



“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver,” Proverbs 25:11.

The Taming of the Tongue

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

L277. Date: July 1971. **Text:** James 3:1-14. **Topic:** Tongue.

INTRODUCTION - Watch your words! This is the theme of today's study. Here is a lesson which will teach us to pray, **“Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips,”** Psalm 141:3.

Words are the common means by which we communicate thoughts. And thoughts direct the course of human actions. Words are, therefore, capable of setting the course of one's life. They are powerful. They can do much good or much harm. It is very important what you say when you talk. Here is the way an unknown writer said it:

“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.”

Each writer can think of some instance of tragedy brought about by an uncontrolled tongue. But such a tragedy is compounded when it is a Christian whose speech is a cause of offense. From this study it is hoped that many will enter a solemn covenant before God to keep a close guard over his speech that his words may bless God and aid men. This is the ultimate aim of today's lesson.

EXPOSITION

I. IMPORTANCE OF TAMING THE TONGUE, 3:1.2.

1. Men must account to God for their words, verse 1. Jesus warned that **“. . . every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment,”** Matthew 12:36. An “idle” word is a vain, empty and unprofitable word. By the presence or absence of such words in our daily speech we will stand condemned or we will stand justified, Matthew 12:37. How we need to hear this solemn warning!

The Apostle James applies this truth even in the area of religious instruction. He warned that one should be slow in assuming the responsibility of a teacher because they, too, must account to God.

It is God who sets teachers in the church, Ephesians 4:11. To assume this office outside of His will is most serious. To fill that office and lead others astray results in one being “called the least in the kingdom of heaven,” Matthew 5:19. Hence some people should not attempt to teach.

Strange as it seems, 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.” This simply means that teachers are judged by a much higher standard. Only those who are spiritually mature should be entrusted with this sacred task. These comments indicate that every person should watch his words. He will surely account to God for them in the day when men are judged by Jesus Christ.

2. Control of the tongue indicates spiritual maturity, verse 2. We offend others in so many ways; but offense caused by words is most common. James points out the difficulty in avoiding offense by words. He says that a man who has sufficient strength of principle, and spiritual vigilance to offend not in word, is able to bridle the whole body. How surprising to learn

that control of the tongue is evidence that a man is full grown in grace. This means the tongue is the last citadel of Satan to fall to the forces of divine grace.

Control of the tongue demands unceasing vigilance. It is not an easy task. So many opportunities come to speak that evil creeps in without our intention. Watch out that Satan does not put words of gossip, self-praise, or half-truth in your mouth.

God has greatly blessed men with the gift of speech. **“How forcible are right words,”** Job 6:25. How much good they can do. **“A word fitly spoken are like apples of gold in pictures of silver,”** Proverbs 25:11. With such potential for good, the spiritually mature believers will not permit his words to work harm to anyone.

Yes, it is in the believer's power to control his words. This is why the Bible contains the command, **“Let all . . . evil speaking be put away from you. . .”** Ephesians 4:31. It is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks, Matthew 12:34. He whose heart is filled with love to God and his fellow men will speak honorably. It is clear, then, that most tongue trouble is first of all heart trouble. One who is spiritually mature will control his speech.

It is important that the believer control his tongue for two great reasons. (1) He must account to God for what he says. (2) He will manifest spiritual maturity, or lack of it, by his manner of speech. Do you control your tongue?

II. DIFFICULTY IN TAMING THE TONGUE. 3:3-5.

It is strange that man can learn how to control things much larger and stronger than himself and cannot control the six ounces of flesh between his jaws. He puts a bit of steel in a horse's mouth and turns about an animal weighing several hundred pounds. A sailor can stand on the bridge of a great ship and by controlling the rudder can turn a ship weighing hundreds of tons into the precise course he desires. Yet a two hundred pound man cannot control his six ounce tongue. How very strange! It has been observed that the muscle which controls the tongue is one of the most powerful muscles in that portion of the human body.

Look how the horse follows the direction set by his mouth as guided by his bridle. Look how a great ocean going vessel follows the direction set by the rudder. Look how a man's life follows the direction set by his tongue through the words it speaks.

But how difficult it is to control the tongue. Verse 2 and verse 3 indicate it is very difficult to master that organ of the body. Almost any other

part of the body may be controlled before the tongue is subdued. This is why it is imperative that we seek divine aid in this conquest.

Difficulty should not discourage diligence in taming the tongue. If one would keep deadly poison from the reach of a child, just so should he guard his tongue. The very fact that the tongue is difficult to control makes it even more imperative that the Christian work constantly at the task. And he must ask God for help.

III. IMPERATIVE FOR TAMING THE TONGUE, 3:5-8.

There is one great danger which makes it imperative that the tongue be tamed. That is, it has such a great potential for evil if uncontrolled. If a tiny spark can start a forest fire which can destroy hundreds of acres of woodland, just so a careless word can create problems greater than can be imagined.

1. Much evil can come from such a little member, verse 5. History records how nations have gone to war, churches have been rent by schisms, families have broken asunder, and friends have parted because of an uncontrolled tongue. Though it is small it is not insignificant in human affairs. The sting of a word can rankle for years. A sour phrase can embitter a life. Take care!

2. An evil tongue is set on fire of hell, verse 6. There was a fire of the Holy Spirit which set men's tongues to testifying of Jesus on the day of Pentecost. So there is a fire of hell which inspires the tongues of wicked and careless men.

“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 his lips profane, or impure, or unkind language, he is, in truth breathing out flames lighted from the bottomless pit. “—Robert Johnson.

Some reader may deny that he has a tongue capable of such evil. But do not be deceived. The words of Simon Peter could bring forth the commendation of Jesus (“Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona. . .”) and in the next instance Peter's words brought rebuke and reproof (“Get thee behind me, Satan, for thou savorest not the things that be of God”), Matthew 16:17, 23. Therefore, guard your tongue unceasingly. Don't let Satan use it.

3. The tongue can defile the whole body of a man, verse 6. The tongue has such an influential position among our members, that by its utterances of malignity, greed, uncleanness, it excites the lusts which act through all the

various bodily organs and thus brings universal pollution. Physical beauty loses its attractiveness when the tongue is foul and depraved. Education is empty if it expresses its knowledge through impure speech. Watch out how you talk! This warning is issued to Christian believers. They are not beyond the influence of Satan. He would delight with special glee to destroy a believer's influence by causing him to speak unworthily of his profession as God's child. Don't let him have an advantage in your speech.

4. An evil tongue is filled with deadly poison, verses 7-8. Like the serpent's fang, the uncontrolled tongue is full of poison —deadly poison. We speak of the scandalmonger as having a serpent's tongue, and the simile is in full accordance with the evil and damage such a speaker inflicts. It is significant, too, that we have prepared antidotes for the bite of the poison serpent. But there is no antidote for the poison of an uncontrolled tongue.

Paul says of the unredeemed, **“Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues have they used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips,”** Romans 3:13. How tragic if such words should ever be applied to a professed Christian because of the foul conversation which he spews forth. Don't let it be true of you. Refuse to poison your own life, and the lives of others, by vile speech. No wonder God will call men to account to Him in judgment for every idle word, Matthew 12:36.

IV. LOGIC OF TAMING THE TONGUE, 3:9-12.

There is a strange paradox for the same mouth to bless God and curse men. For the same person to speak both blessing and cursing is beyond reasonable explanation. But in spite of this moral incongruity, it happens. Who has not been shocked and disappointed to hear the unbecoming conversation of a person who otherwise seemed truly committed to Jesus?

In nature we never find such an anomaly. No fountain sends forth pure and brackish 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, alas, is otherwise! The same man speaks well of God and ill of man, and often fails to recognize the incongruity of his behavior.”—H. A. Ironside.

Redemption does not work from the outside in, but from the inside out. The real problem with the tongue is the heart within. The tongue does not decide what it wishes to say. It is controlled by something within the person, Matthew 15:18-19.

When a man becomes a believer, he receives a new heart, Ezekiel 36:26. But that new heart does not guarantee that only good will issue forth

from our lips. We have the wondrous gift of eternal life “in earthen vessels,” II Corinthians 4:7. The new nature does not eradicate the old. They live side by side and only by faith can the believer “reckon” himself to be dead to sin but alive unto God through Jesus Christ and so glorify God in his body, Romans 6:11-23.

But it is logical that the believer should manifest in outward conduct the life of God within him. Sins of the tongue are incompatible with the true Christian life of faith and service. They are a violation of the principle of life in Christ. If you claim to be a Christian, therefore, speak like one who belongs to Christ. It is this outward manifestation of the inward life of God which is called for in the words of the Apostle Paul, “. . . **Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure,**” Philippians 2:12-13. How reasonable is this command.

The taming of the tongue would be in accord with the new nature of the believer. When one becomes “a new creature” in Christ Jesus, when “old things are passed away” and “all things are become new” (II Corinthians 5:17), there will be a change in the person who has received Christ. His habits will change if he is a new creation. His thoughts will change if he is in Christ. His motivation will change if the old things of sin are passed away. His speech will change if all has become new for him. For one to undergo such a change and not experience a taming of the tongue would be most unusual and peculiar indeed. Common sense teaches, therefore, that the words of a believer should be different from the words of unbelievers. How about your words?

So logical is a changed conversation in a believer that the Bible states, **“If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridled not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain,”** James 1:26. If the lips but declare what is in the heart (as Luke 6:45 declares) how can the pure in heart utter perverse things? He cannot and still be true to his profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION - Has this lesson spoken to a need in your life? Has God used this study to convict of sin in speech? If so, there is yet hope for you. For God has revealed fault that He might forgive, cleanse and heal. Admit to Him your failure. Confess it as sin against Him. Ask for forgiveness. Then enter into solemn covenant with Him to be strong in this point of Christian experience.

Prayer will be most helpful in guarding against this sin. Memorize Psalm 141:3. Use its words to pray often, **“Set a watch, O Lord, before my**

mouth: keep the door of my lips.” The victory can be won. Your victory will be won. He is able to give you deliverance from sin and purity of speech if you will ask and trust Him to do so.

Let us conclude this study with a prayer: **“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer,”** Psalm 19:14.

QUESTIONS

1. Why must men account to God for their words?
2. What does Matthew 12:36 say about it?
3. How does control of the tongue indicate spiritual maturity?
4. Why is it so difficult to control the tongue?
5. How can a few words cause such great problems?
6. How does the tongue defile the whole body?
7. In what sense is an evil tongue filled with deadly poison?