

James

A Caution to Would-be Teachers

November 20, 2011

I. Introduction

A. **James 3:1-12** . . . Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. [2] 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. [3] Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. [4] Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, [they] are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. [5] So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! [6] 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. [7] For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. [8] But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. [9] With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; [10] from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. [11] Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? [12] Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

B. Prayer

II. The Weaknesses Of The Tongue - A Warning For Every Christian

A. At the beginning today, I want to reinforce a truth that I tried to make clear last Sunday. Though this portion of James is all about the tongue, the tongue does not stand alone as if it were either a horrible evil or a marvelous good all on its own. Your tongue and my tongue directly reflects, and therefore reveals what is in our heart.

1. Listen carefully as I say this same thing three different ways:

- a. As a tree naturally brings forth fruit after its kind, so the heart naturally brings forth words after its kind.
- b. At times our words are carefully chosen, and at times they are carelessly spoken, but at all times they are according to what is in our heart.

- c. **Matthew 12:34b-35** . . . For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. [35] The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil.
 2. Because our words directly reflect what we are within, we are wise to listen carefully when others are talking, for in time they will reveal the hidden realities of their heart. And when it comes to comforting each other in times of sorrow, or encouraging each other in times of discouragement, or spurring each other on to godliness, love, and good deeds, we can accomplish far more when we understand at least some of what is in each other's heart. So once again, listen carefully to what others are saying, for that is one significant way to discern what is going on within them.
 3. But just as it is important to listen to each other in order to serve each other and build one another up in the faith, it is also important to listen to yourself, for your words are a great help in discerning what is in your heart.
 - a. Of course, if you are going to listen in a way that helps you discover and deal with what you are within, you must believe that your words actually reveal what is in your heart. However, living in denial or thinking your intentions are a truer test of what you are within in spite of what comes out of your mouth will prevent you from looking honestly within. Therefore, listen to your words.
 - b. And if you need help in using what comes out of your mouth to discern what is in your heart, ask God and those around you to help you see what your words reveal about you.
- B. Now given the harsh things God says about the tongue here in **James 3:1-12**, you may be wondering if there is any hope for your tongue. The answer to that question is a resounding yes. Consider these words from Paul to the Christians in Ephesus:
1. *"Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear."* Paul begins this statement with the word "LET," which clearly indicates that we Christians have the ability and empowerment from God to overcome whatever evil resides in our heart so that we can bring forth good words from a good heart.
 2. Continuing on: *"Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."* Again, the fact that Paul says,

“DO NOT” means we have the power to choose whether we will either grieve or please the Holy Spirit. And since God enables us to both make the right choice and remain faithful to the right choice, we can please the Holy Spirit with what is in our heart, and with what comes out of our mouth.

3. Going further, Paul writes: *“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma” (Ephesians 4:29-5:2).* Here again, God uses the word “LET” which indicates what we can do if we will do it. He goes on to include such phrases as “PUT AWAY FROM YOU” and “BE IMITATORS OF GOD” and “WALK IN LOVE” – all which speak to the part God has given us to do in our pursuit of purity of heart and godliness of speech.
4. Surely we can see from this scripture that God has so re-created us in the new birth that we can be victorious in relation to our heart and in relation to our tongue. So though we are going to examine all the bad things God says about the tongue here in James 3, bear in mind that by the grace and life of God within us, there is hope for victory.

C. **James 3:2 . . .** 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.

1. The point here is that if you can control your tongue – which requires purifying what is in your heart – you will be perfect, or completely godly from the inside out. And why would this be true? Because, if you will purify your heart, then you will be able, by God’s grace, to gain victory over your thoughts, emotions, feelings, passions, urges, fears, pride, selfishness, and any other parts of your being that wage war against the spiritual purity and health of your heart and tongue.
2. However, purifying your heart so as to gain control of your tongue is no small endeavor, and it requires far more than learning good communication techniques. To help you get a better sense of why good communication techniques are not enough, listen to this list of evils that are exposed and expressed by the tongue. And as you listen to this list, try to imagine what would be in the heart of the one speaking

these ways – for if you can imagine what might be in others, you can get a clearer picture of what might be in your own heart.

- a. Gossip, slander, backbiting (*attack the character and reputation of someone not present*), abusive speech, threats, clamor (*angry quarreling*), belittling, put-downs, fault finding, unkind criticism, harsh words, intentionally hurtful sarcasm, cynicism, insensitivity, telling the truth in a way that seeks to hurt or force others to change according to your wishes,
 - b. Boasting (*bragging, self-praise*), arrogance, contemptuous words, scorn, defiance, words that promote discord within a group or sow seeds of division, lying, partial lying such as when telling only part of a story to make one party look bad, or neglecting to tell the part of a story that makes you look bad, admitting fault or apologizing with no intention of changing, saying: “If I did anything to offend you . . .”
 - c. Flippant, disrespectful, and irreverent talk, rudeness, sassiness, crude, vulgar, and coarse communication, making light or joking about that which is perverted, immoral, or just plain wrong for Christians to speak about, silly talk,
 - d. Sweet-talking to get your way or gain acceptance and approval, using words to take advantage of, cheat, or swindle someone, giving your word or promising something and then not following through,
 - e. Cursing God, speaking evil of God, crude or disrespectful communication about God, finding fault with God, complaining to God about God, words conveying unbelief when you claim to believe in God, putting on a verbal show of spirituality when in fact you are a willing hypocrite,
3. **Proverbs 10:19** . . . When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise.

D. **James 3:3-5** . . . Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. [4] Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, [they] are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. [5] So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!

1. This is a graphic way of convincing us of the power of the tongue, not just to influence or control people and events outside us, but to influence and control what we are as individuals, for as I have said

from the start, the words we speak are the outward manifestation of what is in our heart.

2. To control your tongue, you must control what is in, what is put in, and what goes on in your heart. In other words, what we treasure or allow to dwell in our heart has great power over our whole being.
3. Now here is the sad reality which plagues every one of us. It only takes a spark to get a fire going, and a raging fire at that. And in the same way, it only takes a small amount of evil or ill-will or ungodliness or envy or any other such thing dwelling in your heart to influence you toward evil. It makes no difference how godly or how close to being pure your heart is. Any amount of ungodliness that is allowed to reside there can ignite a forest fire or turn a ship or lead us to words that reveal that small amount of ungodliness.
4. Of course, we all know that it is easier to talk about a pure heart than to put in the effort, persistence, and time to gain a pure heart. Yet even if we are willing, who of us has held on to purity of heart on a consistent basis over a long period of years? I am not saying this is impossible, but the common reality is, it is improbable for many of us – not because God is unable or unwilling to lead us there, but because we are not sufficiently diligent in doing our part to get there and remain there.
5. You see, when it comes to controlling our tongue, we need a pure heart. And in case you don't know what a pure heart is, it is a heart that is 100% pure. Anything less than 100% will result in whatever evil is in our heart coming out – sooner or later, whether it be in a moment of carelessness or deliberately.
 - a. This means that 95% godliness of heart is not enough to gain control of the tongue. You may have 95% control of the tongue, but not 100%, which means your heart can produce speaking that dishonors God, hurts others, and reveals the evil with you.
 - b. Now I am not saying this to discourage you. I am telling you this because this is reality, and it is my hope that you will use this reality to spur yourself on in your pursuit of godliness.
6. Now with this reality is sinking in, we come to these next words which paint a picture of the tongue that is sadly common among us Christians. And sadder still, this picture has come to represent what is considered to be normal for Christians. In fact, we often speak of failure and being less than holy as if it were normal, and godliness of life and purity of heart as abnormal among Christians.

E. **James 3:6** . . . 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.

1. God, speaking to Jeremiah tells us a very similar truth when He says: “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (**Jeremiah 17:9**)
2. Any of us who have taken seriously God’s word about our part in obeying Him, putting off the old nature, putting on the new nature, and becoming more and more like Christ understand just how resilient evil is. We understand how attractive some evil is to us, and how easy it is to fall back or willingly return to wanting or thinking about or doing what we know is wrong.
3. Mark this truth: the battle for a pure heart ought to be our first and foremost battle in life. It is a battle which must be waged against our human nature – with all its proclivities for evil. This is the battle of putting off the old nature, and putting on the new. It is the battle of dying to self – and especially selfishness, turning away from evil, making no provision or giving no ground to the flesh, the world, and the devil, being vigilant not to return to old sinful ways, guarding our mind so evil thoughts cannot re-enter, resisting the devil, remaining faithful in the face of hard times, and loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And this is a battle we cannot afford to neglect. And so I urge you today, fight the fight within – valiantly, purposefully, and persistently. God will ensure victory no matter how powerful your foe, but you must do your fair share to gain that victory.

F. **James 3:7-12** . . . For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. [8] But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. [9] With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; [10] from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. [11] Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? [12] Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

1. If we are born again, we ought to be serious about seeking a pure heart and in so doing, taming our tongue. It is out of character for those who have the life and nature of God dwelling within to have an impure heart and therefore an untamed tongue. Besides, if we

can tame animals, we can tame the tongue. So do not look on this as the impossible task.

2. John put it this way: “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. [3] And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (**I John 3:2-3**).
3. And Peter said: “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; [3] seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. [4] For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust” (**II Peter 1:2-4**).

III. Conclusion

- A. May we be Christians who listen carefully to our own words, who take seriously the fact that our words come out of our heart, and who want a pure heart so much so that we are willing to do what it takes to make honest, measurable, and commendable progress in that direction.