

Lifeworld.org

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.

The Taming of the Tongue

Lesson Aim: to note that the tongue is a powerful instrument for good or for evil.

L68. Date: July 1966. **Text:** James 3:1-14. **Topic:** Tongue.

INTRODUCTION

“God gave men two ears and one tongue that he might hear twice as much as he speaks.”—Old Proverb. **“Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath,”** James 1:19. **“If any man among you seem to be religious, and brideth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain,”** James 1:26. **“For he that will love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile,”** I Peter 3:10.

With such solemn words as these, the Bible warns each man to watch his words. It is so easy to speak. Indeed, it is estimated that the average person speaks eleven million words in a year. No wonder the Bible cautions believers to watch their words.

Jesus said, “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.” Luke 6:45. It is evident, therefore, that a man reveals his character by what he says. Sins of the tongue include foolish jesting, immoral conversation, swearing in the Lord's name, much slang language, lies, gossip, and repeating truth when it hurts another. Sins of the tongue can easily become a most prevalent sin.

Each reader can think of some person who offends in the area of speech. The lesson is not intended for that person, but for the reader himself.

This study must be pursued with an eye turned inward. **“Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips,”** Psalm 141:3.

EXPOSITION

I. A TEACHING TONGUE

Thank God for those faithful men and women who are teachers of the Word. How limited the minister of the church would be without them. Theirs is a solemn task, however, though there is a great reward promised for faithful service. Jesus said, **“Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven,”** Matthew 5:19. The Old Testament likewise promises special reward for the faithful teacher. **“And they that be wise (i.e., teachers) shall shine as the brightness of the firmament and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever,”** Daniel 12:3. So important are teachers that one incompetent teacher can do much harm.

Some people should not attempt to teach. Some people that feel themselves qualified should not attempt to teach. Before one assumes this sacred responsibility, he must be sure this is God’s will for him. It is God who sets teachers in the church (Ephesians 4:11) and to assume this work without His call is most serious.

James dealt with a congregation which had too many teachers! He cautioned, “My brothers, not many of you should become teachers, for you may be certain that we who teach shall ourselves be judged with greater strictness.” For one to assume the office of teacher is to claim knowledge sufficient for such a task. If he has the knowledge to teacher others, surely his own life should be exemplary. People will excuse things in the life of a church member which they will condemn in the life of a preacher or teacher. Why? Because they expect a higher standard of life from a teacher of religion. The teacher is judged with “greater strictness.” Phillips translates, “Teachers will be judged by a much higher standard.” This is warning sufficient to any person who aspires to become a teacher” Let him be sure this is the place to which the Lord leads and let him be willing to pay the price related thereto.

So serious is the work of teaching that only the spiritually mature should be trusted with it. What about the teacher who is habitually late, repeatedly absent, negligent in study, sloven in appearance, or careless in

presentation of the lesson? What is waiting such a person? Christian teacher, take inventory. **“For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged,”** I Corinthians 11:31.

On the other hand, thank God for all those faithful men and women who have been good stewards of their teaching responsibilities. How many of us owe our conversion, spiritual growth, or interest in the Word to the influence of a worthy teacher? One way to use the tongue worthily is to use it to teach the truth of God. May God give us more teachers who will be faithful to their task.

II. A DISCIPLINED TONGUE

Blessed is the believer who has learned to control his tongue. This seems to be the last citadel of Satan to fall to the forces of divine grace. When conduct is upright and motives are pure, the tongue still slips into sin. Indeed, control of the tongue is evidence that a man is full grown.

James says, “We all make mistakes in all kinds of ways, but the man who can claim that he never says the wrong thing can consider himself perfect, for if he can control his tongue he can control every other part of his personality!” What a challenge for vigilance!

The believer can control his tongue but he must pay the price of unceasing vigilance to do so. God has endowed man with a noble gift in permitting him to speak. What a shame that any man would abuse it by using his tongue to dishonor God or to injure another man. Jesus said that most tongue trouble is first of all heart trouble. **“A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things,”** Matthew 12:35. So we tell on ourselves by the way we talk!

It is not easy to control the tongue. When such is effectively done, many delicious morsels of conversation will go unspoken. Many words which would boost personal pride will never be uttered. It is often difficult to keep from speaking in self-defense. But evil speaking is always unnecessary speaking. An old proverb says it like this: “Never offer excuses: your friends don't need them and your enemies won't believe them.”

The disciplined tongue will speak words which merit the praise of men. **“How forcible are right words,”** Job 6:25. **“Pleasant words are as a honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones,”** Proverbs 16:24. **“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver,”** Proverbs 25:11. Let us speak like Christians!

The believer can control his conversation if he is truly devoted to Jesus.

The Scripture repeatedly admonishes him to control his tongue. When the Bible states, “**Let all . . . evil speaking be put away from you**” (Ephesians 4:31), it clearly infers that it is in the believer's power to control his tongue. If a man loves God above all and loves his neighbor as himself, he will control his tongue. It is true that most tongue trouble is first of all heart trouble.

III. A POWERFUL TONGUE

It has been observed that the muscle which controls the tongue is one of the most powerful muscles in this portion of the human body. It seems almost a paradox that a man can put a little steel bit in a horse's mouth and turn about an animal weighing hundreds of pounds. Again, a sailor can stand at the controls of an ocean-going vessel and control a small rudder which can turn a ship weighing hundreds of tons. Yet, a full-grown man cannot control the six ounces of flesh which lie between his jaws!

The tongue has power to set the direction of the life. James points out that the horse follows the direction set by the rider who controls the bit. The ship follows the direction of the helmsman who controls the rudder. So the pattern of a man's life is set by how he uses his tongue. What a power to blight or to bless lies here. In almost every language and culture there abound proverbs which call for wise use of the tongue and warn against its wrong use. An unknown writer has gathered these together in this little poem entitled, “**The Tongue.**”

“The boneless tongue, so small and weak
Can crush and kill.” declared the Greek;
“The tongue destroys a greater horde,”
The Turk asserts, “than does the sword.”
The Persian proverb wisely saith;
“A lengthy tongue—an early death”;
Or sometimes takes this form instead,
“Don't let your tongue cut off your head.”
“The tongue can speak a word, whose speed”
Says the Chinese, “outstrips the steed”:
While Arab sages this impart:
“The tongue's great storehouse is the heart.”
From Hebrew wit the maxim sprung:
“Though feet may slip, ne'er let the tongue”;
The sacred writer crowns the whole:
“Who keeps his tongue, doth keep his soul.”

The power of the tongue is evidenced in the evil it can inflame. As a tiny spark can ignite a fire which will destroy an entire forest, so the tongue—though a small member of the body—can create great problems. History abounds in illustrations. Long-standing friendships have been broken, church congregations have been divided asunder, nations have even gone to war because of evil words. Believers may advance or hinder God's cause by the way they use their tongue. Yes, the tongue must be tamed. James points out that the tongue has power over the whole body. It can purify and ennoble or it can defile. When a person uses his tongue to spread slanderous gossip, foul language, “smutty” jokes or otherwise being an instrument of Satan, he is defiling himself before God. Utterances of malignity, greed, uncleanness will excite lust which acts through all the bodily organs and bring universal pollution.

An evil tongue is inspired of hell. The fire of the Holy Spirit set men's tongues testifying on the day of Pentecost. James said there is also a fire of hell which sets the evil tongue to talking. “How appalling the thought should be to the careless talker, the man of unchastened lips, that his words are really Satan's, for which yet he himself is responsible; that his utterances are doing on himself and those around him the devil's work; that, when he pours forth from his lips profane, or impure, or unkind language, he is, in truth breathing out flames lighted from the bottomless pit.”—Robert Johnson.

An evil tongue spreads deadly poison. Paul said of evil speakers, “. . . **the poison of asps is under their lips,**” Romans 3:13. The scandalmonger is sometimes spoken of as having a “serpent tongue,” and the simile is in full account with the damage which evil speech inflicts. Such conversation can kill reputation, peace, hope and conscience. No wonder God will call men into judgment for every idle work they speak, Matthew 12:36.

IV. A FORKED TONGUE

The American Indians had an accurate description of the liar—the man who speaks one way one time and another way another time. They said he spoke with a “forked tongue.” James warns against such a tongue. What man is there who can bless God and curse a man made in the image of God in the same breath? What a monstrosity!

“In nature we never find such an anomaly. No fountain sends forth pure and blackish water from the same vent. Trees bear according to their kind, for they have but one nature. Fig trees do not produce olives, nor do grapevines bear figs. With the tongue it is, alas, otherwise! The same man speaks well of God and ill of man, and often fails to recognize the

incongruity of such behavior.”—H. A. Ironside.

In spite of the moral incongruity for blessing and cursing to come from the same mouth, who has not been shocked and disappointed to hear unbecoming conversation by some brother who otherwise seemed deeply spiritual? There are occasions when unsaved people were turned from Christ because of the lies, immorality, or cursing of one who named the name of Christ. Christians must control their tongues. The conversation of an uncontrolled tongue is mean, devilish, ungodly and Satanically inspired!

CONCLUSION

Before God, in the quiet of our hearts, let us enter into a holy covenant to use our tongues only as God has ordained. Enter this holy resolve with the Psalmist, “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,” Psalm 39:1. Follow up that resolve with constant vigilance and unceasing discipline.

Prayer will be a powerful factor in taming the tongue. This is a proper subject of prayer. **“Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth: keep the door of my lips,”** Psalm 141:3. Many have found it profitable to memorize Psalm 19:14 and repeat it as a prayer many times during the day. **“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.”** In this manner the tongue will be tamed for glory of God.

QUESTIONS

1. Why is control of the tongue so important?
2. What does James 1:26 say on this subject?
3. How does control of the tongue reveal Christian maturity?
4. Why is it so difficult to control the tongue?
5. What inspires an evil tongue?
6. What does nature teach regarding an uncontrolled tongue?
7. How does speech reveal what is in the heart?
8. Why will we account to God for our words?