

James 2:21-26 – Taming the Tongue – 3

1

### Introduction

James has been teaching us about the true nature of our tongue. The tongue declares to those listening who and what we really are. We have studied (I) the potential of the tongue to condemn, (II) its power to control, and (III) its propensity to corrupt. Today we will continue our study.

2

## James 3:1-12

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

3

## The Tongue's Propensity to Combat

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. <sup>8</sup> But no man can tame the tongue. *It is* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

James is teaching that the human tongue is by nature uncontrollable and untamable. It is wild, undisciplined, irresponsible, irrepressible, and savage. James calls it an **unruly evil**. It refuses to be tamed and combats every effort to control and direct it.

4

## The Tongue's Propensity to Combat

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. <sup>8</sup> But no man can tame the tongue. *It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.*

“Every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed of mankind.” The wildest creature is subject to man’s taming and control. For centuries, the major attraction of circuses has been the wild animal acts, in which lions, tigers, and other powerful and dangerous animals do tricks at the command of a human trainer. In that regard they are less primitive and more civilized and controllable than the unregenerate, unsanctified tongues of their masters.

5

## The Tongue's Propensity to Combat

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. <sup>8</sup> But no man can tame the tongue. *It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.*

“No man can tame the tongue.” No human being can tame his or her tongue in their own power. Even the tongue of a believer can “escape” and do great damage. There are times when the tongue erupts like a roaring lion ripping and shredding all that stands in its way. Its work can also be so subtle that it sometimes escapes notice until the damage is done.

6

## The Tongue's Propensity to Combat

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. <sup>8</sup> But no man can tame the tongue. *It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.*

Aware of that danger, David prayed, “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips” (**Ps. 141:3**). Even Paul confessed: “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find” (**Rom 7:18**). He could not trust himself to keep his tongue, or any other part of his unredeemed flesh, in check. “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish” (**Gal. 5:17**).

7

## The Tongue's Propensity to Combat

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. <sup>8</sup> But no man can tame the tongue. *It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.*

The term “**unruly**” is the same word translated “**unstable**” in 1:8. In the context it suggests the idea of a wild animal fighting fiercely against the restraints of captivity. The “evil” rebels at confinement and seeks a way to escape and spread its “**deadly poison**”. Its “venom” is more deadly than a snake’s because it can destroy morally, socially, economically, and spiritually.

8

## The Tongue's Perfidy to Compromise

James 3:9-12

With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. <sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup> Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? <sup>12</sup> Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

The tongue is characterized by what might be called its perfidy to compromise. "**Perfidy**" refers to **deliberate breach of trust, or treachery**, and the unbridled tongue is frequently guilty of such evil. The tongue is not just like a wild and raging animal, but **clever, plotting, and subtly deceptive**. It is hypocritical and deceitful.

As believers we should use our tongues to bless our God and Father. The Jews to whom James wrote were accustomed to pronouncing blessings on God. Three times a day the devout Jew had to repeat the *Shemoneh Esreh*, the eighteen prayers called *Eulogies*. Everyone of these begins, "Blessed be Thou, O God".

9

## The Tongue's Perfidy to Compromise

James 3:9-12

With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. <sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup> Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? <sup>12</sup> Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

We gather together and we **worship and praise God with our lips**. We give thanks for all that He has done and will do in our lives. We recognize that He is holy and good and deserves all glory and praise.

But with the **same tongue with which we bless God; we curse men** who have been made in the likeness of God. James links our devotion to God with how we treat our fellow man. How can we praise God, and at the same time curse at His image in our fellow man?

The term "**curse**" does not refer to course language, but language that would deny them God's blessing and even desire evil and hardship to come into someone's life.

10

## The Tongue's Perfidy to Compromise

James 3:9-12

With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. <sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup> Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? <sup>12</sup> Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

James states that it is inconsistent and hypocritical that from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. Yet every believer has been guilty of that hypocrisy to some extent. It was not only the scribes and Pharisees who claimed to bless God and yet demanded the crucifixion of His Son, accusing Him of blasphemy. Peter confessed that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16); but while his Lord was on trial before the high priest, he began “to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out and wept bitterly” (Matt. 26:74–75).

11

## The Tongue's Perfidy to Compromise

James 3:9-12

With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. <sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup> Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? <sup>12</sup> Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

James states, “My brethren, these things ought not so to be”. “**Ought not**” is a strong negative, used only here in the New Testament. The idea is that there should be **no place** in a Christian's life for this kind of speech.

When God transformed us, He gave us the capacity for new, redeemed, holy speech, and He expects us, as His children, to speak only that which is holy and right. Our “yes” and “no” should be honest (Matt. 5:37). Snakes have a forked tongue. The serpent in the Garden of Eden spoke a forked message. **Let us not speak as children of the serpent, but holy as children of the Truth and Light.**

12

## The Tongue's Perfidy to Compromise

James 3:9-12

With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. <sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup> Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? <sup>12</sup> Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

James sees such mixed use of the tongue as unnatural. He explains this truth using three illustrations. First, he asks rhetorically, Does a **spring** send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? The obvious answer is no.

James asks, "Can a **fig tree**, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?" Again, the obvious and expected answer is no. Such a thing is utterly contrary to nature and cannot happen.

He then states emphatically, nor can a fountain yield both salt and fresh water. This also is clearly impossible, and no rational person would think twice about believing anything to the contrary. It is true that a person can fake "sweet water" for a time, but his motives are not "sweet", and he cannot keep the true nature of his heart hid forever.

13

## The Tongue's Perfidy to Compromise

James 3:9-12

With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. <sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup> Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? <sup>12</sup> Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

A hateful heart cannot produce loving words or works. An unrighteous heart cannot produce righteous words or works. "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit," Jesus explained, "nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ... So then, you will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:18, 20).

In Romans 10:9, Paul said, "if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved". The **heart and the tongue are united**. If we are to control our tongue, we must allow God to fill our hearts with His presence and control.

14

## So What ...

There is a remedy! We must pray that the Lord will keep us from gossip, critical, and unkind speech. We need to commit ourselves not to talk unfavorably about anyone. Even Michael the archangel dared not to bring a reviling accusation against the devil. Instead he said, "The Lord rebuke you!" As Christians we are told to love one another, and Peter teaches us that Love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

When problems do arise in the body we need to deal with them in a Biblical manner (Matthew 18:15; Luke 17:3). We need to spend more effort trying to see Christ in our brothers and sisters instead of focusing upon their minor failures.

All that we say should be subject to the threefold test: **Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?** We should ask the Lord to set a watch before our lips (Ps. 141:3), and pray that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts might be acceptable in the sight of Him who is our strength and Redeemer (Ps. 19:14).