



BRIDLING THE TONGUE

3:1-12

“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment. 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. Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Behold, 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. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, 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. 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. 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. 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? Neither can salt water produce fresh” (3:1-12).

It is astounding to learn that communication experts estimate that the average person speaks enough words every day to fill approximately twenty typed pages. That is enough words to fill two books of three hundred pages in a month, twenty-four in a year, and 1,200 volumes in fifty

years of speaking. Obviously, talking comprises a very large part of our lives. It is such a large part of life that most schools offer courses to help one improve his ability to speak.

Speech is such a large part of life that James knows that our faith must be at work in our daily conversation. He is so concerned about the subject that some have called his epistle a textbook on “Developing a Christian Conversation.” Nearly 20 percent of all the verses in the epistle deal with some aspect of our speech.

The text of our lesson, James 3:1-12, is the most extensive discussion about the way we talk in the New Testament. In this passage, James goes for the jugular vein, the heart of the problem, the tongue. The twentieth-century Christian must admit that the problem and the corresponding message of this passage is not one just for antiquity. We all at one time or another struggle with our tongue.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TONGUE (3:1, 2)

The very first words that he says have caused sober reflection by preachers and teachers for years: “Let not many of you become teachers, my brothers, . . .” (3:1a). This is a striking statement that James makes. It would seem apparent from other passages of Scripture (Hebrews 5:12; Ephesians 4:11) that James is not intending to discourage teachers. What he is saying is that responsibility brings accountability. That is why he wants us to know that teachers will receive the stricter judgment. Obviously, teaching should be considered a dangerous profession for any man. A

precious heritage belongs to the Christian teacher. He follows in the footsteps of the Jewish rabbi. Many good rabbis did outstanding jobs teaching the people. But often the rabbis were treated with such an immense amount of respect that their egos would swell and they were ruined. The respect was so great that the young Jewish men were taught to treat their rabbi better than their parents. For instance, if an enemy laid siege to the city and both parents and the rabbi were captured, the rabbi was to be ransomed first. With that kind of esteem from the people, it is not hard to understand how a rabbi could end up as Jesus described (Matthew 23:2-7). That same danger still faces teachers today, especially preachers. Young men rush headlong into preaching for all the wrong reasons—the glory, the prestige, the commendations from friends and family—and quit when they learn about the stress, the work, and the pain. Those who manage to stay in for those reasons often become spiritually arrogant like the rabbi.

Teachers and preachers are not the only ones who are tempted to sin with their tongues. The tongue is so difficult to control, it is essential that every Christian maintain a constant vigil on his tongue. When James says, “. . . If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well” (3:2), he is saying that on the list of things that are hard to control, controlling the tongue is the most difficult. If you can control your tongue, you can control everything else.

THE CONTROL OF THE TONGUE (3:3, 4)

Because of the difficulty involved, every Christian must constantly work at controlling the tongue. Just look at the illustrations James uses—a bit in a horse’s mouth and a rudder on a ship. A bit enables the rider to control a horse, and a rudder allows the helmsman to control a huge ship. For James, the tongue controls the body. In verse 5 he says, “So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. . . .” For the rudder to control the ship or the bit to control the horse, constant tension is required. The same thing is true of the tongue, we must have constant control of the tongue, or the tongue will allow the body to run wild.

Another point can be made from James’ illustration. Not only are the bit, the rudder, and the

tongue small, but they also must overcome contrary forces. The bit must overcome the wild nature of the horse, and the rudder must fight the winds and currents that would deter the ship. In the same way, for the human tongue to be controlled and to guide the body, it must overcome contrary forces. The old nature on the inside and the sinful world around us fight us every step of the way. We need to put Jesus in control of our tongues as the jockey controls the bit and the helmsman controls the rudder. We must allow the Lord of our life to be the Lord of our lips. We need to echo the prayer of the Psalmist: “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psalms 141:3).

THE DANGERS OF THE TONGUE (3:5-12)

James has so strongly pleaded for control of the tongue because he knows the dangers of an uncontrolled tongue. Informing us of those dangers, he lists three alarming facts about an uncontrolled tongue.

First, it can defile the body. James says,

. . . Behold, 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 (3:5, 6).

He is saying that the damage the tongue can cause is like the damage caused by a forest fire. A forest fire can burn uncontrollably and eventually destroy valuable property far from where it began. The same thing is true about the tongue. A small spark from the tongue can rage uncontrollably and destroy lives far from its beginning. No wonder James says that it is “set on fire by hell.” The devil delights when we destroy each other in this way.

Second, the tongue is untamable. “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” (3:7, 8) is the way that the Spirit inspired James to say it. Obviously, humans are not capable of controlling their own tongues. In order to harness that wild, restless evil, someone or something else must do the controlling. As the huge ship is controlled by the rudder, the rudder is controlled by the helmsman. Again, we must ask the

Lord of our life to be the Lord of our lips. He is the only one powerful enough to control that raging fire and harness it into a source of energy.

Third, James says that an uncontrolled tongue acts inconsistently with the faith of a Christian. The illustration he uses is very pointed: "Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?" (3:11). The answer to the question of the illustration is a resounding "no." For it to be "yes," it would have to be absolutely contrary to everything we know. James carries the illustration further by asking, "Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? . . ." (3:12). The point he wants Christians to see is that nothing is more inconsistent than for a Christian to use his tongue to sing praise to God on Sunday and then to turn around and curse his neighbor the rest of the week. A Chris-

tian who curses, swears, or gossips has a real problem (Proverbs 4:23; Matthew 15:18). The person who is known for a trashy mouth, dirty jokes, cruel words, and the latest gossip is not on anybody's list of outstanding Christians. Why? Because even the world can see the inconsistency of having an uncontrolled tongue.

CONCLUSION

The Psalmist has said, ". . . I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue; I will guard my mouth as with a muzzle, . . ." (Psalms 39:1). How do we let our faith make a difference in our lives? By making Jesus the Lord of our lives! No more challenging point for doing this can be found than in allowing Him to control what we say!

—Bill Hooten

Applying the Book of James to Life

Two Important Sciences

Once a young man came to the great philosopher Socrates to be instructed in oratory. The moment the young man was introduced he began to talk in an incessant stream. This went on for some time. When Socrates could get in a word he said, "Young man, I will have to charge you a double fee."

"A double fee, why is that?"

The old sage replied, "I will have to teach you two sciences. First, how to hold your tongue, and then, how to use it."

A Critical Brother

A church member, noted for his "kickative mood and objective case," was challenged to construct a workable program, rather than always finding fault with the suggestions of others. "No," he replied, "you go ahead and make plans and then I'll gladly tell you what's wrong with them."

The "Lost" Word

I lost a very little word, only the other day;
It was a very naughty word I had not meant to say.
But then, it was not really lost—when from my lips it flew,
My little brother picked it up, and now he says it too!

The "Four-Way Test"

Rotary International has a "Four-Way Test" which the Christian would do well to apply to his speech: (1) Is it the truth? (2) Is it fair to all concerned? (3) Will it bring good will and better friendship? (4) Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

The State of Words

Eugene Ionesco in his modern play *The Bald Soprano* provides an illuminating critique of the debased state of words in our

contemporary world. From the beginning of the play it becomes obvious that words have lost their connection with reality or truth. The actors expect to find no meaning in one another's words and hence use the tongue merely to play verbal games. Language becomes so irrelevant and debased that, shortly before the play closes, the actors have lost the power of human speech altogether and are simply barking and crowing.

Fashionable Speech

Today it is fashionable to be foul mouthed. Our society seems to be majoring in x-rated speech. A study of profanity at Wayne State University revealed that students used one off-color word for every fourteen. What is worse, a similar study revealed that the average adult used one off-color word for every ten.

Karen Burton Mains,
You Are What You Say