

James 2:21-26 – Living Faith

1

Introduction

The tongue has a unique way of declaring who you are. It reveals the heart (Matt. 15:19) and discloses the real person. The misuse of the tongue is perhaps the easiest way to sin. There seems to be no limits on what one can say.

Scientists maintain that once a sound wave is set in motion, it continues on a never-ending journey, and that, if we had sophisticated enough instruments, each wave could be captured and reproduced at any time. If that is true, every word spoken by any person who has ever lived could be retrieved! God, of course, needs no such instrument, and Jesus states plainly that we must give an account of every careless word that we speak (Matt. 12:36–37).

2

Introduction

We have studied the relationship between faith and works and this becomes evident in one's speech. After the fall, Adam's heart was revealed when he slandered God by suggesting that He was indirectly responsible saying, "The woman whom **You** gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate." (Genesis 3:12).

When a person receives Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, he becomes a new creation. His whole being is transformed and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. A transformed nature will produce transformed behavior. And new behavior involves new speech, speech that corresponds to a saved and sanctified life and that reflects the holy nature of the One who has given the new life.

3

James 3:1-12

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. ²For 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. ³Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. ⁴Look 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. ⁵Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! ⁶And 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. ⁷For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. ⁸But no man can tame the tongue. *It is* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

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The Tongue's Potential to Condemn

James 3:1-2a

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The term "**teachers**" was a word often used of rabbis and anyone else who functioned in an official teaching or preaching role.

Teachers were to understand God's word and were given great honor and respect. In the Gospels, many of the rabbis relished this prestige and privilege.

The **self-seeking motives** that characterized many rabbis were an abomination to Jesus and have no place in the lives of His people. But obviously there were some among those to whom James wrote who had such motives and who desired to become teachers for the wrong reason.

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When James states, "**Let not many of you become teachers**", he does not mean to discourage lay-people from communicating their scriptural insights. Nor does he want to hinder those who are called by God to be official teachers of His Word (1 Timothy 3:1). He is saying that those who believe they have such a divine calling should first test their faith to be sure they are saved. He has made it clear that, "If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless." (1:26). If that principle applies to everyone in the church, how much more does it apply to teachers who presume to stand before God's people to interpret and explain God's Word?

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James's point is that no believer should begin any form of teaching God's Word without a **deep sense of the seriousness of this responsibility**. To sin with the tongue when alone or with one or two other persons is bad enough; but to sin with the tongue in public, especially while acting as a speaker for God, is immeasurably worse. Speaking for God carries with it great implications, both for good and bad.

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Teachers use their tongue in order **to communicate truth**. In the church they stand before the people and declare "Thus says the Lord". Teachers much take special care that what they say is true and proper. To **lead people astray** is a serious charge to which one stands accountable to God for the souls of those which were lead astray. It is important to note that James includes himself [**we**] with those who are subject to that stricter judgment. Not even the apostles and writers of Scripture were exempt. Every teacher, without exception, is to be "diligent to present [himself] approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15; cf. 1 Tim. 4:6-16).

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James's statement that "... **we all stumble in many things**" reinforces the truth that no one is exempt to the dangers of the tongue and other forms of sin against God. "**Stumble**" refers to any moral lapse, a failure to do what is right.

On May 21, 1941, the "unsinkable" German battleship, the **Bismarck**, was sighted in the North Atlantic. Immediately planes and ships from the Royal British Navy sped to the scene. As the *Bismarck* headed toward the German-controlled French coast where it would be safe from attack, to the astonishment of all the massive battleship suddenly swung around and reentered the area where the British ships were massed in greatest strength. At the same time, she began to steer an erratic zigzag course, which made it much easier for the British to overtake her. You see, a torpedo had damaged her rudder and without its control the "unsinkable" *Bismarck* was sunk. As the rudder controls a ship, so the tongue controls a person.

9

The Tongue's Power to Control

James 3:2b-5a

If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. ³Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. ⁴Look 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. ⁵Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things.

The tongue has **extraordinary power to control**, even to the extent that if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man. "**Perfect**" has two possible meanings. One carries the idea of absolute perfection, of being **without any flaw or error**. If that is James's meaning here, he is obviously speaking hypothetically, since no human being but Jesus would qualify for that sort of perfect speech. But the term can also mean **complete, or mature**. If that is the sense intended here, the idea is that a person who does not stumble in what he says gives evidence of a purified and mature heart. The idea is that only spiritually mature believers can control their tongues. To the degree that our holiness approaches that of Christ's, to that degree we are spiritually perfect or mature.

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James then makes a **remarkable claim**, declaring that a Christian who can bridle his tongue is able to bridle the whole body as well. "**Body**" seems to refer to the person in general, to his whole being. In other words, if we can control our tongues—which respond so readily and limitlessly to sin—then controlling everything else will follow.

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James uses **two analogies** to show the power of the tongue. The first is that we put **bits into the horses' mouths** so that they will obey us. This illustration is particularly appropriate, because the bit lies on top of a horse's tongue, and when attached to the bridle and reins, it is possible for the rider using that bit to easily make the horse obey. Controlling horses' mouths controls their heads, which, in turn, direct their entire body as well.

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The second illustration is that **of a ship**. James states that even the great ships which are driven by fierce winds, are turned by a small rudder wherever the pilot desires.

So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it **boasts of great things**. Like the bit in a horse's mouth and the rudder of a ship, the tongue has power to control the rest of us. It is a master control for the whole body, directing almost every aspect of behavior.

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James gives no specifics in saying that the tongue boasts of great things. But he obviously has in mind man's natural inclination to boast, and to be self-centered. Whenever and however the tongue boasts, it leaves a wake of destruction. It tears down others; it destroys churches, families, marriages, and personal relationships. It can even lead to murder and to war.

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So What ...

For the tongue to control our lives in the right way, we must resist the temptation to boast and brag. We should speak only gracious words, kind words, words that edify, comfort, bless, and encourage. They should be words of humility, gratitude, peace, holiness, and wisdom. Such words, of course, can only come from a heart that not only is indwelt by the Holy Spirit but is also wholly submitted to His control.