



“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).

Faith Controls The Tongue

Central Truth: Taming the tongue is essential for your spiritual growth.

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“It takes a baby two years to learn to talk and fifty years to learn to be quiet.” There is much truth in that old saying, isn't there? Perhaps that is why the Holy Spirit placed in the Bible a number of references to the control of speech.

Tongue is an English translation of the Greek word *glossa*. That word occurs fifty times in the Greek text of the New Testament. It has three primary meanings.

(1) Tongue refers to the physical organ in your mouth. Mark 7:31-35 reports how Jesus enabled a mute man to speak by touching his tongue.

(2) Tongue refers to something of an elongated shape like the human tongue. Acts 2:3 speaks of “*tongues of fire*” because the flames were slim and long upon the heads of the believers on that day of Pentecost. Today, we speak of the tongue of a shoe or the tongue of a wagon.

(3) Tongue refers to a distinct human language. Acts 2:8 reports the words of the people present at Pentecost, upon hearing the miraculous gift of languages: “*How hear we every man in our own tongue wherein we were born?*” A person's “native tongue” is the language he learned to speak from youth.

Our reference to “tongue” in this study has to do with the words you speak by the use of your physical tongue and vocal organs.

The Problem With the Tongue (James 3:1, 2)

The first problem we face is that we are accountable for all of our words. Jesus said, *“I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment”* (Matthew 12:36). When Christians stand before the judgment seat of Christ, they will be judged according to their works—what they did and what they spoke.

James warns those who want to become teachers (called “masters” in the King James Version). He reminds them that the teacher is judged by a more strict judgment than others. The teacher must use words to teach, words which will be evaluated by the Lord. And one who teaches is judged by a more severe standard.

It is so easy to stumble in our words. James acknowledges that and adds, *“If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to control the whole body”* (verse 2). So the wise person limits how many words he speaks (Proverbs 17:27). If a person would declare himself righteous and innocent, listen to him speak and soon his own mouth will show his profession to be false (Job 9:20). Jesus warns us to say “Yes” when we mean yes and to say “No” when we mean no. Many words might lead us into sin (Matthew 5:37).

That is the problem with the tongue. Those few words from James' pen challenge us and warn us to watch our language.

The Power of the Tongue (James 3:3-6)

Here is an excellent illustration of James' power to put a lot of meaning in a few words. In only twenty words (in the King James Version) he pictures a high-spirited horse controlled by its rider with only a small bit in its mouth. (That makes the Epistle of James a classic: in literature, even apart from its spiritual message.) However, we can draw principles from that illustration and apply them to life.

The tongue has the power to control a high spirit (verse 3). Some horses are of such a temperament that they do not wish to submit to the control of the rider. But the bit in the mouth disciplines them to obey the rider's will. In like manner, the tongue is able to bring under control the high spirit of a person. The discipline of the tongue can tame a rash spirit, stir up a lethargic spirit, and humble a proud spirit. Be sure you use your tongue to speak things which have that beneficial effect.

The tongue has the power to set the direction of your life (verse 4). The body of a large and powerful horse is turned in the direction the rider or driver wishes to go, by the use of the bit. The mass of a great ship is set in

the direction the pilot desires by the use of a very small rudder. The life of a strong person is set in the direction his words mark out.

Some words pierce like a sword; some words give life (Proverbs 12:18). The person with a wicked tongue (evil speech) falls into trouble as a sinner and a lawbreaker (Proverbs 17:20). The Bible says, "*Death and life are in the power of the tongue*" (Proverbs 18:21). A person speaks harsh and condemning words in a moment of anger. Another's spirit is wounded by those words. That wound may continue unhealed for years. Or a person speaks kind and encouraging words to one in trouble. Those words comfort and heal. The blessing of that continues for years. In each instance the tongue affected the direction of a person's life.

The tongue has power to bring great damage or great blessing (verses 5, 6). Fire is a blessing as long as it is under control. We heat our homes, cook our meals, and generate power by the use of fire. But fire becomes a curse when it is out of control. Homes are consumed, forests are destroyed, and wild life suffers. You have experienced the joy of a lovely fire and perhaps have experienced the terror of a rampaging forest fire.

The tongue is like a fire. It has great power to bless. It has great power to blight. Speech can do great good or harm to you, bringing life or a curse (Proverbs 13:3). By disciplining your words, you will keep your life from trouble (Proverbs 21:23). Therefore, the Bible warns, "*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). Discipline of the tongue leads to a good long life. Like a fire, a disciplined tongue brings good and an undisciplined tongue brings evil. As a tiny spark can start a great forest fire, a little word can do great damage.

James 3:6 is difficult to interpret. It seems to say, "The tongue is like a spark of fire. It represents among our members the world with all its wickedness. It contaminates the whole body. It provides the 'fire' (motive) of our natural life, but it receives its 'fire' from hell itself. The tongue suffers under the depravity which afflicts the whole human person. Therefore, it must be guarded and disciplined with careful diligence."

The Poison of the Tongue (James 3:7, 8)

The human tongue is more dangerous than wild animals. All types of animals have been domesticated by mankind. God put all of the animals on earth under the dominion of man (Genesis 1:28). The elephant is many times stronger than a man, yet man has disciplined his strength and taught him to work. The cheetah runs much faster than any man, yet man has disciplined

his speed and taught him to hunt. The horse is much larger than man, yet man has disciplined his spirit and taught him to obey his much smaller master. Yet, animal trainers who control the strongest, fastest, largest, and fiercest beasts cannot control their own tongue — that six ounces of flesh which lies between the jaws. How strange!

The tongue can do harm to innocent people. It is an “unruly evil” (a restless, irreconcilable evil incapable of being quieted). It is filled with a poison more deadly than the venom of the most poisonous serpent. James does not say merely that the tongue is full of poison; he says it is full of “deadly” poison. Beware!

We seem to be left without hope. In each of our physical bodies there is a member which is filled with deadly poison. It is capable of bringing a curse upon others and upon ourselves. And the Holy Spirit caused James to write, “*The tongue can no man tame*” (verse 8). What can we do?

There is only one hope. You cannot control your tongue, but God can. Glory! He gives you grace to bring that unruly member under control. He says of the unsaved, “*Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness*” (Romans 3:13, 14). Note how sin is related to the mouth. But when God delivers us from the power of sin, He frees the mouth to speak blessings rather than cursings. God can conquer the most rebellious tongue and make its speech holy.

The Paradox of the Tongue (James 3:9-12)

The tongue is a paradox in that it can violate a principle of Scripture (verse 9). The same organ of the body can be used both to bless and to curse; to praise God and to dishonor people who are made in the image of God. How can that be?

God's design is that we will with one mind and one mouth glorify Him (Romans 15:6). That is the purpose of our salvation. But to bless God and curse man does not glorify Him. Each person, regardless of race, age, culture, or sex, is made in the image and likeness of God: “*O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand*” (Isaiah 64:8). To speak good of God and evil of people is a contradiction, which is actually sinful. But the undisciplined tongue will do it. **The tongue can violate a principle of logic** (verse 10). It is illogical for blessings and cursing to come from the same mouth. That indicates a divided spirit, which tries to serve two masters at the same time. Jesus said that is impossible. How can anyone call himself a Christian if that is his

manner of speech? How can anyone say he loves and serves God if the words of his mouth contradict that statement? Be careful how you talk, for your words will reveal the truth of what is in your spirit. 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 evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh”* (Luke 6:45) **The tongue can violate a principle of nature** (verses 11, 12). A horticulturist may graft the buds of different types of peaches on the same tree, and each may produce a different type of fruit. But all the fruit is peaches. That follows a basic law of nature, “everything after its kind.” The Christian tongue can speak many kinds of blessings, but only blessings. The tongue that speaks curses is not a Christian tongue. Nature proves it so. There is a proverb which says, “Words, good or bad, have to be in you or they can't come out of you.” Another has said, “More lasting harm can come to a church from tongues wagging within than from stones being hurled without.” Take heed, therefore, how you speak. God is listening. You will account for your words in this world and in the next. Remember the central truth of this study: “Taming the tongue is essential to your spiritual growth.”

Questions for Discussion

1. In what three ways is tongue used in the New Testament?
2. What does Matthew 12:36 say about judgment for words?
3. How is control of speech a sign of spiritual maturity?
4. How does James 3:5 illustrate the power of the tongue?
5. “Why did James call the tongue a “deadly poison”?”
6. How is the tongue “set on fire of hell”?
7. “Why has no person been able to “tame” his tongue?”
8. How can the same tongue bless God and curse people?
9. What are some of the ways the tongue is used for cursing?
10. How can you use your tongue for blessing this week?