

“Untamed Fire: The Destructive Power of the Tongue (James 3:1-12)

Overview of the Letter of James:

*Written by James, probably the brother of Jesus. He identifies himself simply as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” He obviously knew his readers well. He doesn’t hesitate to command them. There are 54 imperatives in 108 verses.

*Written to believers who were being oppressed by the people around them, especially the rich.

*Experiencing trials is a major theme: how to go through trials and remain faithful to God.

Regardless of what’s happening, do the right thing!

Read James 3:1-12

*The subject of the Tongue is connected to the qualifications for Teachers. Why? Because the tongue is the main tool of those who teach or preach.

*That means we who teach and preach must be especially careful how we use our tongues!

*The broader context of 3:1-12 is the subject of *Disunity in the Church* (3:1-4:12). It is important to recognize this, since *misuse of the tongue ALWAYS lies at the heart of every situation of disunity among Christians*: gossip, back-biting, unfair criticism, harsh words, spreading rumors, etc.

*James 3:1-4:12 is one of the Bible’s most important texts on church unity and should be studied carefully.

Every chapter in James says something about the various ways we sin with our tongues.

*Our tongues can be used for positive things, too (praising God, evangelism, encouragement, words of comfort, etc.) - but James’ concern is with the misuse of the tongue.

*1:26 - Claiming that we are “tempted by God” (blaming Him for our sins and failures).

*2:1-4. Speaking disrespectfully to the poor.

*2:14-16. Telling someone to “be warmed and filled,” but doing nothing to help them.

*3:1-8. Extensive discussion of the power and danger of the tongue.

*4:1-2. Fighting and quarreling among Christians.

*4:11. Speaking evil against one another.

*4:13. Boasting about the future.

*5:9. Grumbling against one another.

*5:12. Swearing oaths, when we should simply tell the truth.

James 3:1-12. The Tongue’s Destructive Power

*Proverbs 18:21 - “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” Our words can give “life” through encouragement, or they can “kill” by discouragement, destroying someone’s reputation, stopping good works, causing division, etc. Misusing the tongue is *deadly serious business!*

*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.”

*3:1 - James isn’t discouraging people from teaching, but Teachers must be extra careful about what we say. Also, churches should be careful about who is allowed to teach. Not just because someone is willing. But what do they actually know? Why do they want to teach? Do they understand the gospel? Do they lead an exemplary life? Do they want to teach simply because they have some peculiar idea they want to promote?

*3:2 - “We all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.” “Perfect” means complete or well-rounded. We all admire the person of few words whose life is exemplary.

*3:3-5. Three illustrations of the power of the tongue, and how its power is out of proportion to its size.

-A bridle in a horse’s mouth; very small, but controls the direction of the horse.

-The rudder of a ship; very small compared to the ship, but controls its direction.

-A spark; very small, but can burn down a house or a whole forest if not controlled.

*3:6 - The tongue "is a fire." Not an exaggeration to say this. This is a terrible description of a tongue out of control. Note: "among our members," staining the whole body." "Body" may refer to our human bodies, but more likely to the "body of Christ," the church. One out-of-control tongue can bring destruction to even the strongest, most peaceful of churches. All it takes is one careless (or vicious) person, and a whole church can go up in flames!

*Example: Diotrephes, 3 John 9-10. "Talking wicked nonsense against us."

*Notice: The tongue is "set on fire by hell." There is no question about the source of such irresponsible and evil behavior.

*3:8 - "A restless evil, full of deadly poison." Note: We are often quick to correct false teaching, but slow to correct the wicked use of someone's tongue. Why, when one is as dangerous as the other?

3:7-8. The Difficulty of Controlling the Tongue

*V. 7 - "Tamed" does not necessarily mean "domesticated," but "controlled." Even if we must kill an animal, we can control it. But the tongue is far more difficult to control than a lion or an elephant!

3:9-12. The Hypocrisy of Not Controlling Our Tongues

*With the same tongue we praise God but curse one another.

*We readily go from worshiping God to destroying one another!

*"This ought not to be so!"

*Vs. 11-12 - 3 Examples of the inconsistency of using our tongues to praise God but curse our brothers:

- A spring is either fresh or salt. It can't be both.

- A fig tree can't bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs.

- A salt pond can't give you fresh water.

*This goes back to the issue of our Hearts. If the source (spring) is corrupt, so will our words be. Pure speech can come only from a pure heart.

*Where did James get this? From his half-brother, Jesus! "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, *for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks*" (Luke 6:43-45).

*That is why real wisdom (3:13) can be spotted by what people say and do.

*An old saying: "When you speak, your mind is on parade."

*Another truth: "When you speak, your *heart* is on parade."

Suggestions for Controlling the Tongue:

1. *Be careful what you say.* Will what I am about to say be helpful or hurtful? Will it make a situation better or worse?

2. *Be careful how you say it.* Proverbs 15:1 - "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Speak with love, or don't speak at all."

3. *Be careful to whom you say it.* If you need to criticize someone, say it to them, not to others. Also, recognize that some people simply can't be trusted not to repeat everything they hear. So don't let them hear you.

4. *If you're not sure you ought to say something, don't say it.* Often a moment of hesitation will cross our minds, "Should I say this or not?" If so, keep quiet. You'll be glad you did, both now and in eternity.

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