

19. The Sin of the Tongue: Part II

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

(James 3:3-12)

The Tongue Must Be Sanctified

We come now to a section of the letter in which James describes the sin of the tongue. We will consider the power of the tongue, the poison of the tongue, and also the purity of the tongue. We have before us, perhaps, one of the most graphic parts of Scripture. The examples James uses are compelling, the conclusions are inescapable, and the only solution is clear: the tongue, including all that we say or put forward in whatever way we communicate, either spoken

or written, must be *sanctified*. It must be renewed by the power of Christ through the Holy Spirit, and cleansed and shaped by the Word of God.

The tongue must be sanctified. We may not think, and especially not say, whatever we want. Even our manner of speaking is subject to the scrutiny of the Lord. We must mention here our Lord Jesus Christ, for he always chose his words carefully, even when he spoke directly and strongly. His purpose was never to hurt, but always to heal. In that light, we will also look at a passage from the book of Isaiah later in this chapter.

James has already warned us in the first two verses of chapter 3 that we are all imperfect, and this is true especially in our speaking. We are often quick to speak in anger or reaction, but slow to listen and understand. In 3:2, James has already intimated that if we can control our tongue, we can keep our whole body in check, and he elaborates on this in 3:3-12.

I mentioned in the previous chapter that James writes about the sin of the tongue in various places throughout his letter. The question arises, “Why mention it yet again?” Indeed, why go to such great lengths and deep detail to describe and condemn the sin of the tongue? Was it such a big problem in the churches? Is James perhaps too concerned about this sin? If he continues writing like this, the effect could be that nobody dares say anything anymore.

Of course, that is not James’ purpose. He does not want to silence the members of the churches. He wants to warn against a sin that is indeed widespread and very destructive. His point is not that our tongue should be silenced, but that it should be sanctified.

A Small Part

James’ examples have basically the same message, found in 3:5: “Likewise (as in the examples) the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.” The word “boasts” indicates that the tongue often gives evidence of self-elevation and reveals our arrogance. Further, the examples all have one matter in common: something small can be very powerful. The tongue is a very small part of our body, and yet it plays a huge role. Something does not have to be big in order to have a great, unimagined effect.

The first example is a horse. A horse was probably the most sought after and esteemed animal in James’ time, for it not only embodied elegance and spirit, but also power. Today, we still speak about power in terms of horse-power. The more work a machine must do, the greater the horse-power it

must have. I do not know how this is measured, but the combination of “horse” and “power” is precisely what James is referring to.

A horse is typically not an easy animal to train. The process takes time and effort. The most effective way to lead a horse is by the use of a bit, a relatively small piece of tack compared to the animal, which is put in the horse’s mouth. When the reins are pulled, the bit exerts pressure in the horse’s mouth, and it knows that it must slow down or stop. Even pulling the bit in a certain direction will turn the horse that way. This little bit, then, controls the entire animal. The energy of the horse is governed and channeled in the way the rider wants, for energy that is out of control is chaotic.

The second example is the rudder on a ship. Again, when we compare the size of the rudder with the size of the boat, it seems so small and insignificant. How can a large boat ever be directed by such a little mechanism? Yet just a slight movement of the rudder alters the course of the vessel. The boat is completely controlled by that small rudder.

The Power of the Tongue

This demonstrates the power of small, ingenious instruments. We can all understand these examples. Whoever controls the bit controls the whole horse. Whoever has the rudder in his hand determines the course of the boat. It would seem from these first two examples that it should not be hard for us to control ourselves, if all it takes is keeping a tight rein on our tongue. We can do that, can we not?

Can we? James writes otherwise. Consider again 3:5, where we read, “Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.” It talks incessantly and loudly. It shows who we are and tells what we think. In fact, our life is controlled by that one little member. Instead of us controlling the tongue, the tongue controls us.

And there can be disastrous effects. James comes with another example, not from large to small this time, but from small to large. He says, “Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire.” A forest fire is very destructive, fierce, swift, and sweeping vast areas, yet it starts with a small spark. Perhaps someone did not properly put out a campfire, dropped a match, or threw a cigarette out of the car window into the underbrush. As a result, thousands of acres of bush land are blackened and countless animals perish.

The tongue is like that spark that sets the fire ablaze. Once we say something, it has consequences. Our words have effect and are passed on, perhaps

not exactly in the way we said them, and soon those few words, minor and innocent in our opinion, can make people very upset.

James does not mean to suggest that we sell the horse, scuttle the boat, or cut out the tongue. What we must understand clearly is the *power* of the tongue. It has the potential to hurt deeply and cause great harm, therefore, we must strive to control it. There is a very graphic expression for this: “I bit my tongue.” Rather than speak in the same way as another did, and so escalate verbal violence and abuse, someone can “bite his tongue” and say nothing. As it says in Proverbs 15:1, “a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Do we still know the meaning of the phrase, “a gentle answer”?

The powerful way in which James presents all this should make us aware of the seriousness of the problem. A word, or even a few words, is so easily spoken. A little remark, half in jest, half in earnest, is quickly made. A strong statement comes out of our mouth before we can stop it. Perhaps we did not even want to stop it. After all, we should be able to say what we think. We might as well be honest and outspoken, and tell it like it is.

A World of Evil

James goes on to speak about the tongue in very strong terms, however, as “a world of evil” that “corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (3:6). And he adds in 3:8 that “it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

“A world of evil” is an expression that means the sinful world. The tongue is filled with worldly language, sinful statements, warped concepts, and intentional maliciousness, for “evil” means deliberate sin. We may know deep down that we should not say something or say it in a particular way, but we do it regardless because we find pleasure in doing so. Is that not terrible?

“[The tongue] corrupts the whole person.” Lest we think that words are only words, James tells us that we incriminate ourselves as persons, as individuals, by what we say. We become known for our words and our language. Often, just by mentioning the name of a person, certain statements made by him in the past immediately jump into our mind. Indeed, we make ourselves known by our speech, by its content and form, and the picture can be downright ugly.

“[The tongue] sets the whole course of [our] life on fire.” An expression is used here that literally means the “circle of life”. By our speaking, we enter into a vicious circle, get caught up by what we have said, and refuse to back

down. We even make it worse and stronger than what we said before, and so the cycle of verbal violence continues.

James then writes something that is frightening: “[The tongue] is itself set on fire by hell.” The Bible says that lack of fuel causes the fire to go out, but the fuel that keeps our verbal fires burning comes straight from hell. “Fueled by hell.” Why does James use this strong language? He does so because Satan, the prince of darkness, is the one who first used speech to lie and manipulate. He misled Adam and Eve with his tongue, by his words. He is the father of lies, the murderer from the beginning. How many people have not been killed because the devil took over the spoken or written word and repeated a lie so often that it was accepted as truth?

The Poison of the Tongue

Is our speaking fueled by hell? We must really think about that. James continues in 3:7 with saying that all kinds of animals “are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue.” “No man” includes each and every one of us. It is amazing what we can do with animals, for example, at large aquariums and zoos. Such places are tourist traps, no doubt, but it is impressive how wild animals can be tamed and made to perform. Killer whales can be trained to come up out of the water and kiss someone chosen from the audience. Elephants can be made to perform all sorts of interesting tricks. Even lions and alligators can be taught to do almost anything their trainers imagine.

The funniest sight I have ever witnessed in this regard was a bear riding a bicycle. I once took my in-laws and kids to a local theme park called “Marineland”, and I sensed that my father-in-law thought it was too much of a circus, but he laughed when he saw that bear on a bike. The discussion on the way home was about this question: how is it possible that people can train these animals to do such things? While accidents do happen occasionally and trainers get hurt or killed, on the whole all kinds of animals are being tamed and have been tamed.

Yet no man can tame the tongue. Keeping in mind the example of being fueled by hell, James writes, “It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” “Restless evil” means that the tongue is constantly and deliberately saying what is wrong and hurtful. “Full of deadly poison” makes us think of snakes and their bite. Not every snake bite is deadly, but some are. James dares to compare our tongues to those of snakes, filled with deadly venom. We are

always thinking about what we shall say next. Retorts well up naturally out of our mouths, even before others have finished speaking.

The tongue is full of deadly poison. Words can kill. They can kill confidence, self-esteem, hope, harmony, joy, peace; all this can be wiped out by a few words. As a man who must use words to bring a message – or to put it even more accurately, must use the Word of God to bring a message – it is always a difficult and sometimes frightening prospect for me to find the best way to say things. How do I get the point across clearly, using the right words and fitting examples, without making people upset? This is true for all who teach in whatever capacity. It is true for us also in our relationships, homes, marriages, and friendships.

James is not addressing worldly people who hate God and use lies and talk to destroy others. He is writing to Christians, to the churches, to believers like us, and he is warning us to watch out, for the tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. God's people have to watch what they say and how they say it, because they know that the tongue is filled with deadly poison.

The Example of Christ

We must therefore have a good eye for what I call the sanctification of the tongue, its purification and resulting purity. Let us also note another important point. This passage should not lead us to say nothing at all, as if speaking is always wrong. There is the saving and renewing work of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the indwelling of his Spirit by which also our tongue is made pure.

Let us turn to Isaiah 42. There we find one of the well-known passages about the Servant of the LORD, an advent passage about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us consider verse 2: "He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets." Here, God declares that the ministry of our Lord Jesus is not going to be one of outward pomp and circumstance. Jesus Christ will not attract attention to himself by powerful speeches, loud clamoring, or bold statements. The sin of the tongue will not be found in *his* ministry.

How will he work, then? He will do so with quiet compassion that speaks volumes. "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Isa 42:3). Others would say, "Get rid of this broken reed and smoldering wick," but Christ instead restores them. His method will be one of spiritual power. He will be a light for the Gentiles, and so will bring glory to the Name of God.

Jesus Christ does not need to cut anyone down in order to put himself forward. He does not climb up over the backs of others to get higher. In his life

on earth, he was not loud or boisterous. Instead, he emptied and humbled himself, also in his speaking. In his hour of greatest trial, he did not utter one word of criticism, anger, or condemnation, but trusted in him who judges justly. His work was marked by kindness, love, patience, and piety. He needed no one to trumpet his achievements or to announce his arrival. He came and went quietly, and in the meantime did abundant works of power and grace.

More than once, our Savior spoke about the sin of the tongue. Let us look at Matthew 12:36-37: “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” God will ask, “What did you say about others? Let me now see if you have been any different.”

Seek Purity of the Tongue

In 3:9-12, James illustrates how the tongue is used in different, opposite ways. He writes, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water come from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.” The tongue is remarkably versatile. With it, we can praise or curse. Yes, but the Lord Jesus also said, “For out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Matt 12:34). A tree is known by its fruit.

Sometimes, we go to church and praise God in song and prayer, but when we go home (or before we even get that far), we say terrible things to each other. Have we not all, at one time or another, had an argument between the church parking lot and our own driveway? Everyone comes home angry. Someone may speak very nicely in public, but use brutal language in his own home. What terrible hypocrisy! In his work *Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan created a character called Talkative, who is described in this way: “a saint abroad, a devil at home.” As children of God, let us never be like Talkative.

We have the remarkable ability to adjust the tone and content of our speech. We can be angrily screaming at a spouse or a child when the telephone rings, and we pick it up with a smile and a pleasant, “Hello,” as if there was nothing wrong. Praise and cursing come out of the same mouth. Notice how James again, even twice, uses the appellation, “my brothers.” He writes that “this should not be.” This *need* not be either, for we know that our Lord Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and has poured out his Holy Spirit to dwell in

us. Now we must, and we *can*, learn to discern and speak in a spiritual manner. Now we may pray for the purity of the tongue, for becoming like our Lord Jesus in our speaking. We may pray for the ability to speak words of wisdom—as James explains in the next verses—the wisdom from above that is first of all pure.

Part of becoming a mature Christian is that we learn to control our tongue. It does not necessitate that we stop speaking altogether, but that our speaking changes in form and content, where words are not knives that cut but salve that heals. For it is true that the same spring cannot bring forth fresh water and salt water. If our heart is renewed, our tongue will give evidence of this.

We cannot purify our tongue of ourselves. Only the Lord can do this by his power, but we begin with knowing our responsibility and asking for the precious gift of pure and holy speech that edifies and never destroys. So it should be, because we have the Spirit of him of whom God said, “I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations” (Isa 42:1). His Spirit is now given to us. The spring of our life, which is our heart, has been renewed. Let us with our tongue always praise God and edify men.