

The Power of the Tongue: James 3:3-12

James starts this passage by portraying the power, use and the place of the tongue in the lives of people. By using metaphors and examples he explains the power of the tongue. Bit, rudder, fire, animals, poison, fountain, and trees are seven examples that James uses in order to convey the nature or the characteristics of the tongue. In order to convey the message more effectively James uses the same pattern of teaching that Jesus did by using parables and illustrations.

The Bit and the Rudder:

Before he explains about the power of the relatively small tongue, he presents before his readers the horse and the ship which are huge and strong. The mammoth ships and the strong horse are directed and controlled by small devices like the rudder and the bit. Likewise the tongue is a small organ in the body, yet it can control the entire body. Knowing the power of the tongue, James admonishes his readers to use their tongues wisely and appropriately. Even in adverse weather conditions the ship is directed by the captain by using the small rudder, and the powerful horse by the small bit in its mouth. The bit and the rudder have the power to direct, which means they affect the lives of others. An uncontrollable horse and a runaway ship can endanger the lives of pedestrians and passengers. Likewise, a tongue which spews out careless words can affect the lives of the people around us.

The Fire and the Animal:

James introduces the vicious nature of the tongue. We see this nature come out in the way gossip comes so easily from all conversations. To make his point, James uses a string of metaphors in verses 6-7. The tongue is like fire because while fire can have the good uses of driving out chill and dampness from one's house or cooking one's food, out of control it has the potential to destroy forests and homes. Thousands of acres of forest have been totally consumed and ravaged by wild fires ignited by small sparks. The tongue is a world of iniquity for reasons mentioned in verse 6.

- It defies the whole body: the tongue can pollute a person's whole personality, soils one's whole nature, and leave a deadly stain on it.
- It upsets the course of nature: it works against the wholesome character of a person by destroying any good that remains.
- It is set on fire by hell: it is under Satan's influence and thus is frightening and brazen.

James continues by saying that the tongue is like a wild animal and perhaps worse (Verse 7). Human beings have managed to tame and control the wildest of animals, yet they have failed to master their own mouths. The poison that spews from any untamed mouth can be lethal in any dosage.

The Fountain and the Tree: James continues driving his point home by using vivid figures and metaphors. The tongue ought to be consistent in its speech at all times. He gives out a warning: a fountain cannot give two kinds of water and a tree cannot bear two different kinds of fruit. We expect the fountain to flow with sweet water at all times, likewise we expect the tree to bear fruit according to its own kind; for example, a fig tree is expected to bear figs while an olive tree is expected to bear olives at all times- after all, nature reproduces after its own kind. The tongue that is used to bless God the Father, if used to curse men is in desperate need of spiritual medication. "My brethren these things ought not so to be ." While we examine this issue closely we can understand that it truly shows the condition of one's heart. "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart: and they defile the man (Matt 15:18)."

The Bible sees the tongue in all its glory and in its entire honor. At best it is a means to praise our God; at worst it is a way to vilify our brothers and our Creator. Let us rely on the Holy Spirit and give him full control of our hearts and tongues, so that we may use it to glorify God at all times and to enrich the lives of people around us.

