

Danger!

Tongue at Work!

James 3:1-12

An Expository Sermon

by David Roper

The book of James has been compared to a collection of beautiful gems—as James touches first on this topic and then on that. It should not, however, be thought a collection of unmounted gems, rolling loose in the confines of the book. It is rather a string of matched jewels, each beautiful on its own, but each relating to the others and each enhancing the others. This relationship of one part to the other is seen in our present study.

Earlier in the book, James stressed the importance of right speech: “If any man thinketh himself to be religious, while he bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his heart, this man’s religion is vain” (1:26). But then, in the last study on faith and works, he emphasized that Christianity is not just a lot of talk. Some might, therefore, conclude that what we say is not so important after all. So James then has a lesson on the tongue.

There is no way to overemphasize the importance of using the tongue properly. When we go to the doctor, it is not uncommon for him to say, “Stick out your tongue.” He can tell much about our physical condition by looking at the tongue—its color, the evenness of the color, any coatings, any irritated areas. Even so, it is possible to tell much about our *spiritual* health by looking at our tongues, or at least our use of them.

I am calling this lesson, “Danger! Tongue at Work!” because James’ emphasis is not on the positive, but on the negative. Christians in his day were misusing the vast power of the tongue—and James was unhappy about this and did not hesitate to tell them so. Some writers feel that James uses much exaggeration and hyperbole in this section to get across his point, but the longer I live and deal with people, the less I am inclined to believe that James exaggerates at all. The tongue is a powerful force—and, misused, can literally destroy lives!

The approach we will be taking in this lesson is this: *We need to do all we can to keep our tongues under control because. . . .* And we will pull five reasons from our text.

I. BECAUSE OF THE GREAT RESPONSIBILITY WE HAVE AS TEACHERS (3:1, 2)

James begins:

“Be not many of you teachers, my brethren, knowing that we shall receive heavier judgment For in many things we all stumble. If any stumbleth not in word, the same is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also” (James 3:1, 2).

Look at the phrase, “be not many teachers.” The word *masters* as used in the KJV does not refer to the owners of slaves or even an employer, but rather to “school masters.” The Greek word here is the word for “teachers,” and thus you will find it in more modern translations.

In a sense, the entire third chapter is on the subject of teachers, as we will stress again at the beginning of the next lesson (on vv. 13-18).

When it is understood that James is talking about teachers, his opening statement is startling: “Be not many of you teachers, my brethren”! At first glance, this appears to contradict other passages in the New Testament. Did not Jesus command each Christian to be a teacher when He gave the Great Commission? (Matthew 28:18-20). Did not the Hebrew writer say, “Ye ought to be teachers”? (Hebrews 5:23). Why, then, did James command that not many of them should be teachers?

Let me suggest, first of all, that James was talking about a distinctive ministry, that spoken of in Ephesians 4:11, when Paul said, “And he gave . . . some, evangelists; and some, pastors [or

elders] *and teachers.*" (Italics mine.) It is generally agreed that that ministry refers to the more-or-less public teaching of the word, such as is done in our Bible classes. *Every* Christian should be involved in sharing Christ and His word with others (Acts 8:1, 4), but not every Christian is required to be a teacher on a more formal basis. To adapt the phrasing of 1 Corinthians 12, if the whole body were a mouth, where would be the hearing, the feeling, the serving?

But this raises another question: Is James saying that most of us should not aspire to be public teachers? Frankly, we always seem to be in need of good, qualified teachers! Let me, therefore, suggest that neither is James trying to discourage those who would prepare themselves to teach. Rather the context indicates that James is saying at least two things:

First, *do not become teachers from the wrong motivation.*

Among the Jewish people, it was a great honor to be a rabbi or teacher. According to their traditions, if one had to make a choice between the needs of their rabbi and the needs of their parents, their rabbi had to come first.¹ While not going to this extreme in the New Testament church, the public teacher of the word held an exalted position—along with the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and elders (Ephesians 4:11). People being people, there would be some who would desire the position of teacher for the *honor* it might bring. Some find it hard to resist the combination of position, prominence, and plaudits! Jesus spoke against such in Matthew 23: "But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your teacher, and all ye are brethren. . . . But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant" (vv. 8, 11).

It is possible that some not only wanted the honor of a position, but also the *power* that might come by having a public platform for their views. The Amplified Bible has this thought-provoking translation: "Not many of you should become teachers [self-constituted censors and reprovers of others]."

Second, *do not become teachers without preparing yourselves.*

The next lesson will begin with verse 13: "Who is wise and understanding among you? let him *show* by his good life his works in meekness of wisdom." (Italics mine.) The implication is

that some were claiming to be wise and endued with knowledge. James challenges them to *prove* their claims by their lives, with the further implication that they were *not* all that wise and did *not* have that much knowledge. In other words, they wanted to be acclaimed as wise and knowledgeable teachers without going to the trouble of *preparing* themselves.

The influence of a teacher is so great that it is *imperative* that each teacher prepare himself or herself in mind and life. This involves gaining a knowledge of God's word (see 1 Timothy 1:7). This involves training in *how* to teach. *And* it involves *living* by the standards that we proclaim (see Romans 2:17-19). Paul told Timothy to commit what he had learned "to *faithful* men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). G. C. Brewer had this to say on this point years ago: "If I could control the affairs of the church where I live, I would not allow anyone to teach a class who does not attend all the services of the church, including prayer meeting, of course: and who does not show a lively interest in all the problems and work of the church. What is a teacher to teach? If he is not going to teach respect for and fidelity to the Lord's blood-bought institution, why should he teach anything? If he is not going to teach the students to become Christians and to live as Christians ought, why should he teach?"

But, to return to our text, why does James warn against becoming teachers for the wrong reasons and without adequate preparation? Verse 1 concludes: ". . . knowing that we shall receive heavier judgment."

The teacher of God's word has great blessings in this life (Philippians 4:1; 3 John 4) and in the next (Daniel 12:3), but he also has great responsibilities. If he fails in his task, both he and those whom he teaches can be lost!

Some may say, "I'll escape those responsibilities by not teaching." But it is not as simple as that. If God has given one the potential of being a public teacher, then God will hold that one responsible if he fails to develop that potential! Let me repeat that James is not trying to discourage us from teaching, but he is trying to get us to realize the *responsibilities* being a teacher places on us. Someone has used this alliteration: James is not trying to *deter* us from our *duties*, but he is trying to *remind* us of our *responsibilities*. He

wants us to become teachers from the proper motivation and to prepare ourselves for the task.

But for what will we be judged as teachers? Verse 2 begins, “For in many things we all stumble”—or, we all offend. “Offend” refers to offending *God* by breaking His laws. In other words, we all fall short of being what we should be. Do any need proof of that? James goes at once to an area in which *all* of us are deficient: “If any stumbleth not in *word*, the same is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also” (v. 2b). The RSV has “If anyone makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man.”

At last we come to the subject of the tongue.

The warnings of James 3 apply to us all whether we are public teachers of the word or not, but if any group in the church needs to be constantly reminded of the capricious nature of the tongue, it is those of us who teach and preach. Words are our stock in trade. And “in the multitude of [our] words there wanteth [lacketh] not transgression” (Proverbs 10:19). Open the mouth often enough and eventually the foot will find its way in. How frequently we say the wrong thing; how frequently we hinder instead of help; how frequently we destroy rather than build up. Someone has said that the tongue is in a very wet place and thus very likely to slip! A loose tongue often gets us in a tight place!

James says, therefore, that the one who is able to control his tongue “is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also.” *Perfect* means “complete” or “mature.” This is the goal of every Christian. But James says that Christian maturity is directly tied to the ability to control the tongue. The one who can control his tongue can control his thoughts (Matthew 12:34b) and the one who can control his thoughts can control his actions, and thus can “bridle the whole body.” Phillips puts it this way: “If he can control his tongue he can control every other part of his personality.” Someone has said, “Guard your tongue and you guard your soul.”

So then those of us who teach (and in one sense or another, that should include every Christian) must strive to control our tongues so we can be the kind of influence we should be—saying the right things and doing the right things. We have a grave responsibility.

But, again, we must strive to control our tongues. . . .

II. BECAUSE OF THE POWER OF THE TONGUE (3:3-5a)

The section of James we are studying is filled with visual images, illustrating the points James wants to make. Many of the things mentioned are compared with the tongue in one way or another. Three such comparisons are made in the next three verses to impress a single lesson: *the power of little things*.

Now if we put the horses bridles into their mouths that they may obey us, we turn about their whole body also. Behold, the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by rough winds, are yet turned about by a very small rudder, whither the impulse of the steersman willeth. So the tongue also is a little member, and boasteth great things (James 3:3-5a).

James’ first illustration ties in with the word *bridle* in the verse before. James referred to “bridling” the whole body and then refers to putting a bit in the horse’s mouth to be able to turn about the horse’s body.

The average horse is large—about one-half ton of muscle, bones, and sinews. On the other hand, a bit is small—a few ounces of steel fashioned where it will fit into the horse’s mouth. But because the horse’s mouth is tender, those few ounces of steel can be used to direct the horse in one direction or another.

The second illustration is that of the power of a small rudder over a large ship. The KJV reads this way: “Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth” (v. 4).

The “helm” refers to the rudder, a steering paddle or oar sticking out the back of the ship. The “governor” was the steersman, the man sitting in the back of the ship moving the rudder from one side to the other. In more modern ships, we might think of a pilot standing at the wheel.

There *were* “great” or large ships in those days. The one taking Paul to Rome held 276 people plus a large cargo (Acts 27:37 cf.). But regardless of the size of the ship, the helmsman could move the small rudder just a little and the whole ship would change its direction. The power of a little thing!

“So,” says James, “the tongue also is a little member” (v. 5). That is, it is little in comparison

with the other members of the body. It is not as a leg, a foot, an arm, or a hand. It is only a few ounces of muscle in a body weighing many pounds. But this does not mean that it is weak. Like the little bit and the little rudder, the little tongue is *powerful*. James says, It “boasteth great things” (v. 5). In this passage, this is not referring to idle boasts, but to what the tongue actually *can* accomplish. “What tremendous *effects* it can boast of” is the way Phillips translates it.

The tongue has the potential of great good or great evil. The wise man said, “*Death and life are in the power of the tongue*” (Proverbs 18:21; italics mine). Nick Young counted some twenty *positive* things in the Scriptures that the tongue can do, and twenty *negative* things. A great ruler once sent a gift of meat, the carcass of an animal, to a philosopher with the request that the philosopher send back the best part *and* the worst part of the gift. The philosopher fulfilled both requests with a single gift. He returned the tongue of the animal. The poet expressed this double potential this way:

A careless word may kindle strife;
A cruel word may wreck a life;
A bitter word may hate instill;
A brutal word may smite or kill.

A gracious word may smooth the way;
A joyous word may light the day;
A timely word may lessen stress;
A loving word may heal and bless.

On the negative side, we might think of the words of Hitler that inflamed a nation. For every word in Hitler’s book, *Mein Kampf*, 125 lives were lost in World War II. Or, on the positive side, we might think of the words of Churchill which strengthened a nation and inspired the world.

There is no way to overemphasize the power of words. The judge speaks a few words and a man’s entire life is altered. The President speaks a few words to influential men and the fate of a nation is changed. A preacher, a teacher, and a parent speak a few words and *eternity* is affected!

To continue this thought further, we must strive to control our tongues. . . .

III. BECAUSE OF THE POTENTIAL OF THE TONGUE FOR EVIL (3:5b, 6)

James has given two illustrations of small

things having power to accomplish good: the small bit bringing the horse under control and the small rudder steering the ship on the right course. James now gives a third illustration of the power of small things, but this time it is an illustration of the power of little things to *destroy*:

Behold, how much wood is kindled by how small a fire! And the tongue is a fire; the world of iniquity among our members is the tongue, which defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the wheel of nature, and is set on fire by hell (James 3:5b, 6).

“How great a matter a little fire kindleth!” the KJV has. The RSV has this, “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!” and the NEB, “What a huge stack of timber can be set ablaze by the tiniest spark.”

Life is replete with illustrations of the truthfulness of this statement. Our minds go back to the Great Fire of London in 1666, where a fire started in a little wooden shop near London Bridge. Before it was finished, the fire had wiped out thirteen thousand buildings, killing thousands and leaving thousands more homeless. Or the Great Fire in Chicago in 1871 when Mrs. O’Leary’s cow kicked over a lamp and set her little frame barn and house afire. The fire raged for twenty-four hours, hours of horror. The damage has been estimated at \$400 million. The same day the Chicago fire broke out, a forest fire started in Wisconsin, killing 1,152 persons!

These are the types of images James wants in our mind when he says, “And the *tongue* is a fire” (v. 6a).

Fire is one of the greatest blessings to mankind. When controlled, it can warm us, cook our food, and cheer us as it crackles in the fireplace. Even so the tongue under control can bless, cheer, and gladden the heart. But on the other hand, a fire out of control is one of the greatest curses to mankind. In a matter of minutes it can destroy that which took months or years to build and grow. So it is with the tongue. Out of control, it can blight, destroy, and damn. Then it becomes the hellish thing spoken of in verse 6: “And the tongue is a fire: the world of iniquity among our members is the tongue, which defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the wheel of nature, and is set on fire by hell.”

James uses the most flamboyant phrases in

this verse to get across a single point: the devastating nature of the tongue unchecked.

It is “a world of iniquity” (v. 6b). It encompasses *all kinds* of iniquity. We still use this type of expression today as we say, “I had worlds of fun” or “We have worlds of time.” Grammarians call it “the expansive abundant.” Phillips’ translation notes that “the tongue is as dangerous as any fire” and then, instead of “a world of iniquity,” has this rendering: “with *vast potentialities* for evil.”

Every type of sin can be tied with the tongue.

First, there are sins against *God*, such as blasphemy (Exodus 20:7) or cursing (Romans 3:10, 13, 14).

Second, there are sins against *others*, such as lying (Proverbs 12:22) or bearing false witness (Proverbs 19:5). Of the eighteen sins of the tongue listed in the Bible, *slander* is written against more than any other.

There is gossiping and talebearing (Proverbs 16:27, 28). If there is ever a time where the tongue is like a fire, it is when that tongue is used in gossiping and talebearing. So many hearts are like dry timber, parched for lack of rains of mercy. A careless tongue spreads a tale and ignites a spark. The flames race through the entire community or congregation, fanned by the winds of morbid curiosity—until homes are wrecked, souls are destroyed, and the smell of burning flesh is everywhere!²

The body of a suicide was pulled from the river. Pinned to the clothing of the young lady was a note with only two words on it: “They said.”

Before we pass on that which we hear, we need to ask three questions:

If you are tempted to reveal a tale
Someone to you has told
About another—make it pass, before
you speak,
These three gates of gold:

First, “Is it true?”
Then, “Is it needful?”
Then you
Will find
The last is narrowest: “Is it kind?”

If to reach your lips at last,
It passes through these gateways three,
Then you may tell the tale,
Nor fear what the results of speech may
be.

“Third, there are sins against one’s *self*, such as “grievous words” that can get one in trouble (Proverbs 15:1), or “corrupt speech” that reveal one’s heart (Ephesians 4:29), or just too much talk (Proverbs 10:19).

This thought of sins of the tongue affecting the owner of that tongue seems to be uppermost in James’ mind—as we see as he continues in the text: “Among our members is the tongue, which defileth the whole body” (v. 6c).

A fire not only destroys and consumes all within its immediate reach; it also stains, pollutes, and defiles everything around it for some distance. So it is with the tongue. The tongue is not isolated from the other members of the body. What the tongue does affects the whole man. No man is better than his word. So the RSV says that the wrong use of the tongue results in “staining the whole body.” The NEB says, “It pollutes our whole being.”

And we are not talking about a one-time thing, an occasional occurrence. The untamed tongue affects *all* of life. James’ cryptic way of saying this is: “And [it] setteth on fire the wheel of nature” (v. 6d).

While James’ general point is clear, commentators use much space wrestling with the phrase “the course of nature” as it is translated in the KJV. The Greek text has “the *wheel* of nature,” and thus the ASV translates it. Most of James’ readers would have been aware that in the Old Testament, *life* was compared with a wheel. When the writer of Ecclesiastes pictures the end of life, he speaks of “the wheel broken at the cistern” (Ecclesiastes 12:6). There is nothing of the Buddhist idea of the wheel of existence and reincarnation here.³ The simple picture is that of a wheel that begins to turn at birth, and it continues to revolve through life, until one day it *breaks* and remains still. Death has come.

To return to our text, James’ point is that all the time the wheel is turning, that is, *throughout life*, the untamed tongue can blight and destroy like a fire out of control. Phillips puts it this way: “It can make *the whole of life* a blazing hell.”

And what is the source of the devastation fanned by the tongue? James pulls no punches as he says it “is set on fire by *hell*” (v. 6e).

The word translated “hell” is *gehenna*, the word for hell fire, the eternal abode of the wicked. When the Holy Spirit wanted to convey how

terrible an uncontrolled tongue is, the only adequate word was the awful place of fire and brimstone, the place of eternal darkness, the ultimate abode of Satan and all who follow him (Matthew 25)!

Let us not deceive ourselves. When we use the tongue where it hurts rather than helps, where it discourages instead of lifting up, where it breaks hearts instead of mending them, that tongue is not directed by God but by Satan himself—and has the smell of sulphur about it!

But having noted the hellish nature of the untamed tongue, we may be startled to notice we must strive to control the tongue. . . .

IV. BECAUSE OF THE “UNTAMEABLE” NATURE OF THE TONGUE (3:7, 8)

“For every kind of beasts and birds, of creeping things and things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed by mankind: but the tongue can no man tame; it is a restless evil, it is full of deadly poison” (James 3:7, 8).

Having seen how devastating the tongue can be, this statement is alarming: “But the tongue can no man tame”!

All other creatures have been tamed. James gives four classifications, encompassing all types of animated life.

“Every kind of beasts” has been tamed. My mind goes to a recent performance of the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus, and the amazing things that the dogs, bears, horses, and elephants did—climaxed by the incomparable Gunther Gebel-Williams and his act with lions, tigers, and other jungle beasts.

And “every kind of . . . birds” has been tamed. Now I think of a trip to Universal Studios in Hollywood and a demonstration of trained birds used on television that can rollerskate, fly on command, and do other remarkable things.

And “every kind of . . . creeping things” has been tamed. The snake is a natural enemy of mankind (Genesis 3:14, 15 d.); what an unlikely creature to be tamed! But the snake charmer of the East does exercise control over his serpent, guiding the snake as he rises slowly from the basket.⁴

And “every kind of . . . things in the sea.” The memory now evokes scenes from zoos, amusement parks, and marine exhibitions around the world where dolphins, small whales, seals, and

sea lions have been trained to perform almost every trick imaginable through the proper use of love, discipline, rewards, and patience.

But, in *contrast* to these, James says, “But the tongue can no man tame.”

There is a play on words in the original. The word translated “kind” literally means “nature”:⁵ “Every NATURE of beasts . . . has been tamed by human NATURE.” Human nature has tamed the beasts—but human nature has not been able to tame human nature!

To illustrate again how deadly the tongue is, James compares it to a *snake*: “It is a restless evil, it is full of deadly poison” (v. 8b). This is the last comparison with “a little thing” in our text. Most venomous snakes are small but the poison deposited in the pockets under their mouths can kill!

When I read of this comparison, I think of a snake silently slithering through the undergrowth until it *strikes*, driving its venom deep within its victim, and then crawling swiftly away. In a similar way, do some use their tongues! There are some who would never think of turning loose a sackful of snakes here in the auditorium, who think nothing of whispering their innuendos and slander, destroying reputations within these same four walls! Indeed the tongue can be “an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.”

Should we, therefore, give up? After all, James has said, “The tongue can no man tame.” If it is impossible to tame the tongue, why should we try? For that matter, how can God hold us responsible for our tongues when it is impossible to tame them? *If this the point James is making?* Should we not even try to control our tongues?

No.

Actually God *expects* us to control our tongues. Remember James 1:26: “If any man thinketh himself to be religious, while he bridleth not his tongue but deceiveth his heart, this man’s religion is vain.” In just a moment we will notice James 3:10 where James says, “My brethren, *these things ought not so to be.*” (Italics mine.) But he would not have made such a statement if we could not help whether the things were so or not.

What then is James’ point when he says, “The tongue can no man tame”? The key is found in several words in the statement. Perhaps there is significance in the word *tame*: We may not be able to *tame* the tongue, but we can learn to

control it. These suggestions have been given on how we can control our tongues.

First, we can work on our *hearts* for “out of the abundance of the *heart* the mouth speaketh” (Matthew 12:34).

Second, we can learn to use *wisdom* in our use of the tongue—as did the worthy woman of Proverbs 31 (v. 26).

Third, if all else fails, we can *keep our mouths shut*: “And . . . study [give diligence] *to be quiet*” (1 Thessalonians 4: 11); “He that would love life, and see good days, let him *refrain his tongue* from evil” (1 Peter 3:10); there is “a time to *keep silence*” (Ecclesiastes 3:7). (Italics mine.) God created us with two eyes and two ears, but one tongue—and that well enclosed!⁶ This little poem still has a message we need:

There was an owl
lived in the oak,
The more he heard,
the less he spoke;
The less he spoke,
the more he heard,
O, if men were all
like that wise old bird!⁷
 (“The Wise Owl,”
Author Unknown)

Even a fish would avoid trouble if he kept his mouth shut!

But probably the most significant word in the sentence is the word *man*: “The tongue can no man tame.” I think it not out of line to introduce Matthew 19:26 here: “And Jesus . . . said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.” In our next lesson, we will study concerning “the wisdom that is from *above*” (James 3:17). There is help from *above*.

I think of John, one of the “sons of thunder,” who became the Apostle of Love. He didn’t do that on his own. He had help from God. I also think of Peter, who cursed and swore when denying Jesus. But with the help of the Lord, he grew and matured spiritually; thus we never read of him misusing his tongue in that way again!

In our struggle to control our tongues, we must stay as close to the Lord as we can. As David prayed: “Set a watch, O Jehovah, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips” (Psalms 141:3). Another has phrased it: “Help me keep my eyes and ears open, my mouth shut, and my

nose out of other people’s business!”

We need to do all we can to control our tongues because the tongue is *so hard* to control—literally impossible to control *unless we have the help of God*. But, finally, we need to do all we can to control the tongue. . . .

V. BECAUSE OF THE INCONSISTENCIES OF THE TONGUE (3:9-12)

James 3:9-12 says,

Therewith bless we the Lord and the Father; and therewith curse we men, who are made after the likeness of God: out of the same mouth cometh forth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth from the same opening sweet water and bitter? can the fig tree, my brethren, yield olives? or a vine figs? neither can salt yield sweet.

The scene depicted by James fills me with sadness. Apparently, it was a common occurrence in James’ day, as it is in ours: “Therewith [i.e., with the tongue] bless we the Lord and Father; and therewith curse we men, who are made after the likeness of God.”

The word *bless* is used in the sense of prayer, praise, and adoration. The NIV has, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father.” The English word *curse* originally meant “to invoke evil by the sign of the cross.” Thus these were praising God and at the same wishing evil upon men—men made in God’s likeness. We are reminded of 1 John 4:20: “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, cannot love God whom he hath not see.”

No doubt we immediately think of so many with whom we associate who give lip service to Jesus, but whose mouths at the same time, are a constant flowing sewer. How repulsive! But let us not fail to ask: Can we as the people of God ever be guilty of this same type of inconsistency? Picture the family singing praises together in the assembly—and then fussing and fighting in the car all the way home!

One can almost hear the astonishment in James’ voice as he says, “Out of *the same mouth* cometh forth blessing and cursing”! (v. 10a). So he thunders, “My brethren, these things ought not so to be”! (v. 10b).

James has stressed throughout this section that “these things ought not so to be” because

such things are *unscriptural*. Now he makes the point that “these things ought not so to be” because such is *unnatural*: “Doth a fountain send forth from the same opening sweet water and bitter? can the fig tree, my brethren, yield olives? or a vine figs? neither can salt water yield sweet” (vv. 11, 12).

Palestine abounded with fountains, wells, and springs. Most were filled with pure, sweet water. Some, especially those near the Dead Sea, were filled with brackish water—as the salty water seeped through the soil. But none gave forth both fresh sweet water and salty bitter water at the same time. Nature is consistent.

I learned this the hard way. When I was still a young boy, I went with my father, who was a vocational agriculture teacher and his students on a summer trip. During our travels we came to Pratt National Park near Sulphur, Oklahoma. This area is known for its natural sulphur springs (with the distinctive rotten-egg smell). Inside the park was a large drinking fountain with several outlets from which to drink. With a few half-concealed snickers, the students encouraged me to satisfy my thirst by drinking from one of the outlets. I took a hefty swig of the foul-smelling water—and began to choke, gasp, and sputter. The boys immediately cried: “Go around to the other side of the fountain and get some *fresh* water to wash the taste out of your mouth!” Around I went . . . and filled my mouth with . . . you guessed it . . . more sulphur water! I learned the hard way that a fountain does not “send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter.”

Palestine also abounded in fig trees and grape vines; most yards had one or both. Figs and grapes were the most common fruits in Palestine. So his readers would readily comprehend James’ meaning as he asked: “Can a fig tree. . . yield olives? or a vine figs?”

Don’t try to play games and talk about grafting several types of branches into one trunk so that one plant is capable of bearing several types of fruit. When that happens, one no longer has a simple “fig tree” or grape “vine.” James is talking about that which is *natural*. In the very *nature* of things, an ordinary fig tree does not bear olives. And an ordinary grape vine does not produce figs. Each produces “after his kind” (Genesis 1:11).

Nature is consistent. Unfortunately, man is not always so. There are no two-watered fountains. There are no natural two-fruited trees. But there *are* two-faced men.

Several years ago, I pulled into a gas station in Oklahoma City. The attendant was one of the most foul-mouthed men I have been around. To escape the profanity I stepped into his office. Every square inch of wall space was covered with religious mottos. Puzzled, I stepped back outside and asked the attendant about the mottos. “Those are mine,” he said proudly and began to tell me about his “conversion” some time before. He concluded by saying, “I still blank-and-blank a lot—but I’m a real born-again Christian!”

May God help each of us not to be a spiritual “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” “These things ought not so to be”!

CONCLUSION

From this passage, we have suggested that we need to do all we can to keep our tongues under control (1) because of the great responsibility we have as teachers, (2) because of the power of the tongue, (3) because of the potential of the tongue for evil, (4) because of the “untameable” nature of the tongue, and (5) because of the inconsistencies of the tongue. Frankly, it sounds like—and is—a hard job, a lifelong job, but let us not think of it as an impossible job. (Members of the Catholic Church are known by the sign of the cross; members of the Lord’s church are often known by the wringing of the hands.)

Let us, first of all, do what *we* can. We can generally do better than we have done in the past. Take, for instance, the foul-mouthed man who says, “I can’t help it. There’s nothing I can do about it.” And yet when he is around his mother, the preacher, and certain others, he *does* control his tongue. He can control it *when he wants to badly enough*. Paul said, “I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection” (1 Corinthians 9:27). The tongue is part of the body.

And second, let us depend more on *God*. “I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13). Let us pray the prayer of David: “Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy

sight, O Jehovah, my rock and my redeemer”
(Psalms 19:14).

May God help us all in this great challenge!

FOOTNOTE.

¹*Faith That Works*, p. 16.

²Language adopted from Evans, *Make Your Faith Work*.

³The wheel *stops* at death. It does not continue to revolve through successive reincarnations.

⁴He does so not by the music, but by his movements.

⁵ASV, interlinear, etc.

⁶It is well enclosed by *two* cages—the lips and teeth.

⁷Another benefit of keeping our mouths shut is that some will think us wise! (Proverbs 17:28).

Visual Aid Notes

Winston Atkinson has produced a set of slides on James 3 entitled “The Untamed Tongue.” This set is available from Gospel Services, Inc., P. O. Box 12302, Houston, TX 77017, for \$17.95. The manual (which covers several slide lessons) is an additional \$3. I made a number of supplementary slides to go with Atkinson’s set and have worked up three visualized lessons from these aids. If you will carefully compare the set of slides with the above sermon, you will see where I worked in most of the purchased slides.

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