

James 3:1-12.

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov 18:21). Insults, speeches, conversations, arguments, curses, and blessings all come from the tongue. Whether intentionally or accidentally, our words have awesome potential for good or evil.

Glance through some of the speeches of Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler. Words were their arsenal, and they moved the world by them. Hitler seized upon the vulnerabilities of his people with speech after speech of a glorious new empire. Within 10 years, he rose from prisoner to Chancellor and commanded millions who were ready to die for him.

Across the English Channel, Churchill’s words raised the British Empire to its “finest hour.” London wasn’t ready to face Berlin, nor did anyone believe she could win. Surrender seemed the only viable option. Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Norway, France, and others had fallen so fast that victory seemed a fool’s hope. Yet, Churchill’s words inspired the British to “never give in” by giving hope at a time when there wasn’t.

Words hold such great power. Like a spark that destroys an entire forest or a rudder that turns a great ship, the tongue is small but has great potential. James warns that the way we speak impacts not only our own lives; it impacts countless others in ways we might never have imagined.

TEACHERS AND TEACHING

(JAMES 3:1-2)

Many who read James’ letter wanted to become teachers (Jas 3:1). They had turned from Judaism to Christianity and joined a whole new family, the church. Opportunities to advance existed in churches that likely didn’t exist in a synagogue. With Christianity in its infancy, one could more easily become a pastor than a rabbi. Churches also didn’t have much structure when James wrote (within 15 years of Christ’s Resurrection).

The desire to teach or to lead others may be very good (1 Tim 3:1). James, however, knew there were problems in the churches to whom he wrote. How did he know? By listening to the words of those who wanted to teach in them: “From the same mouth [came] blessing and cursing” (Jas 3:10).

Ongoing patterns of speech. James didn’t write against an occasional slip of the tongue here. It seems he regularly heard of men who wanted to lead in the church but hadn’t much control of their tongue. They were loose cannons at times even outright destructive to their own brothers and sisters in the faith.

Why did they want to teach? James says they were motivated by “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition” (Jas 3:14). Teaching had little to do with building up the church; it was fueled by a desire to build up oneself. Thus, these teachers blessed some and cursed others. They spoke well of those who supported their teaching endeavors and spoke against those who opposed them. What was the result? Quarrels and fighting. Factions had engulfed the churches to whom James wrote (Jas 4:1).

OUT OF THE HEART, THE MOUTH SPEAKS

Impure words are a strong indication of impure desires. The tongue is a tattletale, and it always tells on the heart. This is why Jesus said that God could judge a person on the basis of his or her own words...

Matthew 12:36-37—“I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

God could scratch all your bad deeds off the record and still condemn you on the basis of your words. According to the Bible, the tongue can be used for lying, deception, slander, flattery, blasphemy, complaining, gossip, foolishness, cursing, sensuality, boasting, and scheming. Even if God pardoned all our bad deeds, it would still be hopeless. That lump of muscle inside your mouth is proof enough you need a Savior.

The tongue is just an organ, but it’s the organ that most easily expresses the heart (Matt 15:18-19). If you want to know what someone loves or values, just spend time listening. We talk about what’s on our heart. If compassion for another resides within, our words tend to reflect it. If it’s anger, rest assured it will explode into words at the most inappropriate time. “For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Matt 12:34).

The Weight of Words

WORD PICTURES

(JAMES 3:3-12)

James used several pictures to illustrate the importance of speech. The tongue has an inordinate size to the damage it can enact upon others. It also tends to be inconsistent.

THE INORDINATE SIZE OF THE TONGUE (JAMES 3:3-6)

James says the tongue is like the bit in a horse's mouth, the rudder of a ship, and the spark that sets a forest ablaze. Since it might help to put some numbers to these pictures let's use a race horse, a cruise liner, and a historic fire...

- 1) The 1973 Triple Crown winner, Secretariat, set speed records in all three races that still stand to this day. Though he was 1,175 pounds of pure muscle, it was a ten-ounce bit that directed this racehorse to victory.
- 2) The RMS Queen Mary was a luxurious ocean liner over ten football fields in length with over 81,000 tons of steel. Yet, for thirty years of service across the Atlantic, a rudder that wasn't even one-fifth of one percent of her entire weight controlled her.
- 3) The Great Chicago Fire in 1871 left more than 100,000 homeless as it destroyed more than 17,000 buildings. One-third of the valuation of the entire city went up in smoke during those three days. And what was the cause? Nothing more than a small barn lantern.

In each case, something small can direct, control, or cause something much greater. The tongue is no different. No other member of the body is condemned so severely in the Bible. Sins of the hands and the feet (actions) are described vividly (Prov 1:16, 6:17). Yet, sins of the tongue have a destructive power that exceed these. Words roll so easily out of our mouth that end up forcing our hands and feet to take action.

James calls the tongue a "world of unrighteousness". More literally, a "system" or "cosmos of iniquity" (Jas 3:6). The idea is that our words can produce a system of destruction. A little gossip here or an insult there may not seem like much, but it might be the snowflake that begins an avalanche of ruin in another's life. Our words may lead to our own ruin as well.

THE INCONSISTENCY OF THE TONGUE

(JAMES 3:7-12)

The tongue is also like an untamable beast. All kinds of animals have been tamed—dogs, bears, lions, dolphins, etc. Through a system of rewards and punishments, we can cause most animals to consistently obey. The tongue, however, isn't tamable. Why? Because "it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (Jas 3:8).

The tongue can sing the glories of heaven or unleash hell, and at times, we do both within a matter of minutes. We can yell at our spouse on a Sunday morning only to warmly smile and sing with the choir. Back and forth with no consistency is the natural way of our words. Rather than being consistently gracious or consistently encouraging throughout the day, we can turn on a dime.

Prov 26:23—"Like the glaze covering an earthen vessel are fervent lips with an evil heart."

James adds that the tongue is like a spring that provides both fresh and salt water. It is also like a tree that bears two kinds of fruit (Jas 3:9-12). Inconsistency is the theme of these word pictures.

Many of James' readers wanted to become teachers. Inconsistent speech might include the way they praised their supporters and cursed their detractors. They weren't consistent vessels of grace with their words to everyone in the church.

James wants us to understand that words aren't just words—they can do great harm. In the case of churches, an inconsistent preacher has the ability to split a church. With all the fights in the churches to whom James wrote, it seems that splits were already happening (Jas 4:1).

So, how can a Christian get control of his tongue? The tongue is only tamed when the heart has been transformed. James isn't saying that a Christian should just speak less, hold back his words, or try a little bit harder. He's saying that words reflect the heart. If you want to change the tongue, you yourself need to be changed. If you want to have a sanctified tongue, you'll need a sanctified heart. And that's a work of God's Spirit within a man's heart changing him to be more like Christ.