

THE TONGUE

The tongue is a fascinating muscle. With it, our taste-buds bring us pleasure by informing our minds if something is sweet or sour, spicy or bitter. The tongue allows us to shape our thoughts from mere sounds into specific words, which are useful in expressing genuine emotions and pertinent information. Fact is, without the ability to communicate, our civilization would be doomed.

Unfortunately, though, because of our tongues, life can be sabotaged, and pain can be inflicted. Our tongues reveal one other thing about ourselves, it reveals our inner person. The tongue is the bucket that dips into the well of a person's heart. Someone once made the erroneous statement that "stick and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." The truth is, "stick and stones" may in fact break bones, but words can crush a spirit, assassinate a character and destroy a relationship.

James says that our tongue, though it is small, that it is like a fire and that it can quickly get out of control and destroy anything in its path. In 1871, a small spark in the O'Leary barn in Chicago set a blaze that engulfed the entire city that left 100,000 homeless, killed another 300, destroyed 17,500 building and incurred approximately \$400 million dollars in damages. Thus, while we have the ability to bless God and others with our tongue, we also have the ability to spew venom and destroy lives.

Let's consider our culture for a moment. Each and every day people are abusing one another by the selection of the words. We have become quite adept at talking trash and maliciously slandering one another for the sake of esteeming ourselves. But what is worse, some of us verbally abuse one another simply for pleasure of it—we enjoy hurting others. It is no wonder that the Bible addresses the use of our tongues so often. Jesus spoke a great deal on the use of this tiny muscle, because he knew the wealth of its power. Each of us need to become more aware of the value of our words and therefore we will know how to measure them before we say them.

"He who guards his lips guards his life, but a man who speaks rashly will come to ruin."

The tongue, in a way, reflects the inner person. It is a tattletale that reveals the heart and discloses the real you. Every tongue is capable of the most grotesque and hideous of sins. The Bible describes the tongue as wicked, perverse, corrupt, vile, complaining, slanderous, cursing, foolish, filthy, blasphemous, sensual and gossiping. And this list is in no way exhaustive.

It is no wonder that God put the tongue in a cage behind the teeth and walled by the mouth. The tongue is of great concern to God. In the book of James alone, the tongue is mentioned in every chapter (see 1:19, 26; 2:12; 3:1-12; 4:11; and 5:12), with one chapter (3) providing a great deal of insight. In the context of having a living faith, James reminds us that the tongue is possibly one of the best devices to measure the depth of our commitment to God. He basically concludes that the genuineness of a person's faith will invariably be demonstrated by his speech.

Paul understood this truth when he encouraged young Timothy (1 Tim. 4:12) to not let anyone look down on him because he was young but rather to set an example for believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Both Paul and James understood that the tongue only vocalizes what has been produced by the heart—the place where sin originates. Jesus put it another way in Matthew 12:36-37. He said that by our words we will either be justified or we will be condemned. In other words, what you are will inevitably be disclosed by what you say. That is, your spiritual temperature can be measured by the thermometer of your words. Thus, if your nature has been transformed then your behavior and speech will be transformed. But if your language and actions have not been transformed, then your nature has yet to be redeemed. This is a certain truth because the only way that the tongue can possibly be tamed is by the supernatural strength of the Holy Ghost in you.

Speech Under Control is a Measure of Maturity: James 3:2 states, *“We all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.”*

The word “stumble” means to trip or to fall. Feet that stumble can bring the body crashing to the ground. The word “perfect” means mature or complete. Maturity in God is directly related to the words we speak. If we are able to control our tongues, then it will reveal that we are mature and wise. Adversely, if we cannot hold our tongues, then we reveal the immaturity of our faith. Consider James 1:19, “be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...” Have you ever wondered why God has given us two ears and one mouth? Maybe He wants us to use our ears twice as much as we use our tongues.

The truth is, if we are going to mature in our faith, then we must learn to guard our lips. We will need to learn some priority skills. For example, a marathoner has no difficulty with a mile run, a professional golfer can sink a one-foot putt, a concert pianist can play chop sticks. And if we can learn to master our tongues, then we can master other areas of our lives.

A third word in this passage is “bridle.” The idea of this word involves the horsemanship of an expert horseman. An expert horseman knows how to rein in his horse, how to control his every movement. In the same manner, a mature believer knows how to control his conversation. He knows when to speak and when to listen.

The truth is, we all stumble, we all make mistakes. After all, nobody is perfect. Yet the idea in this passage is not that we give into our fallibility, but rather that we diligently strive to obtain the greatest sense maturity that is humanly possible.

The Tongue is Small but Powerful: The tongue not only distinguishes or depicts our heart, but it also gives direction. Consider the next two verses of James 3:3-4.

“If we put bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.”

What does a bit do? Why does a ship need rudder? The bit and the rudder are instruments of “direction.” They enable the individual to guide a vessel in a desired direction. As for size, it is not the issue, thus the tongue, even though it is one of the smallest members of the body, usually serves as the guide of one’s life.

James gives us two analogies to emphasize the significance of the tongue. First, the tongue is like a bit in a horse’s mouth. A horse can only be controlled by a bit. Even a horse tamed and bred for trail rides needs to have a bit in his mouth in order to have its movements controlled. Our tongues when left unbridled can take on a mindset that leads to destruction. A few ill-spoken and misplaced words can lead a relationship, a marriage and even a friendship down a road to destruction.

The tongue is the rudder for your body. If you tame it and guard it, it will serve you well and guide you through this life, but if you misuse it and neglect it, it will destroy your character and credibility. It’s like the guiding device of an F-16. You have this 30-million-dollar airplane that receives its flight instructions from a small stick that rests between the pilot’s knees that requires just a simple touch of the fingers to move this plane as the pilot desires.

Preachers, fairly or not, are known more by their tongue than most other professions. Preachers are creatures of words both in and out of their pulpits. If anyone is to be cautious of the power of the tongue it is the preacher.

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