

# TAMING THE TONGUE

## JAMES 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

### Bible Reflection

Words are very powerful. They can do great good. I can encourage someone, and their spirits will be lifted. I can pray with someone, and those words will bring life. In fact, in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, we see that God spoke, and the world was made. That's how powerful words are.

Words can do great good. Indeed, how many of us heard the gospel through spoken words, or someone reading the Bible to us.

Words and speech can bring great life. They can also bring great destruction. Think back in your life, to a time when you heard someone say something terrible about you. Maybe it was during your school days. Maybe it was a bully teasing you. Maybe it was a teacher who didn't like you. Maybe it was even a parent, or a family member, who said terrible things to you. And they probably did that because their parents said the same things to them.

I can recall even to this day, moments when someone said something so terrible it was ingrained on my memory for life. They say sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me. Well, that isn't true. They don't break skin or tear bone, but they burn inside.

Maybe it's easy to remember times when people did it to us. But how often have we been the guilty parties? We see someone we don't like, so we spread rumours. Gossip can seem fun at the time, but later we see the damage it does.

Our scripture today said this: "We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong. In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches."

And in verse 2 it said, "Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way."

It's interesting that it says if we can control what we say, we can control everything else about ourselves. So this is apparently the secret to learning self-control. Learning to control our speech.

So when we talk about others, a friend or stranger, we ought to consider this formula for speaking of others or controversial issues: THINK.

T--Is it true?

H--Is it helpful?

I--Is it inspiring?

N--Is it necessary?

K--Is it kind?

If what I am about to say does not pass those tests, I should keep my mouth shut!

All of us will stand before God at the end of our lives and have to give an account, and answer for the decisions we made, and the things we said.

Jesus himself said, "You must give an account on judgment day for every idle word you speak" –Matthew 12:36.

So all of us will have to answer for our words. And we'll be judged.

Verses 8 to 10 say, "The tongue is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who

have been made in the image of God. And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth.”

Do you use words to bless people and bless God? But then later on do you use words to curse others, and mock others, and use your words to complain and argue? Let's put those old ways aside and let's put on the new self in Christ Jesus, speaking good and not evil.

We all slip up in many ways. The point is that we recognize the mistake, we make it right, we turn to God and ask forgiveness, and then we try to do better in the future.

The tongue is a great paradox, for it is both the best and the worst. It is the producer of all our praise, and the maker of all our malice. We both love and hate with the tongue, and James says we must stop using it for evil and use it consistently for good.

Human nature has some marvellous powers, and with much labour can tame the creatures of the jungle, sky, and sea. One of the wonders of the world is man's power to train wild animals and other creatures. Most of us have probably seen a whale or porpoise trained to do tricks, and lions, tigers and elephants are old hat. When it comes to the tongue, however, man's weakness is as impressive as his power is over other creatures. No man can tame or control the tongue.

James does not mean that we are all a bunch of wild uncontrollable babblers, but that we all have a tongue that at any time might go off half-cocked and do damage. We never know when we are going to say something stupid or hurtful.

The implication is that much of the evil of the tongue is not wilful and deliberate, but it is the result of poor control.

James closes verse 8 by saying that the tongue is full of deadly poison. It is a tool of the serpent, and once we sink our fangs into someone, and let false rumours or slander flow, there is no cure. The only way to deal with the sins of the tongue is by prevention. It takes a baby a couple of years to learn how to talk, and then decades to learn how to keep quiet. Silence is golden because often the best thing you can ever say is nothing.

In Luke 6:28 Jesus said, "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you." Paul repeated the command to the Romans in 12:14, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."

There is just no justification for a Christian to curse any person, but the fact that we need to be constantly reminded makes it evident that we do, and James says this ought not to be. It is totally inconsistent with the Christian life to use the tongue in this way.

Too many times we judge a friend

Away from God and man,

And drive repentant prodigals

From Jesus and His plan.

Too many times our knifing words

Stiletto through a heart,

Leaving wounds beyond the healing

Of any doctor's art. (Author Unknown).

So, let us think before we open our mouths. Let us use our words to build people up, to encourage them, to tell them about how much God loves them, and let us be channels of God's peace. Amen. *Frank*