

James Part 7 – Study Notes

Introduction

We continue with the theme **that real faith produces genuine love**. In the verses we are studying today James talked about controlling the tongue. No other section of the Bible speaks with greater clarity and impact on the potential destructive power of our words. We might summarise this powerful passage in the form of a question: *if you say you believe that you should then would you say things you shouldn't?*

James 3:1-2 *Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ² 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.* James was not trying to criticize the ministry of teaching in the church; he was trying to protect it. He warned of the responsibility of the teaching ministry, because teachers, those who have the responsibility of speaking God's truth fully and accurately, will fall under stricter judgement.

A Bible teacher is responsible to speak **the truth**, not their personal opinions. They cannot stray from the truth into their own speculation. What the Bible teacher says **affects many lives**. The responsibility to handle God's word accurately can't be taken lightly. Too many people's lives are at stake to just wing it. Bible teachers fall under stricter judgement because we are expected to live the truth, not just teach it. You say, the real test of the teacher isn't what he says, but what their families say about them. The extent of the person's ministry is not the size of his church or how big a ministry they have.

Of course no person is infallible. Everyone stumbles in some way. When a Bible teacher stumbles, he can cause a whole crowd of people to stumble with him. The tongue is the teacher's indispensable tool but an ignorant, deceptive or a wicked tongue can become a disastrous weapon. We can take heart though that we will stumble because we are not perfect. The church needs willing, gifted, trained, and qualified Bible teachers. James warned against hurrying into teaching without realising what a serious responsibility it is. James urged self-control. Self-control begins with the heart. Jesus said in Matthew 15 that the basic problem is not the tongue but the heart. The tongue is the messenger from the heart. Matthew 15:11 says: *What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.* Matthew 15:17-19 says: *Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? ¹⁸ But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.* The root problem is the heart and from this James developed the thoughts regarding the tongue.

James 3:3-5 *When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.* Leonardo da Vinci's giftedness as a master sculptor led him to study the human body in as much detail as any doctor of his day; when he described the tongue he said, *no member needs so great a number of muscles as the tongue.* The tongue is very small but extremely powerful. James wanted to impress on us the effects it can have, both positive and negative. He gave us three analogies for the power of the tongue.

First, the tongue is like a bit in the horse's mouth. A piece of metal can control the movement of an entire horse. Similarly, the tongue can steer the direction of the person's life.

Second, the tongue is like the rudder on the ship. A massive hulk of steel can be steered by a small flap of metal, determining the course of the ship. In the same way, the tongue, determines the course of the person's life.

The third analogy teaches of the potential danger of the tongue, *see how great a forest is set a flame by such a small fire.* If you take a spark, a glowing ember, or a smouldering ash and drop it in the wrong place, thousands of acres of forest can go up in flames. The tongue is a tiny spark, but it can set hundreds of

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people's lives ablaze. An unchecked tongue can assassinate a person's character, destroy a reputation, or even ruin a church.

Our words can build unity or demolish it. The tongue can encourage fellowship or destroy it. Our mouths can build community or fracture it. The tongue is a small but powerful member. It has the ability to do tremendous good but it also has the potential to do incalculable harm.

James continued in the next three verses of the danger of the tongue and uses the image of the tongue as fire. James 3:6-8 *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. ⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.* The tongue can turn an otherwise gentle person into a monster. Bitterness can sour our speech.

James said the tongue is in some way connected to hell. The tongue is set on fire by hell, and then it sets the entire course of our lives on fire. In the Greek the word used for *hell* here is *Gehenna*. This word only appears in Jesus' teaching and in the book of James. It would have been familiar to the Jews living in Jerusalem.

Gehenna refers to the Hinnon Valley, which runs along the south side of Jerusalem. In the days of James of Jesus residents of Jerusalem put all their garbage in the Hinnon valley where it was burnt. *James was saying you see the smelly dump south of the town? Our tongues are just like that. The garbage in our hearts is set on fire. Our tongues let everyone hear the wickedness in our hearts.*

James also refers to the tongue as an untamed beast. It seems we can train any kind of animals but the wild tongue resists taming. James 3:8 *but no human being can tame the tongue*. James said that human beings, on their own, do not have the power to keep their tongues in check. But when we know Christ personally, with God's power through the work of the Holy Spirit's presence can transform our heart and take full control of the tongue. Matthew 19:26 says *Jesus looked at them and said, With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible*. James pictured the tongue as being *full of deadly poison*, ready to spread words of death. These words soil a person's character or image.

After likening the tongue to a fire, wild beast, and a deadly poison, James continued with two arguments. The first comes from human experience the second from human nature. James 3:9-12 *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.*

We can be driving our car praising the Lord when someone cuts us up. Blessing and cursing can come from the same mouth. James says *my brothers and sisters, this should not be*. Another example might be. After the Sunday service sit down to meal, say grace and then continue to complain about the preacher.

James concludes ¹¹ *Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.* James said that the product is consistent with the source. A man who speaks out of two sides of his mouth reflects the heart of a double-minded man. Matthew 7:18 *A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.*

The tongue **defiles**. With just one syllable the tongue can stain our image. The tongue is that powerful. It can cause enormous destruction. It resists natural attempts at self-control. The tongue reveals what **we really are**. That inner person always seems to find opportunities to reveal it's self through the tongue. The fruit of our lips find it source in the root of our soul.

James's taught us the importance of surrendering to God's control.