

## STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JAMES

### THE TONGUE AND WISDOM I

Read James 3:1-12

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, James tackles the tongue. His bottom line: the tongue is unbelievably powerful, and it cannot be fully controlled. A person who could perfectly control his or her speech 100 percent of the time would have already arrived at full control of every aspect of the entire body, and their entire life. Yes, the tongue is small. So is the bit in a horse's mouth, the rudder on a ship, or the spark that ignites a forest. That forest fire is the one James lingers on. He calls the tongue a fire that sets the whole course of our lives on fire and is itself set on fire by hell. He calls it a restless, unstable evil, full of fatal poison. In fact, James insists, the tongue is untameable. We have no hope for controlling our words on our own as sinful human beings. Blessing and cursing shouldn't come out of the same mouth; that's bizarre and sinful. It's as weird as salt water and fresh water coming out of the same spring together. It's as weird as olive trees growing figs. And, yet, speaking both blessings and curses with the same tongue is normal behaviour for sinful humans.

#### **The Peril of Teachers**

*“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.” (vv1-2)*

James has a sober admonition for those who would become teachers in the church. They must take the responsibility seriously, because their accountability is greater, and they shall receive a stricter judgment. Why should teachers be judged more strictly? Because they can't claim, "I didn't know any better." They've been teaching others how to behave; God and everyone else expects them to practice what they preach. They are held to a higher standard since they know better!

The greater accountability of teachers is especially sobering considering our common weaknesses. After all, “we all stumble in many things”. The ancient Greek word translated stumble does not imply a fatal fall, but something that trips us up and hinders our spiritual progress. James included himself among those who stumble. Yet he did not excuse his or our stumbling. We know that we all stumble, but we should all press on to a better walk with the Lord, marked by less stumbling.

James provided a way to measure spiritual maturity for teachers and for all Christians. Jesus demonstrated in Matthew 12:34-37 that words are the revelation of the inner character.

- To not stumble in word shows true spiritual maturity. This is especially relevant to teachers, who have so much more opportunity to sin with their tongue.
- We stumble in word about ourselves, with our boasting, exaggeration, and selective reporting.
- We stumble in word about others, with our criticism, gossip, slander, cruelty, two-facedness, and anger; or with flattery and insincere words meant to gain favour.

#### **Remedy 1: Bridle the Tongue – Self-Control**

James defines maturity or perfection:

*"If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle (chalinagōgeō) the whole body"*  
(v2)

This is like a statement he made earlier:

*"If anyone among you thinks he is religious and does not bridle (chalinagōgeō) his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless." (James 1:26)*

In both verses he uses the Greek verb chalinagōgeō, "guide with a bit and bridle, hold in check." Just as a person would be liable for the damage incurred for not restraining a runaway horse, so we must restrain or bridle our tongues. This is the essence of our "religion." It is a hallmark of the "perfect man" or "mature man" (James 3:2).

He's talking, of course, about exercising careful self-control, the first remedy for an out-of-control tongue.

### **Small Cause, Big Effect**

*"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. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!" (vv3-5)*

In these verses he gives several examples of small objects with large effects:

- Bit - guide a horse
- Rudder - steer a ship
- Tongue - great boasts
- Spark - start a forest fire

### **Destructive Power of the Tongue**

*"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 it is set on fire by hell. For 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." (vv6-8)*

James' analogy of a spark starting a forest fire leads into his next section about the terrible destructive power of the tongue. The fire of the tongue has been used to burn many. Children are told *"sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me."* But that child's rhyme isn't true; the bitter pain of a word spoken against us can hurt us for a lifetime, long after a broken bone has healed.

What others say to us and what we say to others can last a long time, for good or for evil. The casual sarcastic or critical remark can inflict a lasting injury on another person. The well-timed encouragement or compliment can inspire someone for the rest of their life. Proverbs speaks of the person who doesn't consider the destructive power of his words. *"Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death, is the man who deceives his neighbour, and says, "I was only joking!""* (Proverbs 26:18-19).

Again, James isn't telling us to never speak or to take a vow of silence; in many ways that would be easier than exercising true self-control over the tongue. The bridle, the rudder, and the fire can all do tremendous good when they are controlled properly.

James echoes the testimony of Proverbs regarding the tongue:

*In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise. The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the heart of the wicked is worth little. The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of wisdom. (Proverbs 10:19-21)*

Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad. (**Proverbs 12:25**)

Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones. (**Proverbs 16:24**)

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit. (**Proverbs 18:21**)

### **The difficulty of taming the tongue.**

*“... But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” (v8)*

A wild animal can be more easily tamed than the tongue. In fact, James tells us that no man can tame the tongue. The human spirit has incredible capacity for sacrifice and self-control. Sometimes we hear a desperate survival story of someone who cuts off their own leg to get free from a tree that has fallen on them, and then they make it to a hospital for medical treatment. Yet that same man can't tame the tongue perfectly. Nevertheless, the tongue can be brought under the power and the control of the Holy Spirit. We might say that only God Himself is mightier than the human tongue!

The untameable tongue is even more dangerous when we consider the deadly poison it can deliver. A woman once came to John Wesley and said she knew what her talent was and she said, “I think my talent from God is to speak my mind.” Wesley replied, “I don't think God would mind if you buried that talent.” Speaking forth everything that comes to mind is unwise, poisonous speech.

### **Out of the Same Mouth**

*“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 yields both salt water and fresh.” (vv9-12)*

Now James struggles with the ugly truth that out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing. The tongue can be used for the highest calling (to bless our God), and it can be used for the lowest evil (to curse men). In those who are born again, it shouldn't be said that out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. On the one hand he acknowledges that our mouths say evil, corrupt things. On the other he strongly protests and uses several pairs in nature to demonstrate that this is an anomaly:

- Blessing God vs. Cursing men
- Fresh water vs. Bitter water
- Fig tree vs. Olive tree / Grapevine vs Figs
- Salt spring vs. fresh water

He doesn't resolve the discrepancy. He merely points out its incongruity and then says, “My brethren, these things ought not to be so” (verse 10).

Our speech should be consistently glorifying to God. We shouldn't use one vocabulary or one tone of speaking at church and a different one at home or on the job. Like a spring of water, our mouths shouldn't send forth fresh... and bitter from the same opening.

James points to the ultimate impossibility of such a contradiction. If bad fruit and bitter water continue to come forth, it means that there is no contradiction. The tree is bad, and the spring is bad. Jesus taught in Matthew 12:34-37 that a man's words are a reliable revelation of his inner character. What we say can indicate what we are.

Unless you are regenerated, born from above by a new and heavenly birth, you are not Christians, whatever you may be called, and you cannot, produce the fruit which is acceptable to God any more than a fig tree can produce olive berries.

- You can label a fig tree “Olive Tree” and that will not make it an olive tree.
- You can trim a fig tree to look like an olive tree, and that will not make it an olive tree.
- You can treat a fig tree like an olive tree, and that will not make it an olive tree.
- You can surround a fig tree with many olive trees, and that will not make it an olive tree.
- You can transplant that fig tree to the Mount of Olives, and that would not make it an olive tree.