

STUDIES IN THE LIFE OF JAMES

STUDY NUMBER 6 – JAMES 3:1-12

This comes to our sixth study in the book of James. James is writing to people that are suffering greatly and he wants to mature them in faith by explaining to them things that God does in our lives and things that we do as well to cooperate with the work of the Spirit.

We're talking about the tongue today. We don't often hear message about the tongue. I bet you can't remember the last time. But the Scripture has a heavy emphasis on the subject so we better take time to give serious consideration.

Our key verse is going to be verse 2 of chapter 3: “For we commit many sins. If anyone does not stumble in word, this one is a fully developed man, able to hold in check also his entire body.”

You'll remember that in our first study James said that we should deem it pure joy when we fall into diverse testing because God is using and orchestrating these circumstances to make us more productive and more like Christ.

And in study #2 we saw the distinction between temptation and the test. We like the temptation, it comes from the Devil to destroy us. And James makes it quite clear that our growth is stunted during that time if we participate in the sin that's being suggested. We flee from that and we grow by the intake of the Word of God, was number three. Be doers of the word and not hearers only deceiving your own selves.

Then in chapter 2 we learned two things. 1. The kind of love that is produced in us is love without partiality. James gave us a graphic illustration of that in the earlier part of chapter 2

Last week we talked about the subject faith and works and that a living faith will manifest itself in fruit in our lives that will be good works that people can see and understand that Christ lives in us.

So the ways that Christ can be seen in me is by my attitude in the times of storm when it's rough. Also in my victory in the area of temptation. By the intake of the Word, my love without partiality, and a living faith. But has anybody told you that your spiritual maturity is also revealed by the words that come from your mouth?

Now we're going to reverse the DVD for just a second. We're going back to chapter 1. James a lot of times will drop a sentence or two in to tell you that he's going to

come back to that subject later. He told us that at the end of chapter 1, verses 19 and 26

You know this, my beloved brethren. Now let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to become angry . . . If any man is thinking himself to be religious, and not holding in check his tongue, he is deceiving his own heart, and his religion is worthless.

What James has been talking about in chapter 2 is the works or the fruit. Today he's talking about the words. Next week he's going to talk to us about wisdom at the end of chapter 3.

Harry Ironside is one of the great Bible commentators.

“So the tongue, seemingly so weak in-itself, has power to make or break one's life and testimony. Nor can any man control it in his own strength. When the tongue is surrendered to Christ, and dominated by the Spirit, it becomes one of our most useful members. When it falls under the control of the Enemy, it works untold grief and damage.”

There are a lot of little poetic pieces are about the tongue and this one is very graphic:

**“Only a word of anger,
but it wounded one sensitive heart.
Only a word of sharp reproach,
but it made the teardrops start.**

**Only a hasty, thoughtless word,
sarcastic and unkind,
but it darkened the day before so bright
and left a stain behind.”**

If you need to be convinced of the fact that the Scripture speaks about the tongue so much, you might take a little study of the book of Proverbs and read how many times Solomon refers to the tongue and to the words and the impact of them. We always think of the book of Proverbs as the book of wisdom. But if you're thinking in terms of words as well as wisdom, then you're going to understand that Solomon made it a priority. David does too in numerous of the Psalms. We'll mention several of them here today.

But then flowing out of that is this tremendous statement in James 3 about the tongue.

Now can I share with you just a minute? The tongue is a very, very serious matter. And I hope and pray if you've never heard a message on the tongue that you'll give all ears this morning and that you'll join me in praying that God would daily take the offering of your tongue and ask God to fill your mouth with the words that He would desire you to speak.

The tongue reflects who you are. It's speaks and makes public what's in your heart. That's why you guard your heart. But I want you to guard your tongue. I want

you to learn to know the joy of surrendering your tongue to Jesus Christ. And the control of the Spirit to be a blessing and a joy to others because He's speaking through you.

v. 1 Stop becoming many teachers, my brethren, knowing that we shall receive a greater condemnation.

You see, a message on the tongue is not for you it's for we who take the mantle of teaching. It's we who speak publically that we get the very first warning. And you will notice that it is in the present tense so obviously James has some evidence for this going on and he's saying "Look, don't take lightly the mantle of communicating spiritual truth to others."

You have to be very, very careful because when you do that you're using your tongue. And if your whole heart is not in it and your whole passion and your own purity of heart and motive before the Lord is not there, stop it! It's going to be a horrible experience in eternity to have to face that kind of hypocrisy and inconsistency. "Stop becoming many teachers, my brethren [brothers and sisters in Christ] knowing that we are going to receive a greater condemnation."

Let me give you a couple of verses of background to this and then point out where the condemnation comes.

Matthew 12:36-37

Jesus said “and I tell you this, that you must give account on Judgment Day for every idle word you speak. Your words reflect your faith, either you will be justified by them or you will be condemned.”

Then the psalmist says:

Psalm 141:3

Help me Lord to keep my mouth shut and my lips sealed.

Careful with your communication because there is a time at the judgment seat of Christ that we’re going to be held accountability for those words.

Psalm 19:14

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

The words flow from the mediation of the heart. When the heart’s right, the words are going to be different that’s all. You’re not going to be speaking in the flesh but you’re going to be speaking with the power and the authority of the Spirit and it can be recognized.

v. 2 For we commit many sins. If anyone does not stumble in word, this one is a fully developed man, able to hold in check also his entire body.

This is our key verse for today's study. "*We commit many sins.*" We sin with the tongue.

And then the statement:

"If anyone does not stumble in word, this one is a fully developed [or mature] man. . . able to hold in check also his entire body."

You see, it's not just controlling our physical appetites, it's not just being able to say "No" to our body and treat it roughly and exercise, it's not just showing up every morning to be with the Lord, it's not just striving for one particular aspect, for when you are disciplined in one area, that discipline will spill over into other areas of your life. And that's the great hope for each of us that we learn how to live disciplined Spirit controlled lives. That's the longing of my heart for our lives and for yours as well.

This would take us back to James 1:4. We usually have a verse in a book we are studying that will encapsulate the whole book. I call that the key verse to the whole book. Then each study has a key verse and we're there on that one in this particular one on the tongue.

But chapter 1 verse 4 says:

“let patience be having its complete work [the reason] in order that you may be fully developed and complete, lacking in nothing.”

That’s the goal and objective of James in writing the book. So now he’s come time to talk to us about the words that come from our mouth so that we can be fully developed and mature in the faith.

I would put 1 Corinthians 9:27 right alongside of that. Paul said:

“I treat my body roughly and make it serve me, lest when I preach to others I would be ordered to stand aside.”

All of the discipline is inter-related. As you discipline your body with regard food and sleep you will find that same discipline will spill over in your exercise program. Then it will spill over in what you eat. Then it will spill over into your sex life. It will spill over in the words that you use and the attitudes you display and the actions you take and the disciplines of your spiritual life. Bottom line, **“be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19).**

Don Gilmore has written an excellent book called *Freedom to Fail*. In the book he talks about a friend that really says a lot.

“The depth of a person’s freedom is revealed in and through his ability to hold his silence and to use it discerningly. The most famous Christian I know is a man who remains silent on any subject that might lead to self-congratulations. Whenever conversation reaches a point where he might need to comment on his latest writings, honors, speech makings, experiences with other important people, he grows strangely silent or attempts to change the subject. There is a great power and freedom in him because there is much that runs deep in his soul, unarticulated and secret. I cannot imagine this man namedropping or relating his most recent prayer experience or exclaiming for all to hear how wonderfully the Lord is using him. A man like this is rooted and grounded in God’s presence and is free of the external need to be babbling like a shallow brook.”

He’s telling us how, when the Spirit controls the tongue, the Lord Jesus is glorified.

Would you pause with me for just a minute and answer the question for the Lord right now. “Lord, I want to give You my tongue. I want You when we go public for You to be the One speaking through me. I want Your words to be on my lips. Control my tongue.”

That God would use my thoughts, God would use my hands, God would use my feet, God would use my members as an instrument of righteousness set apart

for Him to use. It is the spirit of God controlling the tongue.

Now if you prayed that prayer, I've got to tell you that there are going to be some dramatic changes that are going to take place if you were sincere. First of all you are going to find yourself filled with gratitude. You're going to find that your whole orientation has changed. You actually for the first time really learn what it means to praise the Lord. You're thanking Him. It's coming out of your mouth. It's a praise that exalts the Lord and lets people know that the Spirit of God is speaking through you. There's an incredible joy.

Now, you've got to be real careful guys especially if you prayed that prayer and you go home and you tell your wife she's the most beautiful thing you've ever seen and you thank God that you're married to her and you're so grateful you married over your head. She could have cardiac arrest. You want to be really careful or she might think you've had too much to drink and we don't want any of that. See the whole orientation is going to change.

The Spirit of God will transform you and you'll learn in humility to say thank you.

You are speaking words. The next thing you're going to find is that you love to sing. You start singing hymns and songs and choruses. Things that express to the

Lord the feeling of your heart. And to just tell the Lord I am so at rest and peace in Him.

And then you speak words of love. You encourage, you affirm, you're a blessing to be around and you can't wait to see each other because of the nice thing you're going to hear. Let's understand where it comes from. That it's a tongue controlled by the Spirit.

Want a great illustration? Joseph is another one. Here he is, he walks through this series of circumstances in his life, including sexual purity, and he comes down to the end of it and his brothers are just blown away by the fact that he's now vice president of Egypt. And Joseph looks at those guys and says "You thought it for evil against me but God meant it for good to bring to pass as it is this day to save much folks alive." In other words he's saying "Don't sweat it guys, I'm still your brother and I'm here and I'm going to take care of you as long as I'm able to do that."

Those great statements just refresh our spirits and realize that the Lord is there. Now, when you get to verse 3, verses 3, 4 and 5, you've got three illustrations of something that's little that has big ramifications. Isn't that a great illustration for the tongue? Just a little old thing behind the pearly gates in there but it does big things, this is what James wants to describe. So he gives you three illustrations. Here we go.

v. 3 Now if we are putting bridles in the mouths of the horses, [purpose] in order that they may be obeying us, we are also guiding their whole body.

That bridle and that bit is just small in comparison to this monstrous horse that we're trying to control and do what we want to do. But he's saying we are putting the bridle in the mouth so that they will be obeying us and we are also guiding their whole body.

I love David's honesty about his sin and when he gets to Psalm 32 and he's talking about the consequences of forgiveness he makes this great statement in:

Psalm 32:9

Do not be like a senseless horse or mule that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control.

We don't want to be like that. We don't like to have outward constraints. We want the freedom of the Spirit to do His thing through us and in us.

I found this piece the other day:

**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.
(source unknown)

Same cycle of a little word having big result. Now here comes the second one:

v. 4 Behold, also the ships, though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, are being guided by a very small rudder wherever the impulse of the steersman leads it.

Large ship, there's a ship up here. Rudder. The question is, who's handling the rudder. When the Spirit of God is handling the rudder or the tiller, then we are being guided by Him. Who is the pilot? Who is controlling this thing up here? Are we or is the Lord? And have you addressed the issue? You want to be wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove. Learn to let the Spirit control your tongue.

When you just feel like you've got to say something, you end up saying some of the dumbest things in the whole world. Just back off, keep still and think of all the peace that's going to result from you keeping your mouth shut. And you're going to do a whole lot better.

v. 5 So also the tongue is a small member and it is boasting of great things. Behold, how large a forest, a little fire sets ablaze.

That's your third illustration. First of all, he talks to us about the tongue, about the rudder of the ship, about the bit and the bridle with the horse, now you've got a large forest and it's incinerated by a little fire.

Well you need to say in Texas that the fields are set afire. We recognize the devastating spark that can set many of these arid fields up in the panhandle and other places in our state to an incredible burning.

It's a very graphic illustration. You didn't mean to say it but you just said it and it just hurt so bad it burned the landscape. It's been devastating what's happened as a result of it and James just says that.

William Barclay is a little more honest about it:

“The stroke of the whip makes marks on the flesh, but the stroke of the tongue breaks the bones. Many have fallen by the edge of the sword, but not so many as have fallen by the tongue.”

“Behold, how large a forest, a little fire sets ablaze.”

In 1871 a cow kicked over a lamp in a shed in Chicago and nearly burned the whole city down. And we look back on that as the devastating effects of what fire will do.

Now he's going to go on and talk about the tongue in the remaining verses and I'll wrap it up.

v. 6 And the tongue is a fire, the sum total of iniquity. The tongue so presents itself in our members, staining the whole body, and is setting on fire the course of existence, and is being set on fire by hell.

Our tongue can accomplish what Satan wants. Even though it's a small member, these words say that it has within its capacity a world of iniquity.

So let's talk for just a minute about what he means with the fact that it's a fire and it's the sum total of iniquity.

How would we be involved in that? Well, we can turn a person's character into ashes and we can ruin a person by burning them badly by saying things that are not true.

Here are just a few suggestions that I came up with. First the way the tongue burns is by speaking idle words. They're not according to truth. You don't really know all the details but it's something to talk about and so you fill in your own.

Psalm 34:13

**Keep your tongue from speaking evil
and your lips from telling lies!**

Psalm 120:2

**Deliver my soul, O LORD, from lying lips,
from a deceitful tongue.**

The second area this comes in is the area of insinuating evils. You don't really know the juicy details but you have heard by means of the grapevine, dah-dah-dah-dah-dah-dah, and you've got these suppositions and you just can't keep your mouth shut and it makes for exciting conversation so you go ahead.

Psalm 52:2

**You think up evil plans.
Your tongue is like a sharp razor, making up lies.**

Proverbs 4:24

Avoid all perverse talk; stay away from corrupt speech.

The third way that this is seen: Speaking of things which reflect on the character of another child of God.

When you don't have the facts, you don't have the witnesses, keep your mouth shut.

Wait until the Lord makes it quite clear that a word needs to be spoken.

Proverbs 18:8

The words of a gossip are like tasty bits of food.
People like to gobble them up.

Proverbs 16:28

A useless person causes trouble,
and a gossip ruins friendships.

If you think of this lightly on the Lord's hate list, this is one of the big ones. If you read Proverbs 6 where it says "There are six things the LORD hates—no, seven things he detests:" When he says something like that, oh there's six but the seventh is the one I hate the most." That's the way you could translate that. You know what the seventh one is? It's *sowing discord among the brothers*. A feeling that you are going to be superior, that you're going to be vindicated or you're going to be this or that by saying these words and they're used to hurt and to devastate the life of somebody else.

Then magnifying faults.

Booker T. Washington said: "You can't hold a fellow down in the ditch unless you stay there with him."

You are magnifying the faults of others and speaking of your own personal virtues.

And then words that belittle.

Psalm 64:3-4

**They sharpen their tongues like swords
and aim their bitter words like arrows.
They shoot from ambush at the innocent.**

Have you ever wondered why it is, by nature, that it's easier to talk about the faults of others than it is about their virtue? If you've got a right attitude and a right spirit and you're controlled by the Holy Spirit, you're going to have a new freedom in your life to speak of virtues and keep your mouth shut on faults because you're so grieving over the fact that if they're true you don't want to be part and parcel of speaking or hurting that person in any way because the love of Christ is controlling you and you just don't have time to be running somebody down. You need to be building them up, speaking often of their virtues, speaking of their assets. And guys I can tell you, if you'll just take the book of Song of Solomon today and spend some time with it.

Everything he has to say is complimentary. It's affirming, it's encouraging about how beautiful she is and how thankful he is.

Proverbs 31 woman, the same way. The picture is gorgeous because people are speaking in those passages on the virtues rather than criticizing the weaknesses and the faults. God help us in that area.

Now, how is the tongue, we know it's a fire because it burns. How is the tongue "the sum total of iniquity"?

- 1. The tongue suggests sin,**
- 2. It commits sin by lying and gossip, and**
- 3. It excuses and defends sin in justifying itself.**

William Barclay says:

"An uncontrolled tongue is like a world hostile to and ignorant of God. It is the part of us which disobeys, defies, and rebels against God."

Then he says it is actually kindled with the very fire of hell.

I struggled with that for a while. How can we go that far to say that we've got in our mouths something comes from the fires of hell?

Then I began to realize, do you remember the one time Satan is into things big time is in the life of Job. And he just nails Job over and over again in those first two chapters. And then what happens? He's saturated with words from some 38 chapters from guys who are supposed to affirm and comfort him and every time they open their mouth, including his own wife, the guy is blasted and accused and criticized. Talk about Satan

flying words. By the time you get through reading that book you are worn out with wordiness. There are just volumes of words. None to comfort. Almost did Job in by the use of their tongues.

v. 7 For every creature, wild animals and birds, reptiles and sea creatures, is being tamed and has been tamed by human kind.

Well, you go to Sea World and you see these monsters jumping out of the water to the tunes of music and grabbing the fish and diving and going through hoops and splashing people. It's amazing that that happens! It's beyond comprehension what we can do with animals in training them to do what we want them to do.

Amazing what we can do with animals. But he goes on to say:

v. 8 But the tongue no one in the human race is able to tame; a restless evil, full of death-bringing poison.

What's that tell you? You can't do it. I can't do it. Nobody in the human race can do it, but who can? The Spirit of God! There's your message. God I come to you and I place my tongue under the control of the Spirit this day to be a blessing, to be a joy, to speak of virtues, to be positive and affirming and encouraging my brothers and sisters in Christ

Only the Spirit of God can control it. I can hear some of you saying: “Well, I’ve done that. Every morning I tell the Lord to control my tongue and it just turns out the same.” That’s not a problem with the Lord, that’s a problem with you. The problem is you’re grieving the Holy Spirit by some sin in your life that you haven’t dealt with so the Spirit is not functioning like He would. Or maybe you’re quenching Him by saying you know he’s told you to do something and you haven’t done it so the Spirit won’t function. The Spirit will function when you deal with the sin. And if you’re not experiencing the Spirit of God speaking positive affirming words through you then don’t blame God. Address the other issues. Let God speak through you.

Remember Moses? The Lord finally got fed up with his excuses: “Now go! I’ll help you speak well and I’ll tell you what to say.”

Lord, I give you my eyes, my ears, my mind, my tongue, my hands, my feet. Use me as an instrument for your glory and honor.

v. 9 With it we are praising the Lord and Father; and with it we are cursing men, who have been made in the likeness of God.

Inconsistency. Instability. How could you be actually praising the Lord and then go out and curse somebody?

There's a story about that lady who got so ticked at this guy who stopped at the stop light in front of her. And she started yelling and screaming because he didn't go on through and she had to be delayed and she was in a hurry. She was slamming on her horn and she was yelling like crazy. Pretty soon after the thing happened an officer behind her flashed the lights to pull her over. He took her down to the police station and after he booked her, about an hour later he came back and got her and said, "I really want to apologize to you. You know, I looked at the back of your car and you had 'See You in Sunday School' and you had a fish on there and 'Honk if You Love Jesus' and I figured that car was stolen by the way you were acting."

The horrible inconsistency of the way we display our voices on Sunday to praise but on Monday to curse the likeness of men.

v.10 Out of the same mouth is proceeding blessings and cursings. My brethren, it is not necessary that these things keep on happening.

Don't let that happen. Stay under the control of the Spirit.

v.11 The spring is not pouring forth out of the same opening, the sweet and the bitter [water] is it?

v.12 A fig tree, my brethren, is not able to produce olives or a vine, figs, is it? Neither can a salt spring give sweet water.

It's the control of the Spirit.

When The Fire Goes Out

[Proverbs 26:17-28](#)

Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. —Proverbs 26:20

When a fire finishes burning through the material it feeds on, it goes out. Similarly, when gossip reaches the ear of someone who will not repeat it, it dies.

Gossip, like other sins, is like “tasty trifles” (Proverbs 26:22). We like to hear it and share it with others because it “tastes” good. Gossip is rooted in our need to feel good about ourselves. As we bring others down, we gain the illusion that we are moving upward.

That's why spreading gossip is so difficult to resist. It takes prayer and God's grace to bring us to the point where we refuse to pass it on or even hear it—even under the guise of personal concern or a request to pray for a sinning friend in trouble.

We must ask God for the wisdom to know when to speak, what to speak, and when to simply keep our mouths shut. For “in the multitude of words sin is not

lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (Proverbs 10:19).

It is often wise to be quiet and speak few words. But if we must speak, let’s talk of those things that encourage and move others closer to God, not those things that will discourage and hurt them. “The tongue of the wise promotes health” (Proverbs 12:18). — David H. Roper

**The tongue can spread suspicion,
And reputations steal;
But when the Lord controls our tongue,
Its words will soothe and heal. —Sper**

Destroy gossip by ignoring it.

LESSONS FROM THE PASSAGE

LESSON #1: Our spiritual maturity is reflected by a controlled tongue.

LESSON #2: We will be held accountable for our words at the Judgment seat of Christ.

LESSON #3: The tongue can only reflect one nature at a time.

LESSON #4: The Holy Spirit is the only One who can control the tongue.

LESSON #5: Though little, the tongue can do extensive damage.

STUDY NUMBER SIX - STRIVE FOR TONGUE CONTROL — **JAMES 3:1-12**

KEY VERSE 3:2

v. 1 Stop becoming many teachers, my brethren, knowing that we shall receive a greater condemnation.

v. 2 For we commit many sins. If anyone does not stumble in word, this one is a fully developed man, able to hold in check also his entire body.

v. 3 Now if we are putting bridles in the mouths of the horses, in order that they may be obeying us, we are also guiding their whole body.

v. 4 Behold, also the ships, though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, are being guided by a very small rudder wherever the impulse of the steersman leads it.

v. 5 So also the tongue is a small member and it is boasting of great things. Behold, how large a forest a little fire sets ablaze.

v. 6 And the tongue is a fire, the sum total of iniquity. The tongue so presents itself in our members, staining the whole body, and is setting on fire the course of existence, and is being set on fire by hell.

v. 7 For every creature, wild animals and birds, reptiles and sea creatures, is being tamed and has been tamed by human kind.

v. 8 But the tongue no one in the human race is able to tame; a restless evil, full of death-bringing poison.

v. 9 With it we are praising the Lord and Father; and with it we are cursing men, who have been made in the likeness of God.

v.10 Out of the same mouth is proceeding blessings and cursings. My brethren, it is not necessary that these things keep on happening.

v.11 The spring is not pouring forth out of the same opening, the sweet and the bitter [water] is it?

v.12 A fig tree, my brethren, is not able to produce olives or a vine figs, is it? Neither can a salt spring give sweet water.

NOTES

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QUESTIONS:

1. Read James 3:1-12 and in your own words pull out the main thought of this passage.

2. What does James say about “teachers” in verse 1?

3. Put in your own words the meaning of verse 2.

4. What illustrations does James use to tell us how little things do big jobs?

5. What does James say about the “tongue” in verse 6? Look up some other references to the tongue in a Bible concordance for your own personal study.

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6. Has anybody ever tamed the tongue, according to verse 8?

7. What is James saying in verses 9-12?

8. State some ways that you can learn to control your tongue.

9. Which verse in the study has meant the most to you?

10. What lesson have you learned from this study?
