

THE DESTRUCTIVE TONGUE

James 3:1-10

What is the most destructive force on the face of the earth? I cannot answer that question for sure but it seems to me that a force more destructive than famine, fire, drought or bombs is the evil force of the tongue. Bombs destroy and maim the physical body, but criticism, gossip and backbiting destroy or maim a person's reputation, which affects body, soul, spirit, heart and mind. Millions of people are spiritually killed yearly by a vicious tongue.

The Bible has more to say about the tongue than about many of the major doctrines of the Christian Faith. There are Christians who would give up their lives in martyrdom for the basics of the Christian Faith, but they would never think of giving their tongues over to God. Often Christians do not have their tongues under control and this affects their Christian walk.

BACKGROUND OF JAMES

The Book of James is about the necessity of proving the reality of one's faith by the good works he performs. The immediate context is found in chapter two where the subject of faith and works is discussed. The conclusion of chapter two is that true saving faith results in positive Christian works.

"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" (James 2:14).

"In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (James 2:17).

"You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?" (James 2:20).

“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”
(James 2:26).

It becomes obvious that faith without works is dead! It is not true, saving faith.

As soon as James finishes his discussion of the necessity of works to prove true saving faith, he begins to speak about the use and abuse of the tongue. Why does he choose to speak on the tongue? He could have talked about witnessing, prayer, Bible reading or giving as means to prove the reality of one’s faith. He chooses the tongue because the tongue shows the inward condition of the believer’s heart. Once the great Greek philosopher, Socrates, said to a young man, “Speak, son, that I may see you.”

THE TEACHER AND THE TONGUE James 3:1-2

“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers,”

Apparently there were many people in the church James was writing who wanted to be teachers of the Bible. However, it appears that these people did not have the gift of teaching or they did not take their teaching seriously. Those who were trying to teach did not have anything to say. They were unable to communicate the truth to people. They were only saying words and not communicating content.

“because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”

The teacher of the Word of God will receive much greater discipline because he is held accountable before God to preach the truth of scripture.

“Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” (2 Cor. 4:1-2).

Accountability is the issue, for with much light comes much responsibility. If a man who claims to be a teacher of God’s Word is merely preaching fancy words or trying to impress people with his preaching skill he will receive the greater

discipline. How a teacher speaks is a serious matter. Christ Himself said that a teacher should never speak an idle word. *“But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.”* (Matt. 12:36). What is being said here of the teacher is also in a lesser degree to be applied to every Christian.

“We all stumble in many ways.”

Every Christian will sin and have weak areas in his life, for he is not yet perfect. This, however, does not make sin right, but it is a fact of life. Yet, through God’s grace and a life of obedience, each Christian can see progressive improvement in these areas.

“If anyone is never at fault in what he says,”

This is specifically speaking about teachers of the Word, but in general this can be applied to all Christians. Because the teacher is constantly using words, he is most likely to fall into the misuse of words. Often the words of teachers leave an indelible impression for good or evil upon receptive and immature minds. James warns teachers that if they teach others the way in which they should live, they will receive the greater judgment than the rest of men if they have failed to walk in that way themselves. This is designed by God not to discourage the one who desires to teach, but puts before him the dangers of this vital office of teacher. It is a serious matter to be a teacher of the Bible.

Every time I read this section of scripture in James it causes me to tremble a little, for it says that my discipline will be greater than the average Christian because I am a teacher of the Bible. I am beginning to see the awesome responsibility of being a teacher of the Holy Scriptures.

“he is a perfect man,”

A person may have great potential to be a preacher, teacher or leader in spiritual matters, but he is not qualified for that position until he has learned to control the tongue. No man can consider himself a mature Christian until he has learned to control the tongue. You may read your Bible daily, pray daily and witness faithfully, but if you have a vicious tongue you are not a mature Christian.

“able to keep his whole body in check.”

The tongue is the key to the subjection of the whole body. If one can control the most difficult member of the body, the tongue, he can control the whole body. As the tongue is the hardest of all the members of the human body to control, it follows that in controlling the tongue a person possesses the power to bridle the whole body. The body is an outward means of expressing what is inside the body. The tongue is the most obvious member of the body to sin. To control the tongue is in reality to control the mind, for we must think before we speak. This verse says that to control the tongue is to control all the body. A great man once said, "A wise man, when stirred inwardly, often bites his tongue until it bleeds."

THE POTENTIAL OF THE TONGUE James 3:3-6

Potential for Good (James 3:3-5): James uses two illustrations to make the point that a very small thing can have control over a very large thing.

"When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal."

Think of a young, restless horse which is rebellious to all restrictions, longing to go anywhere just as long as it is moving. Yet, by a small bit placed in the mouth, the horse is brought under control. The horses' fine energies are directed into useful channels. The tongue brought under control and used for good can do mighty things.

"Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go."

Just a small rudder can control the actions and movements of a huge ship. The controlling factor in the direction the ship takes is the pilot or captain. The pilot moves the rudder, so the tongue is ultimately controlled by the person himself.

"Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts."

Because the tongue has such great potential for good, it has the right to boast that it can do many things. Kingdoms have been overthrown and governments

established by the tongue. With the tongue we worship Almighty God, exhort the brethren and propagate the gospel of our Lord.

Potential for Evil (James 3:5b-6): The tongue has great potential for good and great potential for destruction.

“Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.”

The tongue is a fire. A fire begins with a small spark and then shoots into flames which rapidly spread and if left uncontrolled soon everything is consumed. The result is a terrible fire leaving destruction. So too the misuse of the tongue can be devastating. Damage by the tongue can never be repaired. A seemingly harmless comment could cause a spiritual fire that could not be put out.

“The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person,”

The misuse of the tongue has evil effects on the one speaking the evil. The tongue defiles every particle of one’s body. As the world of unrighteousness defiles men, the tongue defiles the body. A vicious tongue eats away at the whole body like a cancer. How does the tongue defile the body? It suggests sin to us and to others. It excuses and defends sin when we commit it. It commits sin by lying, bitterness and gossip.

“sets the whole course of his life on fire,”

As a small spark can set ablaze a whole forest so a vile tongue can set the whole cycle of one’s human nature burning. The misuse of the tongue corrupts our whole personality.

People who are negative in their speech are very unpleasant people to be around. Their speech has affected their whole personality. Perhaps you do not have many friends because people do not like your negative, critical attitude about life. The tongue does affect a person’s whole nature.

“and is itself set on fire by hell.”

Lying, backbiting, maligning or gossip come directly from the pit of hell. Satan is the energizer of the slanderous tongue. A little lie, a little fit of temper, a little gossip or even a little ridicule may form into a great fire by a breeze from hell.

The Untameableness of the Tongue (James 3:7-8).

“All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man,”

Man has learned to control every kind of animal but because of inherent sin man has not learned to tame himself and this is evidenced by the misuse of the tongue.

“but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

No man can tame the tongue but God can tame the tongue. Vicious tongues, when yielded to the control of the Holy Spirit, can be tamed. God can do what seems to be humanly impossible!

The Inconsistency of the Tongue (James 3:9-10)

“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.”

The Christian life is a paradox. Good and evil should not proceed out of the same mouth but they sometimes do. Why? Because of sin that remains in us. As Christians who are seeking a holy life, we should be aware of the ugliness of our own sin natures and ask God for progressive deliverance from them.

The tongue that gives forth both good and bad at the same time is not a tongue brought under the control of the Holy Spirit.
