

A Little Fire

James 3:5-12

Jewish wisdom literature, both Scriptural and non-scriptural, spoke often about the subject of the tongue. An anecdote from Rabbi Simeon Ben Gamaliel may help us to see this. R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said to Tabbai his servant: 'Go and buy me good food in the market.' He went and bought him food. When he came back, he directed his servant to go and buy him bad food as well. When the servant returned, He said to him: "What is this? When I told you to get me good food you brought me tongue and when I told you to buy me bad food you brought me tongue. The servant replied: 'Good comes from it and bad comes from it. When the tongue is good there is nothing better, and when it is bad there is nothing worse.'

I believe we must agree with the servant. That is why James spends time here discussing havoc wrought by the tongue. While James has already shown the positive power of the tongue rightly harnessed (vs. 1-5a), now he seeks to expose the wicked potential of the tongue. Why does he do this? So we might see the need for God's grace each moment of the day.

Inflammatory Character of the Tongue

Inflammatory is an apt description for considering the tongue. The very word pictures something that can quickly flame up, spread, and cause harm. Our tongues fit this description. As James explains the evil in the tongue, he is considering the tongue in its natural condition apart from Divine Grace. The whole implication of his exposition is to point us to the absolute necessity for God's grace to work in every area of life, especially the tongue.

The tongue is.....

1. Uncontrollable

The exclamation he offers about the tongue brings to mind a clear picture: "See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!" The word he uses for "great" and "small" is actually the same word. There is a twist of irony in it, as it expresses size, answering the question, "How Much?" The term for "forest" could mean anything from a massive of dead wood, to fields of brush and shrubs, to gigantic forests. The picture is clear: one small spark can light up thousands of acres.

We have witnessed the weather reports detailing forest fires. Some underbrush being burned is a good thing. More often that not, a controlled fire fanned by high winds sparks the controlled burn into a force uncontrollable. The flames of a tongue are fanned by the natural suspicions of ears to believe gossip, innuendos and slander. Soon it is uncontrollable. It begins to exceed its size in power. The flames of the tongue are fanned by the natural suspicion of ears to receive and believe. Once let loose, the destructive power is out.

2. Unrighteous

Every one of the Ten Commandments can be violated in some use by the tongue. If a person is a malicious gossip, it is important to understand the propensity you have for sinning with the tongue.

3. Unrestricted

The tongue is shown to present itself among all the other faculties of the human body as the one instrument that most defiles each of us. The tongue is set upon its members as that which defiles the entire body. Without inhibitions, the tongue would work its way through the whole person, staining the reputation of everyone's mind. The present tense of the word defiled implies that a constant staining of defiling words is always present.

4. Unrelenting

The tongue also sets of fire the course of our life. James uses an ancient term here, translated as course, to refer to the entire circle of life. Notice what he states: "The tongue that does not know the grace of God in Christ. The course of our life involves others."

5. Ungodly

It is obvious that the unregenerate tongue is ungodly. But James makes a specific claim for the tongue which spots the source of the venom. Where does the tongue receive its influence? How can the tongue continue to tear down? Hell is at work! The influence for the tongue has an incredible intensity.

James borrows the same term that his half-brother, Jesus Christ used. It is the word translated as hell. Years before there were restrictions on burning pollution; there was a city dump. Those fumes cannot begin to compare with sin.

We use the phrase "that a person speaks outside of both sides of his mouth" to explain duplicity of character and life. What we say and what we do are important. Notice what he says: the tongue is full of deadly evil. The metaphor clearly pictures the snake with its pockets of poison lying beneath its tongue.

Inconsistent Use of the Tongue

1. By Hypocrisy.

The ancient Greek theatre used a term *hupocritinomai* to describe the actor who could play two contrasting parts equally well. That is what he means by: "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. Praise and inconsistent living do not match up.

2. Through Confusion

Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? James question in this verse begins with a word that presupposes a no answer.

3. Due to its Nature

Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh. He uses the three most basic and common fruits of Palestine: figs, olives, and grapes. The illustration is simple: what comes out of the mouth reveals what is on the inside.

Here James finally brings home his point. He does not want us to think that God cannot do anything about the tongue – or the heart. What is to be done?

Insistent Use of the Tongue

1. We Must Recognize the Problem

The tongue is an accurate barometer of the heart. It tells the truth about what is on the inside of our life. This is what is emphasized in the book of Colossians – a new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the one who created him. With this comes the reminder to put away all vestiges of sinful speech. “Now, you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices” (Col. 3:8-10).

2. Embrace the Solution

A New Nature- The clear implication of verses 11-12 is this: only a new nature in Christ can ultimately change the tongue, for the tongue can only speak out of that which fills the heart. You cannot create a new nature for yourself. All of us are fallen in Adam. “For if by the transgression of one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift of the grace by the one man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many” (Romans 5:15).

3. Constant Grace is Needed

The reminder of our inability to tame the tongue (vs. 8) is offered so that we might cast ourselves upon the Lord and his all-sufficient grace. Being in grace means that you are given the ability to stand firm and make progress in the life of faith.

4. Regular Discipline

James tender statement at the end of verse 10 helps us to see the action we are to take as Christians: “My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.” There is an incongruity in being a Christian and sending forth the wrong message with our mouth. The Bible clearly demonstrates that Christians, by the work of God’s grace, can deal with the tongue. The context of verses 1-5, helps us to understand the issue of discipline. We saw in our previous study that as the tongue goes, so goes life.

Conclusion

When the tongue is good there is nothing better. When it is bad there is nothing worse.
What does your tongue reveal about your heart?