

Daily Bible Study

“The Untameable Tongue?”

James 3: 6-12

October 30–November 3, 2023

MONDAY –We continue our study of James this week and take as our text, **James 3:6-12**: *“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. 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.”* We are continuing this week looking more closely to the issue of our tongues. Among other things, we will see James speak concerning the incredible force and power of the tongue, the issue of it being humanly impossible to tame and control as well as the matter of inconsistent speech which is both harmful and unacceptable as a Christian. We mentioned last week that the controlling of our tongue is a key to Holy living. We think about how we are to control the powerful forces within us that tempt and drive us into sin, and James replies by talking about something we probably never really consider, do we even have control of our tongues? Are we the masters of this master-key? Not only is the tongue and its control in view in our passage but also the role of the tongue in consistent living as well. James will illustrate the matter of control and consistency in the use of our speech. The one who can control this little member of our bodies holds the master key for all the other rooms of our houses.

(Meditate & Apply) Think about how important your tongue is in the matters of your attitudes and actions. Do you have control of this master key?

(Pray): Father, help me understand how very important this matter of controlling my tongue and using it properly truly is.

TUESDAY – **James 3:6**: *“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.”* This verse is one of the most difficult passages in the Book of James. Some scholars have attempted to explain the text by deleting a few words, for example, the phrase *a world of iniquity* which has caused difficulty for some. One of Martin Luther’s sayings is applicable here: “Let the word stand as is.” That is, before we delete from or add to

the wording of the text, let us see whether we can understand the message itself. We see the following points from this verse 6. *The tongue is a fire*. James compares the tongue with a fire that is out of control, destroying everything in its path. He further remarks that the tongue is *a world of iniquity*. This seems to mean that human speech represents unrighteousness; it reveals the often hidden wickedness in human beings. It defiles everything. James uses the term “world” (*kosmos*) in a negative sense in 1:27 and 4:4. There are few sins people commit in which the tongue is not involved. Because of this inclination to evil, the tongue *defiles* man’s total being. The word *defiles* actually means “stains”. The evil tongue stains a person’s entire personality. As Jesus said, it is what comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ (**Mark 7:20–23**). The tongue *sets on fire the course of nature*. This is literally “the wheel of life.” It seems to mean a person’s life from birth until death, which can even affect future generations. This again shows the destructive potential of a person’s speech. Finally, we are told the tongue *is set on fire by hell*. James uses the word *hell* which his Jewish readers would well understand. This is literally in the original language, “being inflamed by Gehenna,” which refers to the valley of the sons of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem. This is the metaphor Jesus used to describe the punishment and place for those who reject faith in God. It was turned into the garbage dump for Jerusalem because this valley was the site in the OT where the fire god Molech was worshiped by child sacrifice (**2 Kings 16:3, 17:17, 21:6**). This is the only use of “Gehenna” outside of the words of Jesus (**Matthew 5:22, 29, 30, 10:28, Mark 9:43, 47, Luke 12:5**). James is referring to the activity of Satan himself in our daily lives through our speech.

(Meditate & Apply) Think about what James has just alluded to. Do you understand the hellacious things that come out of your mouth? The very evil of Gehenna with its child sacrifice and burning filthy trash is what God says is the fuel for our rotten speech.

(Pray): Father, forgive me for the horrid hell fueled garbage that spews from my mouth so often. Help me to have a mouth that instead of bringing hell, imparts holy, heavenly things.

WEDNESDAY – **James 3:7-8**: *“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.”* James comes to a sobering conclusion on the matter of taming the tongue. He previously gave the examples of the horse’s bit and the ship’s rudder and has shown the skill and capability of man in controlling large powerful objects (**verses. 3–4**). He now pauses to shew man as ruler in and over God’s creation. Man has been given power to have dominion, rule and care for all creatures that walk, fly, crawl, and swim (**Genesis 1:26, 28, Psalm 8:6–8**). James lists several of the species and types of animals that man has tamed. We have all seen the lion tamers, the circus elephants and the creatures of Sea World. Man has been able to subdue all these for God has given man the power to rule in His great creation. But we are unable to control our own tongues. When man fell into sin, he lost his ability to govern himself. He lost control of himself as it were and now we are the

ones that are ruled by our sinful nature and tongues. We can tame fierce and powerful animals, but cannot tame our own tongue. James eliminates exceptions when he states, “*But no man can tame the tongue*”. This brief and yet emphatic phrase repeats what he said earlier concerning the man who doesn’t stumble in what he says is a perfect man able to control his whole body. So why is this little tongue such a powerful controller and influencer? *It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison*. The Greek words here speak of the tongue as disruptive and disorderly. The picture then is that of a poisonous snake with fangs. The tongue is full of a death-bringing poison. James, like Paul (**Romans 3:13**) and the Psalmist (**Psalms 58:4, 140:3**) descriptively and accurately portray the nature of man’s tongue which is an ugly picture that shows the destructive nature of sin. According to James here in our text, there is such a thing as “verbal cyanide” if you will. What an opposite picture we see of our Savior Jesus throughout the Scripture. Never was sin found coming out of His mouth and He always had perfect control of His Tongue (**Isaiah 53:7, 1 Peter 2:22**).

(Meditate & Apply) Do I have control over my tongue? What specifically can I point to from the things I have said and thought about saying that shew I control it or it controls me? Do I understand properly the fact that God has given me power to rule over His creation?

(Pray): Lord, You have given mankind dominion over Your great creation and yet I am often controlled by my own tongue and sinful nature. Help me to walk with Jesus and be filled with Your Holy Spirit in order to have my mouth under His control and say things that glorify You.

THURSDAY – James 3:9-10: “*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.*” We are now brought to see the horrible and deadly sin of inconsistency in our speech. The tongue is the little hypocrite in our mouths that can make big hypocrites out of us. The repeated words *with it* and *with it* point out it is the same thing that we use for two opposite purposes; namely, to *bless* and to *curse*. Our inconsistency is further made more horrifying when we see that we bless and curse the same thing, *the similitude of God* (image of God). We look up to *our God and Father* and aware of his greatness and glory, we bless Him. We then look around at our brothers and sisters or those in the human family, who are made in and bear the image of God Himself, and think nothing of slandering, defaming, denigrating, criticizing, and making the innuendo concerning them. Yet they bear the image of God. We think of Jesus and get bent out of shape when His glory is despised or His name used in vain. We complain when in the newspaper or on the radio or TV He is blasphemed. But the same glorious image of God that resides in other people we hardly think of and rarely hesitate to speak against. James, however, was shocked and moved to seek to us concerning this sin. *Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren*, he says, *these things ought not to be so*. James treats us with love and concern as people belonging within the family of God. Over and over we find him using *brethren, my brethren* and even *my beloved brethren*. The words are a loving rebuke to us as

well as an appeal to do right. Brothers, he says, we are in God’s family together, unified by Jesus and such behavior as this *ought not to be so*. Simon Kistemaker comments, “This is a word appearing nowhere else in the whole New Testament and proclaims that this is ‘intrinsically not right’, not right, by reason of its own internal constitution, ‘no way right’.” James makes us face something we can and must do. He examined the tongue and its place among our bodily faculties along with the dangers it threatens and the task of controlling it. Actually, it is a bit overwhelming to think about. It may seem far beyond our current ability but we can make a start here. He gives us something precise, limited, and manageable to work on. In the words of Bob Wiley and Doctor Marvin, “Baby Steps”. This is not beyond our capability; this is something we can tackle with The Lord’s help. It concerns the way we speak outwardly and inwardly about people and the way we speak to somebody else about other people. If we are serious about the Word of God, then we admit as true what it says and even though it may seem above our power to do so, we can start here in obedience with a new respect for the image of God seen in others.

(Meditate & Apply) Am I consistent with my speech concerning God and others? Am I a hypocrite that praises God with blessing while I curse others made in His image?

(Pray): Lord, help me to be a consistent speaker of truth both about You and the people You have made in Your image. Thank You for forgiveness in Jesus and Your patience with me.

FRIDAY– James 3:11-12 “*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.*” James now concludes our text with a rhetorical question which expects the answer no for a very obvious reason. One spring doesn’t give both fresh and bitter water; it is inconsistent as it is if our mouths give both sweet and bitter words. In fact, if two separate sources of water flowed together into one and one were sweet water and the other bitter we would probably never know of the sweet water because the bitter flavor would be what we could taste. It would be the strong flavor that would leave its mark. So our tongues need guarding or they also will leave a bitter taste behind which overpowers all the sweet things we may say. God also has so organized plant life that each plant “*bears fruit after its kind*” (**Genesis 1:11–12**). The nature of the plant determines the fruit and the fruit bears witness to the nature of the plant. “*Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks*” (**Matthew 12:34**). Bitter words come from a bitter heart; critical words a critical spirit; defamatory, unloving speech comes from a heart where the love of Jesus is not ruling.

(Meditate & Apply) Do I speak both sweet and bitter words from my same mouth?

(Pray): Father God, help me by Your Holy Spirit to speak edifying words that build up others and glorify You. I need Your help to do this and ask You to guide me by Your Word and Spirit.