A STUDY OF THE TONGUE - 2

(James 3:1-12)

A. To impress us with the importance of controlling our speech, & the great consequences of our words, James gave us six pictures of the tongue.

1. The bit, the rudder, a forest fire, a poisonous animal, a fountain, & a fig tree.

2. We can put these 6 pictures into 3 classifications that reveal the powers of the tongue.

(James 3:1-4)

I. POWER TO DIRECT: BIT & RUDDER

A. Apparently, many of these Christian men wanted to be teachers of the Word.

1. But perhaps their motivation was wrong: authority, leadership role, prestige.

2. James flat out said, “Most of you don’t need to be teaching, & here’s the reason why. We shall receive a stricter judgment” (2). Why?

a. First, because you handling the most powerful weapon on the earth (Eph 6:17).

b. Second, because you’re wielding that weapon upon the immortal soul’s of men & women (Heb 4:12).

c. In summary, everything you say—as a teacher—has a bearing on the eternal destiny of the listener.

B. Teachers are not the only ones who can sin with the tongue.

1. James said “we all stumble in many things” (2); the sins of the tongue seem to head the list.
2. And so the person who is able to discipline his tongue gives evidence that he can control his whole body, proving that he is mature.

   a. We can give that little test to ourselves.

C. Does the tongue really have the power to “bridle” or unbridle “the whole body” (2)?

1. During World War II there were posters that read LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS! Loose lips can also wreck lives. How?

   a. A person who makes an unguarded statement suddenly finds himself involved in a quarrel.

   b. His tongue has forced his body to go on the defensive, which leads to hostility & hatred.

2. A small bit in a horse’s mouth can CONTROL a very large & powerful animal.

   a. Both must overcome CONTRARY FORCES: the stubborn nature or a horse, & the contrary currents & winds at sea.

3. Likewise the tongue, though very small, has the power to control us & direct our course of life.

   a. Like the bit & rudder, it too must overcome contrary forces that seek to control it.

   b. The “old man” of sin; that carnal, unspiritual nature (Rom 6:5-6; Col 3:8-9).

D. James presented two items that are small in size & yet possess great power, just like the tongue.

1. A small bit in a horse’s mouth can CONTROL a very large & powerful animal.

2. A small rudder at the bottom of a ship can DIRECT the course of a huge vessel.

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E. What will give us the power to keep control of our tongues under extreme situations?

1. Prepare for those situations through prayer.

Ps 141:3-4 – Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips. 4 Do not incline my heart to any evil thing, to practice wicked works with men who work iniquity.

2. Follow up your words to God with listening to His words to you.

Prov 15:1 – A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. 12:22 – Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who deal truthfully are His delight. 10:19 – In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise.

[We should never underestimate the power of the tongue to direct our lives, & the lives of others (John 4; Acts 2).]

James 3:5-8

II. POWER TO KILL: FIRE & POISONOUS ANIMAL

A. A forest fire can begin with a little hot ash, but that spark can wipe out a forest & every house in it.

1. The Chicago fire of 1871 (reportedly started in the O’Leary barn) left 100,000 people homeless, destroyed 17,500 buildings, resulted in 300 deaths, & cost the city over $400 million.

B. Like a fire, our tongues (words) can start fires & cause devastation & death (5).

Prov 26:20-21 – Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; & where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. 21 As charcoal is to burning coals, & wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife.

1. To prevent strife, we must be people of “knowledge” & “great understanding”.

Prov 17:27 – He who has KNOWLEDGE spares his words, & a man of UNDERSTANDING is of a calm spirit. 14:29 – He who is slow to wrath has GREAT UNDERSTANDING, but he who is impulsive exalts folly. [He who is not impulsive exalts wisdom]
C. In verse six, James identifies the fuel of the fire started by the tongue.

1. The tongue “is set on fire by hell”; it derives its potential for evil from Gehenna, a place where sin is punished, a place that never stops burning.

   a. And the result - is that the tongue “sets on fire the course of nature.” The NIV reads, “sets the whole course of his life on fire.”

   b. Our lives are depicted as a wheel where everything we do & say are connected.

   c. You’ve heard the saying, “What goes around comes around”? That means we cannot stop or prevent the consequences of our actions or speech.

   d. Words that have been set on fire by hell will destroy; there is no way to prevent it.

D. Not only is the tongue like a fire, but it is also like a dangerous animal (7-8).

1. It is untamable (unruly); like an animal it seeks its prey & then pounces on it for the kill.

2. People often mistake the pleasant looking animals in a zoo for tame pets.

   a. The tongue is about as tame as circus lion.

3. Like a serpent, the tongue can spew out venomous remarks that are designed to destroy the reputation of another.

4. James reminds us that animals can be tamed, but the tongue cannot be tamed - by man - but it can be tamed by God.

   a. In other words, our tongues need not be “set on fire by hell” (3:6; cf. Matt 12:34).
III. POWER TO BLESS: FOUNTAINS, TREES, VINES

A. The power of the tongue to bless is put in contrast with its ability to also curse.

1. James illustrated the difference in these two abilities by various incongruities:
   a. Fresh water coming from the same spring as bitter & salty water.
   b. A fig tree bearing olives or a grapevine bearing figs.
   c. This is just not the way things work in the physical world.

2. So James emphatically says that when you bless God & curse men, “My brethren, these things ought not to be so!”

   a. To bless means to celebrate with praises; to invoke (appeal to God for) blessings.
   b. To curse means to doom, or to call down evil upon someone.
   c. Blessing God while cursing man who is made in His image is a misuse of the power of the tongue.

Prov 12:18 – There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, but the tongue of the wise promotes health.

B. According to James, the tongue has the power to bless because like a fountain or a spring it can refresh the thirsty & give life to the dying.

18:4 – The words of a man’s mouth are deep waters; the wellspring of wisdom is a flowing brook. 10:11 – The mouth of the righteous is a well of life, but violence covers the mouth of the wicked. 13:14 – The law of the wise is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death.
1. Paul mentioned the names of Christian who had “refreshed” him & others (Rom 15:32; 1 Cor 16:18; Phil 7, 20).

   a. It was not just their presence that was refreshing; it was the words they had to offer.

C. According to James, the tongue also has the power to **bless** because like a tree or a vine it can feed the hungry & weary, & bring them back to life.

Prov 10:21 – *The lips of the righteous feed many*, but fools die for lack of wisdom.

Isa 50:4 (Prophetic of Jesus) – *The Lord God has given Me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary*. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to hear as the learned. (cf. Jn 6:63, 68)

1. If our tongues are going to bless others rather than kill, then we’re going to have to wake up with the Lord each day.

2. We’re going to have to get our “spiritual roots” deep into His Word so that the fruit we bear with our words can be a blessing to others.

**CLOSING**

A. **Twelve words** that if used often will direct our tongues on a path of blessing.


B. The smallest member of the body can cause the biggest problems in the world.

1. But if we will give God our hearts each day, He can use our tongues to be a blessing to others.