

SESSION FIVE

Living with a Controlled Tongue (*James 3:1-12*)

“The testimony of the lips indicates the state of the heart.” ~ H. Ironside

I. Overview

The most frequent use of the word “tongue” in Scripture relates to the moral, ethical, and spiritual nature of the tongue’s utterances. The tongue becomes “a kind of barometer of the heart” (C. D. Linton, “Tongue,” *ISBE*, 4:871). This organ utilized for speech can be used either for the purposes of promoting good or evil. Thus, it should not be surprising that the tongue plays a prominent role in the book of James—a book that focuses upon spiritual growth in the midst of life’s struggles. James has already mentioned the topic of pure speech in 1:19-21 (and also in 1:5-8). He now dedicates the first twelve verses of this next chapter to argue that believers must control their speech. The task is daunting, but vital, as one considers the enormous power this small organ possesses.

II. The Content

A. Background for Discussion Concerning the Tongue (3:1-2)

v. 1 - “Teachers” could refer to a specific office in the church, but in the context of speech ethics, the term seems to include anyone desiring a ministry within the church.

In addition, the teacher has greater influence, and thus, a greater potential for damage within the Church (cf. Rom 5:3; 6:9; 1 Cor 15:58; 2 Cor 4:14; Eph 6:8).

“greater judgment” - Three viable interpretations exist for this phrase: (1) a greater judgment (e.g., KJV), (2) a higher standard of judgment (e.g., NIV), or (3) exposed to greater danger of judgment through the use of the tongue. Espousing the third rendering, Douglas Moo writes in his commentary: “Their constant use of the tongue means they can sin very easily, leading others astray at the same time.” (*James*, 149-50).

v. 2 - “we all stumble in many ways” - James is not speaking to the quantity or number of sins, but rather, to the variety of sins believers face.

“Thus, the point is not that a person who controls the tongue is totally and perfectly blameless, or that such a one has achieved total moral perfection. That would either contradict the previous clause (“we all stumble”) or be purely hypothetical, James’s meaning is that such a person has become truly ‘grown up’ in faith” (McCartney, *James*, 180).

B. The Power Surrounding the Tongue (3:3-8)

1. Powerful Influence for Good (vv. 3-5a)

James utilizes vivid imagery to explain why controlling our tongues is the key to maturity. How is a tongue like a horse's bit or a ship's rudder?

v. 5a - "great pretensions" - While the term can carry a negative connotation, the idea of "boasting" in this context suggests a more neutral nuance. The tongue can legitimately claim to have significant influence and power for good or evil.

2. Powerful Influence for Evil (vv. 5b-8)

vv. 5b-6 - Often the tongue is compared to fire in the Old Testament (e.g., Pss 10:7; 39:1-3; 120:2-4; Prov 16:27; 26:21; Isa 30:27).

As representative of the world of unrighteousness, the tongue becomes the conduit of sin. As stated by Jesus, "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." (Matt 15:11; cf. also, 12:33-37; 15:18-19). John Calvin aptly writes, "a slender portion of flesh contains the whole world of iniquity."

"the course of human existence" - The phrase suggests the "ups and downs of life," or as translated in the NIV: "the whole course of life."

"by hell" - This could be a reference to the diabolical source (3:15) or to the impending punishment for wicked speech.

vv. 7-8 - In what appears as a fatalistic summary, James concludes that no one is able to tame his own tongue. However, James ultimately is arguing that believers must depend upon the Lord when it comes to taming the tongue. Divine assistance serves as the only means to control this small, but powerful, instrument of speech.

C. Duplicity in the Tongue (3:9-12)

vv. 9-10 - Speaking ill of one made in the image of God fails to coincide with the praising of God. This instability of the tongue "recalls the double minded person who is unstable in all his paths (1:8) . . ." (McCartney, *James*, 192). James calls for consistency in speech.

This duplicity in verses 9-10 also recalls the admonition to avoid granting a blessing without accompanying action (cf. James 2:16).

vv. 11-12 - James concludes this section with three pictures from nature: a spring, a fig tree, and a vine.

As noted by one commentator: “. . . the implication of the metaphors [in vv. 9-12] shifts from the initial claim that one person cannot utter both good and bad statements (blessing God and cursing people) to the claim that a person of one kind cannot utter statements of another kind and finally to the claim that a bad person cannot utter good statements. This is an intelligible and logical progression of thought.” (R. Bauckham, *James*, 90).

III. Intersect

Our speech has the positive power to build up and encourage or the power to destroy. Undoubtedly, applications abound. Every successful interpersonal relationship requires healthy communication skills (e.g., an intimate marriage, productive workplace, a harmonious home).

Note below some of the sins that are often times associated with the tongue in Scripture. Select one of the areas that needs attention in your personal life. Identify one or two ways you will intentionally address this area of speech this week (e.g., memorize a specific verse, commit to pray each day for God's strength and spiritual growth in this particular arena, share with a mentor/accountability partner).

Lying/Deceit (Psalm 78:36)

Strife/Anger (Psalm 31:20)

Flattery/Manipulation (Jude 16)

Mischief/Fool-heartedness (Prov 10:31-32)

Ridicule (Isa 57:4)

Foul Language/Cursing (Psalm 10:7)

Slander (Psalm 15:3)

Ungraciousness/ungratefulness (Col 4:6)

Gossip (Prov 20:19)

Self-centeredness/Bragging (Prov 25:14)

“God has given us two ears, but one tongue, to show that we should be swift to hear, but slow to speak. God has set a double fence before the tongue, the teeth and the lips, to teach us to be wary that we offend not with our tongue.” ~ Thomas Watson