tongue is unruly like a wild fire** (3:8b & 6a); it’s “a world of iniquity” and “full of deadly poison.” The word “unruly” means “restless or unsettled.” James pictured for us an animal like a wild tiger: though caged, it’s restless, waiting for an occasion to escape. Once it escapes, it injures, tears, and rips apart the ones who may even desire to be its friends. The phrase “world of iniquity” (verse 6) refers to the sum of evil: the tongue, because of its great power to inflict harm and evil, is considered a world of evil in itself, the evil of which is incalculable. The phrase “full of deadly poison” in verse 8, refers to a poison which brings destruction: destruction of reputations, literal lives, and eternal lives. Like a snake hiding in the grass ready to strike, the tongue lurks in the mouth ready to strike out and destroy. We need to be more like Jesus “who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth” (First Peter 2:22).

**James spoke about the diversity of the tongue: “With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus, no spring can yield both salt water and fresh” (3:9-12).**

**The fig tree, the grapevine, and the spring demonstrate the consistency of God’s creation.** There are four distinct comparisons: a fountain or spring can't produce sweet water and bitter; a fig tree can't bear olive berries; a vine cannot produce figs; and salt water can't be made sweet—that is, according to the ordinary operations of nature, these things are impossible. Jesus confirmed this in some of His teachings as well (Matthew 7:15-20 & 12:33-37).

**The tongue of man, which is also God’s creation, should likewise demonstrate consistency, yet it refuses.** It's said that Rabbi Simeon, the son of Gamaliel, once said to his servant Tobias, “Go and bring me some good food from the market.” The servant went, and he brought back tongues. At another time he said to the same servant, “Go and bring me some bad food.” The servant went and brought back tongues. The master said, “What is the reason that when I ordered thee to buy me good and bad food, thou didst bring tongues?” The servant answered, “From the tongue both good and evil come to man: if it be good, there is nothing better; if bad, there is nothing worse.” Similarly, Solomon once wrote, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21a).

There's an ancient fable about a monster known as Proteus who had the power of assuming many shapes and appearances. He could become a tree or a pebble, a lion or a dove, a serpent or a lamb. He seemed to have little difficulty passing from one form into another. That fabled creature should remind one of the tongue: it can bless or curse; it can express praise or whisper slander; it can speak a word of encouragement or spread the poison of vindictive hatred.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

How do we measure up as Christians in controlling our tongues or in bringing our thoughts under captivity to the obedience of Christ? It's said, “The spoon always seems twice as large when you have

to take a dose of your medicine." Therefore we might paraphrase Jesus' teaching in Matthew 12:33-37 like this: "Words which appear to be just tiny molehills of idleness and frivolity here will loom as mountains of error when we face them in judgment." Not only will the wicked utterances of the tongue rise up against us in that day, but for every foolish, idle word we shall also be called to give a strict account!

According to Gary Smalley, it has been estimated that if a man lives 70 years, he'll speak about 308 million words, while a woman will speak 637 million words. Another way of looking at it is, a man would speak enough to fill 1,540 volumes of 500-page books or 16 large books cases. (That's an average of 400 words per page in a 9" x 6" book.) A woman would speak enough to fill 3,220 volumes of 500-page books or 32 large book cases. It's a frightening thought that by these words we shall either be "justified" or "condemned," as Jesus said. Peter wrote, "He who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile" (First Peter 3:10)!

[Tony E. Denton, March 1994.]