

Bridle your tongue

“The power of speech is one of the greatest powers God has given us. With the tongue, man can praise God, pray, preach the Word, and lead the lost to Christ. What a privilege! But with the same tongue he can tell lies that could ruin a man's reputation or break a persons heart.” [1]

To emphasise the great importance of controlled speech, and the great consequences of our words, James gives us six pictures of the tongue: the bit, the rudder, fire, a poisonous animal, a fountain, and a fig tree.

Lets have a look.

“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. 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” (James 3:1-2).

Christian teachers held accountable

Here, James gives a stern warning relative to the accountability of anyone who teaches. We have a tremendous accountability to God when we teach. That's why Paul says to Timothy,

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

There is shame and judgement connected with teaching error. Teachers will also be judged more strictly because if you know enough to teach other people, you know enough to live by what you're teaching. Beloved, you are no teacher if you're not living what you're teaching, and you're no teacher if there is no example in your life. If your teaching is hypocrisy, sin lies at your door.

Subduing your tongue

The tongue has such potential for condemnation, sins of the tongue seem to head the list. Someone said, "remember your tongue is in a wet place and it could slip easily." The easiest way to sin, is to sin with the tongue. Nothing is more representative of man's sinfulness than his mouth.

The person who is able to discipline his tongue gives evidence that he can control his whole body. He proves that he is a mature perfect man. Why?

Because the tongue can sin so easily, if you can control the tongue—the greater sinner in your body—then by virtue of controlling the greater you have gained control of the lesser.

The person who controls the tongue will also control the body with all its other impulses. Since the tongue responds more immediately and more quickly and more easily to sin, if it were controlled, the slower responding parts would also be controlled because the means of divine grace applied to the greater will also apply to the lesser. What an insight.

So, James is saying if you want to perfect your spiritual life, you need to focus on your tongue.

One who controls his tongue will also control his body. Focus on your mouth. And if the Holy Spirit gets control of the most volatile and the most potent member, the rest will be subdued.

Your tongue, the steering wheel

“Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. 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” (James 3:3-4).

In selecting the bit and the rudder—two items that are small of themselves, yet exercise great power—James finds appropriate metaphors for the tongue. A small bit enables the rider to control the great horse, and a small rudder enables the pilot to steer the huge ship. The tongue is a small member in the body, and yet it has the power to accomplish great things.

“Both the bit and the rudder must overcome contrary forces. The bit must overcome the wild nature of the horse, and the rudder must fight the winds and currents that would drive the ship off its course. The human tongue also must overcome contrary forces. We have an old nature that wants to control us and make us sin. There are circumstances around us that would make us say things we ought not to say. Sin on the inside and pressure on the outside are seeking to get control of the tongue.” [2]

“This means that both the bit and the rudder must be under the control of a strong hand. The expert horseman keeps the mighty power of his steed under control, and the experienced pilot courageously steers the ship through the storm.” [3]

James says, just get control of the little tongue and you can move everything else. The idea is this: power applied at the right point is efficient to control the whole vessel. And power applied at the right point, being the mouth, is sufficient to control the whole body. James says, control your tongue because of its power to control you.

How can I control my tongue?

Speak only gracious words, speak only kind words, speak loving words, true words, thoughtful words, holy words, sensitive words, edifying words. Speak only gentle words, comforting words, words of blessing, words of humility, words of wisdom, words of thanksgiving. Speak only unselfish words and peaceful words.

And if you do that you'll control every other part of your life, because the only way you can do all of that, is by being under the power of the Spirit of God. Led by the Spirit, not quenching the Spirit. When we allow Jesus Christ to control our tongue, then we need not fear saying the wrong things.

So the tongue is like a bit and rudder: it has the power to direct. How important it is that our tongues direct people in the right way!

“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).

“In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (Proverbs 10:19).

Your tongue, the firebug

“Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! 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” (James 3:5-6).

Our words can start fires.

“Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife,” Proverbs 26:20.

When church members cannot control their tongues, there is a spirit of destruction. Let them move out, and a beautiful spirit of harmony and love takes over.

“Like a fire, the tongue can ‘heat things up.’ David wrote:

I said, “I will guard my ways,
that I may not sin with my tongue;

“My heart became hot within me.
As I mused, the fire burned;
then I spoke with my tongue” (Psalm 39:1, 3).

Have you ever had that experience? Of course you have! A hot head and a hot heart can lead to burning woods that later we will regret. David had a temper and he had to have God's help in controlling it.” [4]

No wonder Solomon wrote,

“He who has knowledge spares his words, and a man of understanding is of a calm spirit” (Proverbs 17:27).

“He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly” (Proverbs 14:29).

“A fool vents all his feelings, but a wise man holds them back” (Proverbs 29:11).

Beloved, we need to hold our tongues, we need to control our tongues. Don't vent everything that comes to your mouth.

Your tongue, the dangerous animal

Not only is the tongue like a fire, but it is also like a dangerous animal.

“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 3:7-8).

“Some animals are poisonous, and some tongues spread poison. The deceptive thing about poison is that it works secretly and slowly, and then kills. How many times has some malicious person injected a bit of poison into the conversation, hoping it would spread and finally get to the person he or she wanted to hurt?” [5]

“Poisonous tongues do great damage to individuals, families, classes and entire churches. Would you turn hungry lions or angry snakes loose in your morning service? Of course not! But unruly tongues accomplish the same result.” [6]

“No man can tame the tongue!” This means that the sinful human nature lacks the power to subdue it. Man can tame animals but lacks the power to subdue his own tongue. Divine grace alone can accomplish that.

But does that mean because the tongue is not humanly tameable that we have no responsibility; that it's up to God to just control our mouth? Or does that mean we cooperate with God; we respond to God's grace by faith and allow Him to complete the good work He has started in us.

The Bible refers directly or indirectly to a wicked tongue, a deceitful tongue, a lying tongue, a perverse tongue, a filthy tongue, a corrupt tongue, a bitter tongue, a angry tongue, a crafty tongue, a flattering tongue, a slanderous tongue, a gossiping tongue, a backbiting tongue, a blaspheming tongue, a foolish tongue, a boasting tongue, a murmuring tongue, a complaining tongue, a cursing tongue, a contentious tongue, a sensual tongue, a vile tongue, a tail-bearing tongue, a whispering tongue, a exaggerating tongue. Did you see yourself anywhere in there?

“Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who deal truthfully are His delight” (Proverbs 12:22).

Will we change our conversation if we take into account that every word and every thought is being examined by God. Will we change it? Well let me tell you, it is.

“I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings” (Jeremiah 17:10).

We must speak and act as though we were already facing Christ in judgement.

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Proverbs 18:21).

“The mouth of the righteous is a well of life, but violence covers the mouth of the wicked” (Proverbs 10:11).

How important it is for us to let our speech “be always full of grace, seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4:6). Our words should make people thirsty for Christ.

Your tongue, the river

“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” (James 3:9-12).

Beloved, the tongue that blesses the Father, and then turns around and curses men made in God's image is in desperate need of spiritual help. How easy it is to sing the hymns during the worship service, then after the service, get into your family car and argue and fight all the way home! “My brethren, these things ought not to be so” (James 3:10).

The tongue is a powerful instrument. It can tear down people, it can tear down churches, it can destroy relationships, it can wreck a marriage, it can devastate a family, it can rip up a nation, it can lead to murder, it can lead to war. On the other hand it can build up, it can create love, enthusiasm, encouragement, comfort, peace, joy, powerful, powerful thing is the tongue.

“James issues a warning: a fountain cannot give forth 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, and we expect the fig tree to bear figs and the olive tree to bear olives. Nature reproduces after it's kind.” [7]

In the same way, God expects His children to act and speak like Him, to imitate Him.

If your tongue is inconsistent, there is something radically wrong with your heart. Examine your faith. Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.

Your tongue, the servant of God

“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” (James 1:26).

Religious, in the Greek means “serving God.” If anyone thinks that they are serving God, but he does not bridle his tongue, then his service to God is useless. Unless your salvation is manifested in the way you speak, your salvation is nothing but self-deception.

Your tongue and salvation

“For every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:36-37).

WOW, did you hear that?

“It is appointed for men to die once, but after that, the judgement” (Hebrews 9:27).

How is a man saved? Not by works, but by faith (Ephesians 2). A man is justified by faith (Romans 5). However, there isn't a single verse in all the Bible that says you are going to be judged by your faith. It says you are going to be judged based on your works.

Lets have a look;

“Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28-29).

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

How is it if we are saved by faith, we are judged by works? Faith without works is dead (James 2). Faith when its true, it works, it works in demonstrations of love (Galatians 5); so much so that on judgement day, Jesus Christ, judges people based on their works (Matthew 5; 25:31-46).

“Those that do good to everlasting life and those that do bad to everlasting punishment” (Matthew 25:46).

Jesus said, in the day of judgement you will be justified or you will be condemned by your words.

You see, the justification you receive by faith in Jesus Christ will be manifested in your words. So that you can literally be judged according to your words, for your words are a tattletale: they tell on your heart. Your speech is such a revealer of your heart that based upon the way you talk, your eternal destiny can be determined. The tongue provides the evidence of what your heart really is. Your heart is revealed in your mouth.

Do your words reveal you as a Christian?

Do your words betray you as being a Christian? Let's look at the character of those who may dwell with the Lord. Listen to how much has to do with the tongue.

“Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle?
Who may dwell in Your holy hill?

“He who walks uprightly,
And works righteousness,
And speaks the truth in his heart;

“He who does not backbite with his tongue,
Nor does evil to his neighbour,
Nor does he take up a reproach against his friend;

“In whose eyes a vile person is despised,
But he honours those who fear the Lord;
He who swears to his own hurt and does not change” (Psalm 15:1-4).

Beloved, the very nature of a transformed life, is transformed words, it's transformed speech. As a true Christian you need to be making progress with a mouth that speaks righteously.

“The words of a man's mouth are deep waters; the wellspring of wisdom is a flowing brook” (Proverbs 18:4).

Beloved, what rolls off your tongue gives people around you a view into the depths of you. It's deep, how you speak is deep, it tells everyone around you who you really are. Your words go deep to your roots. Your tongue really is you. It really is. Your tongue is a revealer of your heart.

“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34).

Do you say things that are befitting of the world?

James calls us to measure our speech to see if it is consistent with what we claim to be the reality of our faith. Living faith will show itself in the control of the tongue.

If you have faith in Jesus, if you are believing and trusting the Lord, if you are being led by the Spirit of God, you must, you must be gaining the victory over undisciplined speech. Your faith will show itself in the control of the tongue. If you're not, I say again, examine your faith. Salvation is a continuous believing, obeying and trusting God, and your speech is a good indicator to whether you are being led by the Spirit. Only those that are led by the Spirit of God, are sons of God.

Nowhere is the union of faith and works more visible than in your speech.

Let the Spirit of God control your tongue

“But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (Colossians 3:8-10).

Beloved, we are being fashioned into the image of our creator. Christ is our example, Christ is the one whose image we are being transformed into. As Christians there is no room for ungodly speech.

James says, faith produces works, and one of the works faith produces is speech to the honour of God. So look at your speech: is it the speech of living faith? Apply yourself to control your tongue because of its power to control you and its power to condemn you.

When Jesus Christ is the Lord of the heart, then He is Lord of the lips too.

No wonder David prayed,

“Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth;
Keep watch over the door of my lips.
Do not incline my heart to any evil thing,
To practice wicked works
With men who work iniquity;
And do not let me eat of their delicacies” (Psalm 141:3).

David knew that the heart is the key to right speech.

“Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23).

As we fill our hearts with God's Word, and yield to His Spirit, He can use our tongues to direct others into the way of life, and to support them in the trials of life. Give God your tongue and your heart each day and ask Him to use you to be a blessing to others.

References

“The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: New Testament” by Dr. Warren Wiersbe.

[1], [2], [3] pg 867

[4], [5] pg 868

[7] pg 869

“Be Mature (James) Growing up in Christ” by Dr. Warren Wiersbe.

[6] pg 103