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The Danger of Our Tongues

JAMES 3:1-12

Introduction

1. It was Benjamin Franklin, in *Poor Richard's Almanac*, who wrote, "A slip of the foot you may soon recover, but a slip of the tongue you may never get over."
2. All of us have done it — said something that we did not mean to say without realizing what we had just said or how it would be received.
3. Sometimes it is an honest slip of the tongue which may cause someone to laugh (e.g., stating that a baby weighed 20 lbs. at birth).
4. At other times a improperly chosen word may cause someone to be offended, become angry, drive them away.
5. We say things in . . .
 - a. anger which we later regret,
 - b. jest which to us may be funny, but not necessarily to someone else.
 - c. an effort to wound or belittle because we have been wounded.
 - d. an effort to correct because of an error on the part of another.
6. We say and do so many things with our tongues and the words which come out of our mouths.
7. Here, in his letter to those Jewish Christians "dispersed abroad," James addresses the problem we have with our tongues.
8. As we look at what James has to say, I would encourage us all, myself included, to pay closer attention to the things we say.

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I. The Need To Control Our Tongues

A. THE WARNING

“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren . . .” (James 3:1a, NASB95).

1. In the early days of the church, teachers were highly honored, much like the rabbis (teachers) in the synagogues.
2. They were accorded a great deal of respect.
3. Some individuals wanted to have influence and authority over others.
4. They wanted the praise and admiration which came from being a teacher of God’s Word.
5. James knew that some motivated to become teachers for the wrong reasons.

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6. Jesus recognized this problem in His day (Matthew 23:5-7).

“But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. “They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men.” (Matthew 23:5–7, NASB95)

7. Likewise, it was a problem which Paul encountered in Rome (Philippians 1:17).

“the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment.” (Philippians 1:17, NASB95)

8. As a result, Paul is discouraging people from choosing to be teachers for the wrong reasons.

Slide 4**B. REASONS FOR THE WARNING**

“... knowing that as such we will 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.” (James 3:1–2, NASB95)

1. Paul gives three reasons for his warning.
2. The first involves *divine judgment*.
 - a. As James says, “because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (v. 1, NIV84).
 - b. As teachers of God’s Word, we have the responsibility to obey it and to teach it clearly.
 - c. It was Jesus, who, following the Parable of the Foolish Steward said, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more” (Luke 12:48).
3. The second has to do with the fact that *we are sinners*.
 - a. James puts it this way, “we all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2a).
 - b. The word “stumble” here, as in James 2:10, means “sin.”
 - c. As we noticed this morning in Paul’s letter to the brethren in Rome,
 - 1) “There is none righteous, not even one” (3:10)
 - 2) “There is none who does good” (3:12b)
4. Third, *the act of teaching involves our tongues*.
 - a. James wrote, “If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well” (James 3:2b).
 - b. The prophet Isaiah, following his vision of God in the temple, said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”” (Isaiah 6:5, NASB95)

5. James' point to all of us who teach whether we are elders, preachers or teachers is that we must be very cautious with our words.

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II. The Power of the Tongue

A. IT'S INHERENT POWER

“Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at 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.” (James 3:3–5a, NASB95)

1. James uses three illustrations to show the inherent power of the tongue.
2. His first two illustrations demonstrate the ability of a small object to control or influence a much larger object.
 - a. A rider on a horse can use a bit in the horse's mouth to control the direction of the horse.

“Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.” (James 3:3, NASB95)

- b. Though the bit is small, a rider is able to direct the horse wherever he may choose.
 - c. A ship's rudder is another small object when compared to the size of the ship to which it is attached.

“Look at 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.” (James 3:4, NASB95)

- d. By use of the ship's rudder, the ship's pilot is able to steer the ship in the direction the captain may order.
3. James summarizes the point of these two illustrations with these words:

“So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things” (James 3:5a, NASB95).

- a. While our tongues are small in relation to our bodies, they have the potential to achieve powerful results, both good and bad.
- b. With our tongues,
 - 1) we can stir up violence or promote peace.
 - 2) we can crush someone’s spirit or soothe an aching heart and encourage a discouraged soul.
- c. If the tongue could speak for itself, it could tell of the great things it has done.

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B. IT’S DESTRUCTIVE POWER

“See 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.” (James 3:5b–6, NASB95)

- 1. Our tongues, when left uncontrolled, can be the source of great destruction.
- 2. We have seen, all too many times, the reports of great forest fires which originated from a small flame.
- 3. In the same way, when we misuse our tongues, we can cause great pain in the lives of those around us.
- 4. James points to three destructive results of our tongues when we fail to control them:
 - a. It “defiles the entire body” — it is the source for the pollution and defilement of our entire body.
 - b. It “sets on fire the course of our life” — it has the potential to affect all of our life from our youth to our death.
 - c. It is itself “set on fire by hell” — Satan, himself, the “father of lies” (John 8:44), will hijack our tongues for His own destructive purposes.

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5. Instead, we need to follow the instructions of the apostle Paul:

“Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.”
(Colossians 4:5–6, NASB95)

Slide 8**C. IT’S UNCONTROLLABLE POWER**

“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.” (James 3:7–8, NASB95)

1. James points to four classifications of animals which man has either subdued or tamed: animals which walk, fly, crawl or swim.
2. While man has been able to tame various creatures in the animal kingdom, no one has been able to tame the tongue.
3. It is “a restless evil” always creating more mischief.
4. Ultimately, “it is a restless evil” one “full of deadly poison.”

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5. In Psalm 140, David pleaded with God for his rescue from evil men,

“Who devise evil things in their hearts;
They continually stir up wars.
They sharpen their tongues as a serpent:
Poison of a viper is under their lips.”

(Psalm 140:2-3, NASB95)

Slide 10**D. IT’S REVEALING POWER**

“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? Nor can salt water produce fresh.” (James 3:9–12, NASB95)

1. As James states in verses 9-10, we use our tongues for both positive and negative purposes:

“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” (James 3:9-10a).

2. We are sinfully inconsistent when we bless God with our tongues in one moment and then curse those made in His likeness in the next.
3. Have you ever seen someone come to worship on Sunday and sing the hymns of praise we find in our hymnals, but Monday at work curse a fellow worker with language that as someone has said, “would make a sailor blush.”
4. As James says, “My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.” (James 3:10b).
5. A fountain sends out only one type of water — we don’t get fresh water and salt water from the same spring.
6. Neither do we get olives from a fig tree, nor figs from a grape vine.
7. Each produces according to its kind.
8. The same is true of our tongues.

Conclusion

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1. It was Jesus who said, “For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matthew 12:34).

2. What fills your heart tonight?

3. Is it the peace of Christ?

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.” (Colossians 3:15, NASB95)

4. “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.” (Ephesians 4:29, NASB95)

5. Let’s all do our best to be the people God calls us to be in both our speech and our conduct.