

—{1}. **James 3:1-12.** **The Terrible Tongue**

A. Introduction

1. Works Not Words

- a. James teaches us how in practical terms Christianity should be shown in the way we live
- b. one of his points is that faith that is only skin-deep
 - (A) faith that is just a product of one's intellect
 - (B) faith that does not reach down into the heart of a person, into the very centre of his being
 - (C) such faith is useless
- c. such is the faith he says, in effect, of the person who talks a good religion but it is all on the surface and there is no results to be seen
- d. James is great in his use of examples and illustrations – as you have already seen when we read today's passage – so he illustrated this truth in the previous chapter with the case of the poor:
 - (A) "If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?" (James 2:15-16)
 - (B) so the message is that the fruits or results of Christianity are to be seen in works, not in mere words; and,

2. Yet Words Matter

- a. "Like apples of gold in settings of silver Is a word spoken in right circumstances." (Proverbs 25:11)
- b. as small children we used to yell back at the bullies, 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!' – then they would pick up some sticks and stones! – but words do hurt
- c. and God is paying attention to our words – one of the verses we used to sing of a Sunday School song went something like this:
 - Be careful little tongue what you say,
 - Be careful little tongue what you say;
 - There's a Father up above,

And He's looking down in love,
O be careful little tongue what you say.

d. now, is that Scriptural? ... it sure is; listen to what

(A) Jesus said "But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for 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)

(B) and Jude 1:14-15 tells us, "... Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him."

e. so words do matter

f. in fact, 5 or 6 times in James, he deals with this subject as also today

g. because the tongue is but the mirror of the soul, the expression of one's inward thoughts, attitude and character

B. The Teacher's Tongue 3:1-2

1. The Message to Teachers: verse 1 – "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment."

a. this is a message particularly addressed to teachers

(A) a couple of times James even applies its lessons to himself

(B) and I, too, am forced to apply it in the same way

b. to be a pastor-teacher, given by Jesus Christ to His church "... for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;" (Ephesians 4:12) is a very privileged position

(A) one aspect of this is the oversight of the church of which Paul wrote to Timothy, "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do." (1 Timothy 3:1)

(B) yet it is not to be entered upon lightly, as the qualifications for an overseer (or elder) make very clear

(C) 'According to an old saying, no one should become a minister of the Gospel, unless he can't help

it, unless he has something of the spirit of Paul when he said, "Necessity is laid upon me." (1 Corinthians 9:16)¹⁻².

- c. but because of the respect and kindness that Christians generally show to their pastors, it may appear to be an enviable position and so a man can seek after it for the wrong reason
 - d. it is such people that James addresss because it seems 'there was a desire among believers ... to aspire too lightheartedly to the work of teachers without considering with sufficient seriousness the tremendous responsibility involved'³.
 - e. and so there is this warning of the stricter judgement – that is, they will be judged according to a higher standard – which is in keeping with the general Scriptural teaching enunciated by Jesus Christ, "... From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more. ..." (Luke 12:48) – then follows another warning of ...
2. The Danger for Teachers: verse 2 – "For 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."
- a. that word 'stumble' we encountered before in James 2:10, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all." where we discovered that it was not speaking of this as being some minor misdeed, but of tripping across the edge that marks the boundary of God's moral law
 - b. it is a rebellious act where we say, 'I am not going to do what God says'
 - c. and James, and I, and all of us must include ourselves as such sinners
 - d. it is easiest for such transgression, stepping over the line, to take place in what we say, in exercising our tongues
 - e. which can be a particular pit-fall for those who stand and teach, for in the multitude of words that we use, and in the passion we have for the truths we have found in our study, we can be less than kind and less than brotherly to others who through the same Holy Spirit have learned other, complementary truths from the same Scriptures
 - f. and to broaden the application, how easy it is with ill-chosen words to spoil our Christian witness and testimony of the Gospel
 - g. so all of us are encouraged to pursue being that perfect person, one who is mature spiritually so that we

can control ...

- C. The Tiny-But-Potent Tongue 3:3-5a
1. The Bit Example, verse 3 – “Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.”
 - a. the Percheron is a marvellous horse, typically weighing about 1,900 pounds but often more than a ton (be that long, Imperial or metric)
 - (A) over the years it has been used as a mount for knights in armour
 - (B) for the pulling of coaches through the land
 - (C) for the ploughing of fields and hauling of heavy wagons
 - (D) and even today for the hauling of logs well over its own weight at such speeds that its driver can barely keep up with it
 - (E) to see one gallop is to realize the sheer power of this animal
 - b. and here on the other hand is a bridle that weighs a few ounces
 - c. and here you see the key part of a bridle, the bit that is even lighter and is only a few inches in length
 - d. yet this can govern this great animal to lead it as ever desired
 - e. the bit is small but it’s mighty
 2. The Rudder Example, verse 4 – “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.”
 - a. next James would have us consider a ship – or even a sailboat
 - b. my father sailed most of his life and among other boats, one sloop he had was of the lightning class (show a picture)
 - (A) its hull is about 20 feet long and constructed of modern materials weighs about 700 pounds, but was with older materials was considerably more
 - (B) it carries a mainsail and a jib whose area is about 177 square feet and if it flying a spinnaker that’s another 300 square feet
 - (C) in sailing on Lake Ontario you can have surprisingly heavy wind and as well there are some strong currents at the mouths of such as the Humber river

- (D) it is not unusual during a regatta to see one of these boats down with its sail in the water because of a sudden gust of wind
- c. yet the rudder that is used to steer these boats weighs only a few pounds and is approximately 2 square feet in area, perhaps a bit more
- d. "A second century writer, describing one of the Alexandrian grain ships, ... says: "The crew was like a small army. And they were saying she carried as much corn as would feed every soul in Attica for a year. And all depends for safety on one little atom of a man who controls that great rudder (yet small compared to the ship) with a mere broomstick of a tiller"^{4}.
- e. the rudder is small but it's mighty

3. The Boasting Tongue, verse 5a – "So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things."

- a. and there is our tongue
- b. it is the output gate of the mind, the feelings and the will – the heart
- c. it can boast and claim great things for its owner which when the time of reckoning comes, he cannot deliver
- d. of this the Bible says, "May the Lord cut off all flattering lips, The tongue that speaks great things;" (Psalms 12:3)
- e. yet, on the other hand, the tongue can rightly boast of its power; you only have to see a film of Hitler whipping the crown into a frenzy by his words to realize that is the case
- f. the tongue, a 'Two Ounce Slab of Trouble' as Pastor David Holwick has called it, can have an effect far beyond its size
- g. the tongue is small but it's mighty; that is why we need to deal with

D. The Troublesome Tongue 3:5b-8

- 1. A Fiery Beast, verses 5b-6 – "See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell."
- a. the word that the NASB translates 'forest' is used of combustible matter, kindling, and firewood, but it

- is frequently used in Greek literature in reference to a forest fire
- b. even if you have never seen one, you are no doubt well aware of the great devastation possibly resulting from a spark of a careless fire
 - c. so one careless word can stain a person with indelible pollution
 - d. it can have an iniquitous effect not only on ourselves and on our whole life but also upon the whole body of Christ
 - e. the word here for 'hell' is 'Gehenna', that garbage dump in the valley of Hinnom outside of Jerusalem, once used for human sacrifice, and symbolic of eternal punishment – but here used perhaps of the evil one that caused all this, the devil himself
 - f. when we succumb to temptation in the use of our tongues what a terrible fire we can set ablaze – “A worthless man digs up evil, While his words are like scorching fire.” (Proverbs 16:27)
2. An Untamed, Venomous Beast, verses 7-8 – “For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.”
- a. these words echo back to God's words to Noah after the flood was over: “The fear of you and the terror of you will be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky; with everything that creeps on the ground, and all the fish of the sea, into your hand they are given.” (Genesis 9:2) – sin did not destroy the God-given dominion to man over the animal kingdom and God's creation
 - b. but it did destroy man's ability to refrain from sin, to tame his tongue
 - c. as a child I tried to catch hold of the tongue of our Great Dane: it couldn't be done; it was too slippery, too slimy to be held
 - d. so is our tongue: slippery, ungovernable, uncontrollable
 - e. the result is poisonous, as described in Psalm 140:3, “They sharpen their tongues as a serpent; Poison of a viper is under their lips. Selah.”
 - f. ‘... A few rash words will set a family, and even a nation by the ears. Half the lawsuits and half the wars have been brought about by the tongue. Husband and wife have separated for ever, children have forsaken their homes, bosom friends have become bitter foes – all on account of fiery arrows shot by this powerful little member.’—{5}.

E. The Two-Faced Tongue 3:9-12

1. Blessing and Cursing, verses 9-10 – “With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.”
 - a. our tongues were made so that we can praise our Creator
 - b. even as we were singing earlier today in the praise of Christ’s Name
 - c. yet that same tongue can be used to hurl abuse on our fellow men
 - d. note again how James links himself with this readers in this matter: he has been guilty as have his brothers, his fellow-Christians
 - e. how easy this is to do, to speak as it were with a forked tongue
 - f. sweetly religious and gentle of speech on Sunday
 - g. stormy, angry, critical on Monday
 - h. since man is God’s creation this is utterly inconsistent; hypocritical
2. Contrary to Creation, verses 11-12 – “Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.”
 - a. not only is the inconsistency of the same tongue blessing God and cursing men contrary to His revealed will, but also contrary to the nature of His creation.
 - b. you don’t find the mouth of a fountain spueing forth both good and bad water
 - c. the nature of plants is that they reproduce in kind
 - d. so the regenerate nature of man created after the image of Christ in us should who that same consistency with Christ

F. Conclusion

1. Untamed by Man
 - a. A young man came to Socrates of Constantinople, a fourth century Christian to be trained in knowledge – his first lesson was to learn the verse, “I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my

tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me." (Psalms 39:1 AV)

(A) after many days he had not returned

(B) then one day his instructor met him by chance

(C) he asked about his absence, and the student replied he had failed thus far to learn the lesson of that verse

b. for as verse 8 is in the Greek, 'no one of mankind is capable of taming the tongue' ...

2. But Not Untamable!

a. About these verses Augustine said, 'He does not say that no one can tame the tongue, but no one of men; so that, when it is tamed, we confess that this is brought about by the pity, the help, the grace of God.'

b. the Christian has in the indwelling Holy Spirit the potential for the control of the tongue; all too frequently, however, we do not take advantage of the power available to us and appropriate this potential

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Explanatory additions to the Bible text are shown in *(braces)*. Version identifiers are:

ASV	American Standard Version of 1901
AV	Authorized (King James) Version of 1769
NAS	New American Standard version © 1960, 1995 The Lockman Foundation (usually the 1995 edition)
NIV	New International Version © 1984 by the International Bible Society
NKJV	New King James Version © 1979 Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers
WEY	The New Testament in Modern Speech © 1902, 1912 R. F. Weymouth

Some of my commentaries and resources used in the preparation of this message are identified as follow:

- BM – Biblical Museum, Editor James Comper Gray, ca 1870
- EBC – The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, © 1986 Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 49530, Michigan – Volume 12, James, by Donald W. Burdick, Professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary, ISBN 0-310-36540-6
- EGT – The Expositor’s Greek Testament, *James*, by W. E. Oesterley, Hodder & Stoughton, 1910 (Liberal, but generally helpful on Greek idiom.)
- Lange – Commentary on the Holy Scriptures by John Peter Lange, translated by Philip Schaff, Volume 9 of the New Testament; Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1915 (His interpretations sometimes take strange twists.)
- NICNT – The New International Commentary on the New Testament, *Commentary on the Epistles of James and John* by Alexander Ross, Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1954 – ISBN 0-8028-2192-8
- TYN – Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, *The General Epistle of James*, by Professor R. V. G. Tasker, The Tyndale Press, 1956
- Kerux – The sermon & illustration data base compiled by Rev. David Holwick at the web-site, www.holwick.com.

2. NICNT, *in loc*

3. *ibid*

4. *ibid*

5. J. Bolton, Biblical Museum, *in loc*