

# A Study in James

## The Tests of a Living Faith

James 3:5b–12

February 20, 2013

### Introduction

As we continue to look at the issue of the tongue, we need to remember what is ultimately at stake. The tongue itself is used as a metonymy for human speech. Speech, in turn, is controlled by the heart/mind of a person. And so we can see that a person's speech reveals the character of his whole person. But learning to control the tongue is a seemingly impossible task. Last week we saw that the tongue wields a great influence, out of proportion for its size. Just as the bit controls the horse, and the rudder controls the ship, so also the tongue wields great influence over the person (James 3:5a). In fact, teachers will be judged more strictly because of the multiplied quantity and influence of their words (v. 1). James will now show us what *kind* of influence the tongue typically wields.

### **Wisdom and Speech (vv. 1–12)**

The principle that James is developing throughout this section is found in verse 2:

“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a mature man who is also able to control his whole body.” (HCSB)

As we consider the negative effects of an out of control tongue, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that James is calling on us to control our tongues.

### The Destructive Influence of the Tongue (vv. 5b–6)

James now describes the destructive influential power of the tongue. He compares it to a forest set ablaze by a little fire. We have all seen pictures of forest fires that consume thousands of acres of trees. But when you trace the blaze to its source, it often involves an unattended campfire or a carelessly tossed cigarette butt. The point is that the tongue is like a little fire and has the same ability to wreak widespread havoc. Consider some of the ways it is described in verse 6:

*It is a World of Evil (v. 6a)*

The world to which James refers is the evil world system under the control of Satan. This system is in constant rebellion against God and has no love for the truth. In this way, the tongue and the world are closely related.

*It Defiles the Whole Body (v. 6b)*

The tongue has the ability to corrupt our entire person with the evils of the world. We saw the opposite of this in 1:27. There we saw that pure and undefiled religion involved keeping oneself *unspotted* from the world. Just think of a candidate for public office and how easy it is for one slip of the tongue to quickly destroy their entire campaign and reputation.

*It Sets on Fire the Course of Life (v. 6c)*

The tongue can be destructive not only in our lives, but also in the lives of others. How difficult is it for gossip and slander to spread from one person to an entire group? Not hard at all! Whether it's lies, or gossip, or hateful speech, or cursing, or any other kind of bad speech, the tongue can destroy entire lives.

*It is Set on Fire by Hell (v. 6d)*

Where does the destructive influence of the tongue come from? James tells us that the origin is Satan and his demons. Even back in the Garden of Eden this was so. Today, these satanic powers can wield the same influence over the tongues of those under their sway. Consider the words of John 8:44 — “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do.” The tongue of anyone who does not believe in Christ is under the power and domain of Satan. But this is not so for believers. Consider the contrast between this source (3:15) and the source of true wisdom (3:17).

*The Tongue is Untamable (vv. 7–8)*

When you consider the ability of mankind to tame animals, it is really quite impressive. Pets can be domesticated, livestock can be herded, and zoo and circus animals can be trained. Even some of the mightiest like the lion and the bear can be trained from youth to obey their masters. But the tongue is not tamable by any man. Verse 8 adds that it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. This is similar to the phrase in Romans 3:13: “the poison of asps is under their lips.” Wicked speech is

not something to trifle with. It has the power to destroy lives even to the point of death!

We should note a particular nuance of the text here. The NASB reads: “no *one* can tame the tongue.” (Italics mine). This might give us the impression that the tongue is not able to be controlled or constrained at all. But the sense there is actually that no ordinary *human being* can tame the tongue (cf. ESV, NIV 2011). There is one who is able to tame the tongue — the Lord Jesus Christ! And so we have hope that God can subdue our tongues, and curb the destructive power of our speech.

#### The Inconsistency of the Tongue (vv. 9–12)

In verses 9–12, we learn another key fact: the tongue is inconsistent. You’ll recall that for some of the tests in this book, James accuses his readers of failing the test. This is one instance here.

#### *The Charge of Inconsistency (vv. 9–10a)*

There are two kinds of speech that James mentions coming from the mouths of believers. The first kind involves blessing God. Blessing encompasses the activities of praising, giving thanks, and otherwise speaking well of someone. This does not mean we are conferring some kind of benefit on God, but rather that our words reflect praise to God. As true believers, these words may indeed come from the heart.

The second kind of speech involves cursing men. The kind of cursing James has in mind is the same kind of judgmental speech that Jesus referred to in Matthew 7:1–2. Believers should at times make a godly judgment about others through their speech (e.g. Matt 7:6; 1 Cor 5 — esp. v. 12). However, the cursing in view here is a negative kind of hyper-judgmentalism that falsely accuses, unjustly condemns, and generally suggests someone is worthy of divine punishment. This kind of speech is wrong on many levels. First, the Bible tells us to love our enemies and bless those who persecute us (Luke 6:28). Secondly, by cursing others we are presumptively taking on God’s role as Judge and effectively declaring ourselves to be God. Thirdly, we are cursing those who have been made in God’s likeness — in the image of God.

#### **Sidenote: The Image of God**

The concept of the image of God stems from Genesis 1:26–27 where God made both man and woman in His image.

What does this image involve?

The image of God involves the shared or communicable attributes of God's goodness. Specifically, it includes a *personal* dimension involving intellect, emotion, and will; a *moral* dimension involving the conscience; and a *spiritual* dimension involving the capacity to have fellowship with God and others. This social dimension is actually a subset of the spiritual.

What happened at the Fall in Genesis 3?

The image of God has been marred by the Fall but not destroyed. When defining "spiritually dead," we don't define that by meaning that an aspect of the image of God in man has been completely erased. Spiritually dead means someone is in bondage to sin and blinded by sin. Fallen man still has the spiritual capacity for fellowship with God, but lacks the ability.

*The Moral Exhortation (v. 10b)*

Since the image of God is still present in all mankind, we as believers should not be engaged in the activity of cursing others who still bear God's likeness. Regardless of the situation we're in — at home, at work, with friends, whatever — speaking both blessing and cursing is not becoming for a believer.

*Illustrations of Inconsistency (vv. 11–12)*

The natural course of nature is that a spring produces fresh water, a grapevine bears grapes, and a fig tree produces figs. However, a tongue which blesses and curses is like a spring which produces both fresh and salt water. The point James is driving at is that believers should only be producing godly speech that is consistent with their new nature given to them at salvation (2 Cor 5:17). As believers who have not yet been glorified, we have a disposition toward godliness and a disposition toward sin. But our lives and our speech should be producing godly fruit that is consistent with our new nature.

## **Conclusion**

Remember that the wise use of our tongue is a test of a living faith. The tongue is revealing of our whole person and only a living faith, aided by God's help, will be able to control the tongue (v. 2). Even for believers who are sure of their salvation, this can be a difficult test to pass. But the goal of our faith should be Christ-likeness and maturity. So let's press on toward that goal!

~AWB