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Taming the Tongue James 3:1-12 Part Three

As we have been examining the Epistle of James we have discovered a series of tests. The first test that we examined was the “Response to Trials test” in **James 2:1-18**. The second test that we examined was the “Response to the Word test” in **James 1:19-27**. The third test that we have examined was the “Impartiality test” in **James 2:1-13**. The fourth test that we examined was the “Works test” in **James 2:14-24**. Each of these tests is designed to help us discern whether or not we possess living faith. Each of these tests is designed to help us to discern whether we are a Christian or not a Christian. We are now considering the fifth test which we are calling the “Speech test” in **James 3:1-12**.

Let us read this passage of Scripture. **“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment. (2) For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. (3) Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well. (4) Behold, the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder, wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. (5) So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! (6) And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among your members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. (7) For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race. (8) But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. (9) With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God. (10) from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. (11) Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? (12) Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh.”**

The tongue is like a mirror. It reveals who we are. In **Matt.12:34** Jesus said that **“... the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.”** How can we know whether we are saved or not saved? We can know by what we speak and how we speak. The saved will speak one way and the unsaved will speak in a different way. And because of this we can look at the way we speak to see whether we are a Christian or not a Christian.

James 3:1-12 gives us 5 different reasons why we need to tame the tongue. James gives us five different reasons why we need to work hard at controlling the way we speak.

The tongue’s potential to bring judgment ... Let us look at **James 3:1**, **“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.”** The Bible teaches us that every careless word will be brought into judgment. This is particularly true of Bible teachers.

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The tongue's potential to effect the course of our lives Let us look at **James 3:2-4** “**(2) For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. (3) Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well. (4) Behold, the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are directed by a very small rudder, wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.**” What do you want to be? What do you want to accomplish? Having answered this question you need to know that your tongue will be a major player in realizing your dreams or being the source of your greatest nightmares. Never doubt the power of the tongue and do not underestimate it. It truly can boast great things.

Why should we seek to control our tongue? Because of the tongue's potential to expose us to God's judgment. And because of the tongue's potential to effect the entire course of our lives whether that is for good or bad. We are now going on to the third reason James gives us for taming our tongue.

THE POTENTIAL FOR DESTRUCTION

Let us read **James 3:5-6** “**(5) So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things, Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! (6) And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.**”

The tongue has awesome destructive potential. And to help us appreciate the significance of what he is saying James compares the destructive power of the tongue with the destructive power of fire. If I asked you the question, “what historical event took place in the city of Chicago on Oct. 8, 1871 that involved a cow?” I believe that there would be a significant number of people here this weekend who would probably know that we are talking about the Chicago fire.

For those of you that may not have ever heard of this particular fire let me fill in for you what happened. At approx. 9:00 p.m. one Sunday evening a cow owned by Mrs. O'Leary reportedly kicked over a lantern. Before the fire could be put out, which took two days, it had blackened three and one half miles of the city. It had destroyed over 17000 buildings, 125,000 people were left homeless and over 250 lives were lost. How did such destruction come about? It came about because of one little lantern that was kicked over.

We have heard the expression, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me,” this can be a very misleading jingle. Words can hurt, words can destroy and because of this we must work hard by God's grace to control and tame our tongue.

The writer of Proverbs observed in **Prov. 15:28**, “**The heart of the righteous ponder how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.**” If we do not ponder our words, if we do not weigh our words, we will invariably speak evil things. And the destruction that can come from such carelessness can be very great.

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In v. 6, James gives what is doubtless the strongest statement in Scripture on the danger of the tongue: **“And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among your members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.”** Using the figure of fire, James gives us three major elements of the uncontrolled tongue’s danger.

First, the uncontrolled tongue corrupts the whole person. Look at the very first part of the verse, **“And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among your members as that which defiles the entire body.....”** Certainly we have no problem understanding the phrase, **“And the tongue is a fire.”** But what does James mean by **“the very world of iniquity?”** When James refers to “world” (KOSMOS), he is not referring to the earth, or to the universe, but rather to a system, scheme, or arrangement. In this case, it is the system of iniquity. James refers to the uncontrolled tongue as **“the very world of iniquity”** because it embodies in itself the essence of all wickedness. Since the tongue can play a part in all the sins in the world, it incorporates in itself the whole story of evil in this world. So it is not surprising for us to read that when the uncontrolled tongue, which is the very world of iniquity, is in our mouth that it will defile the entire body.

This, in a sense, is going back to the illustration of the bit in the horse’s mouth. If we can control the tongue, we can control the head of the horse, and if we can control the head we can control the whole body. But if we do not have control of the tongue, if it is not tamed, it is the **“the very world of iniquity”** and it will **“defile the entire body.”** Why? Because the uncontrolled tongue, which is the world of iniquity, will control your head, which will control your body.

Secondly the uncontrolled tongue sets the whole course of life on fire. Read the next phrase, **“And sets on fire the course of our life.”** Since the preceding phrase spoke of the impact of the tongue on the “whole person,” this expression seems intended to set forth the wider social impact of the uncontrolled tongue. James seems to be thinking of the whole wheel of human existence, of which we are individually a part. Thus, this expression serves to convey the thought of life’s varied relationships being set ablaze by an uncontrolled tongue.

Thirdly the uncontrolled tongue is Satan’s tool. Read the next phrase, **“and is set on fire by hell.”**

Let us take a look at this word “hell” for a moment. The word “hell” (GEHENNA) is not found in the New Testament outside of the synoptic gospels, where, in each case, it is used by Jesus. The word literally means “Valley of Hinnom,” a deep gorge southwest of Jerusalem, where trash, garbage, and the bodies of dead animals and executed criminals were dumped and continually burned. The location had originally been used by Canaanites and even some Israelite worshipers to sacrifice their children as burnt offerings to the pagan god Molech. When that heinous practice was permanently halted by the godly King Josiah of Judah (2 Kings 23:10), the place was considered unclean and wholly unfit for any decent usage. It therefore came to be used as a garbage dump, where all the filth of the city of Jerusalem and surrounding areas was taken to be burned. Because the fire burned all the time and maggots were always present, the Lord used GEHENNA to represent the eternal, never-ending torment of hell, “the unquenchable fire, where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:43-44; cf. Isa. 66:24; Matt. 5:22). **Hell** is Satan’s place, prepared for him and his demons (Matt. 25:41). As such, it is used here as a synonym for Satan and the demons.

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Now with this in mind we would have to conclude that the phrase, “**and is set on fire by hell**” indicates that the tongue can be Satan’s tool, fulfilling hell’s purposes to pollute, corrupt, and destroy.

James wants us to know that there is a battle for the control of our tongue. What does Paul exhort us to do in **Eph. 6:10**? “**Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.**” Why are we to be strong in the Lord and the strength of His might? We are to be strong in the Lord and the strength of His might so that we might be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. One of those schemes is to gain control of our tongue. If the forces of darkness can gain control of our tongue, we will actually be more useful in advancing the kingdom of Satan rather than the kingdom of Christ.

What are the three major elements of danger for the uncontrolled tongue? The uncontrolled tongue defiles the whole person, the uncontrolled tongue sets the whole course of life on fire, and the uncontrolled tongue becomes Satan’s tool. All of this is encompassed in the visual picture of the tongue as fire and helps us to understand its great potential for destruction.

There are many ways for us to sin with our tongues, which we detailed for you in our study of James 1:26. But there was a certain area of sinful speech that we did not address when we were going through that section of Scripture. And the reason I did not address it then was because it seemed that it would be more appropriate to address it here in our discussion of the uncontrolled tongue as a consuming fire that, though it may only begin with a spark, can become a raging forest fire. So what is that area of speech that we need to highlight? The evil report. An evil report involves distortion of facts, incomplete facts or false information. It is given with wrong motivations and can very easily leave the hearer with a negative impression of the person or organization which was the topic of conversation.

If I am upset with you. and I come to you while you I am upset, it is very likely that I will sin against you with my tongue. If I don’t sin against you in what I say, I certainly will sin against you in how I say it. And this would be a terrible thing. But there is something far worse than sinning against you with my tongue to your face. And what is that? It is sinning against you with my tongue behind your back. It is passing evil reports about you to others. Why would this be worse? It would be far worse because my anger toward you, my bitterness toward you, is now spreading beyond our personal relationship and wreaking havoc wherever it spreads. **Heb.12:15** says, “**See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.**”

Let us consider a classic example of people listening to an evil report and the results of it. Turn in your Bibles to **2 Sam. 15**. In this chapter we find Absalom, King’s David son, plotting against His father. Why was he was plotting against David? It had something to do with God’s judgment against David for the sin he committed with Bathsheba and against her husband, Uriah the Hittite. It had something to do with Absalom’s upset over David’s lack of action in the matter of his sister’s rape by Amnon. It had something to do with his own personal ambitions. But it all surfaces here in **2 Sam. 15** with Absalom sinning with his tongue.

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It begins with these words, **“Now it came about after this that Absalom provided for himself a chariot and horse, and fifty men as runners before him. (2) And Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way to the gate; and it happened that when any man had a suit to come to the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, “From what city are you?” and he would say, “Your servant is from one of the tribes of Israel.” (3) Then Absalom would say to him, “See, your claims are good and right, but no man listens to you on the part of the king. (4) Moreover, Absalom would say, “Oh that one would appoint me judge in the land, then every man who has any suit or cause could come to me, and I would give him justice. (5) And it happened that when a man came near to prostrate himself before him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him. (6) And in this manner Absalom dealt with all Israel who came to the king for judgment; so Absalom stole away the hearts of the men of Israel.”** This is an evil report. Absalom had distorted the facts. He did this out of evil motives. And he consciously eroded the people’s confidence in David their king.

What was the result of Absalom’s efforts? First of all David chose to flee Jerusalem. Listen to the words of **2 Sam. 15:13-14**, **“Then a messenger came to David, saying, “The hearts of the men of Israel are with Absalom.” (14) And David said to all his servants who were with him at Jerusalem, “Arise and let us flee, for otherwise none of us shall escape from Absalom.....”** The defection of the people of Israel at this point was overwhelming. How did all this begin? With Absalom giving evil reports.

But it gets worse. After David fled Jerusalem **2 Sam. 17** tells us that he came within a hairbreadth of being immediately pursued and destroyed. And this would have happened if it wasn’t for Absalom being persuaded by David’s friend Hushai, not to do this until he got some reinforcements.

This extra time that David had allowed him to raise an army and **2 Sam. 18** records for us the details of the war that broke out between the forces of David and the forces of Absalom which David ultimately won. How was this country brought into a civil war? It was brought into a civil war by the power of the tongue. And more specifically, it was brought into a civil war by Absalom giving what? EVIL REPORTS.

I have been reading in the Old Testament and just this past week, I came across another example of evil reporting in Nehemiah. Listen to these words from **Neh. 6**. Nehemiah had been used by the Lord to move King Artaxerxes into supplying not only permission but provisions, for the rebuilding of the wall in Jerusalem. Nehemiah had also been used to rally the people of Israel to accomplish this task. But this work was being opposed by certain non-Jews who lived in the area. Let us read **Neh. 6:1-7**, **“Now it came about when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab, and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, that no breach remained in it, although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates, (2) that Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to me, saying, “Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono.” But they were planning to harm me. (3) So I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?” (4) And they sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way.**

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(5) Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. (In other words this letter was being proclaimed). (6) In it was written, “It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports.”

What were these men attempting to do with this open letter? They were designing to cast suspicion on Nehemiah as being a self-serving dictator, who was simply using the people around him to achieve his own personal ambitions.

The power of the tongue to destroy is awesome. But there is no more destructive force that the tongue can unleash than the spreading of evil reports. Why? Because it will not destroy a single relationship. It has the potential to destroy many relationships, a multitude of relationships.

CONCLUSION

Why should we tame our tongue? We should seek to tame our tongue:

Because of the tongue’s potential to bring judgment.

Because of the tongue’s potential to effect the course of our lives.

Because of the tongue’s potential to destroy.