



Lesson 7 April 15, 2010

Friend or Fiend

James commanded in the opening verses of his epistle that the believer “be perfect (mature) and entire, lacking nothing.” Nowhere is that maturity better exemplified than in the power to control the tongue, for the spoken word can destroy or heal. James compares the tongue to a bit and rudder for their power to direct, to a raging fire for its power to devour and destroy, and to a fountain for its power to refresh, and to a tree for its power to bear fruit and to afford shade (shelter and healing).

1. In verses 1-4, James warns that teachers of God’s word are subject to a stricter and higher accountability than those not in positions of responsibility and authority because there is a correspondingly greater likelihood of such a one stumbling or offending (v1); however, note that all of us will stumble irrespective of our position. He then amplifies his point from verse 1:26 that the perfect (or mature) man controls his tongue and is hence able to bridle his whole body (v2), essentially controlling his life. James therefore likens the tongue to a tiny bit that controls a powerful horse (v3) or to a small rudder that directs a great ship (v4). How do these verses convey similar thoughts?

Psalm 12:3-4; 34:12-14, 73:8-9

Proverbs 21:23

2. In verse 5-8, James exclaims that the small, but boastful tongue can kindle a great fire (v5) when it is full of iniquity and set on fire by hell (v6), or literally, Gehenna, the valley of Hinnon where the fire burned continually. He laments that man who can tame the beasts (v7) cannot tame the tongue (v8). How do these passages underscore James’ points?

Psalms 10:7; 52:1-2; 57:4; 140:3



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Proverbs 16:27; 26:21

Matthew 15:11, 18

Do we have any hope of taming our tongue? Philippians 4:13

3. In verses 9-12, James continues his theme by declaring that we bless God and curse men with the same tongue (v9) and admonishes that this should not be so (v10), for a fountain cannot be both fresh and bitter (v11) nor can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine yield figs (v12). What similar, positive thoughts do these scriptures express?

Isaiah 50:4

Proverbs 10:20-21, 31-32; 15:4; 18:21

John 6:63



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Personal Application

James maintains his characteristic hard hitting style in this text by declaring that the tongue is set on fire of hell, which in the Greek is the word Gehenna, the garbage dump near Jerusalem where the fire always burned day and night. It is the same word used to mean the lake of fire that Jesus often referenced (11 times) into which both death and Hades, as well as those whose names are not written in the book of life, are cast (Revelation 20:14-15). Jesus described it as the place where “the fire is never quenched (Mark 9:44).” What an incredible and disturbing comparison James is making between the eternal fires of hell and our own tongues, for once started, “the fire that says it is not enough” is one of the four things the Spirit declares “is never satisfied (Proverbs 30:15-16).” Likewise, our own words, once spoken can never be retracted, and if spoken in haste, malice, and wrath can continue to burn, destroy, and kill long after being uttered -- the tongue “that speaks like the piercing of a sword (Proverbs 12:18).” It has been rightly suggested that the most dangerous animal on earth lives in its den behind our teeth!

David lamented that as he kept silent and contemplated his thoughts, presumably evil ones, “the fire burned and then he spoke with his tongue (Psalm 39:2-3),” as though he could not control the fire within. In the same Psalm, David cries out to God to that he “not sin with his tongue and that he keep his mouth with a bridle (Psalm 39:1),” using the same words and thoughts as James. Fortunately, as James also describes, our tongues can be as “choice silver (Proverbs 10:20)” and should be used to speak “acceptable words (Proverbs 10:32)” of life and healing, “full of wisdom (Proverbs 10:31)” and “thanksgiving to God, as we call upon His Name (Psalm 116:17).”

In all areas of our lives, we are constantly facing choices, including what we do and do not speak, and we will not be able to exercise control over our tongue unless we exercise control over our entire being. “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he that rules his spirit is greater than he who takes a city (Proverbs 16:32)” and “the discretion of a man defers his anger, and it is his glory to pass over a transgression (Proverbs 19:11).” How we need the healing, hot coals from the altar of heaven placed on our own lips, as they were for Isaiah (Isaiah 6:6-7), so that our lips become clean through the power of the Holy Spirit transforming our character into the mature Christian that James is calling us to become. Note that as Jesus healed the deaf and mute man, “He touched his tongue (Mark 7:33).”

Ultimately, it is a matter of the heart since “that which proceeds out of the mouth comes forth from the heart and they defile the man (Matthew 15:18).” Therefore, our prayerful plea should be that Christ may “dwell in our hearts by faith so that we are rooted and grounded in love (Ephesians 3:17)” even as the wholesome tree that James describes must be deep rooted. Perhaps our most important stewardship as a believer is “to keep our heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life (Proverbs 4:23)” In fulfilling that responsibility we will then exercise the control and wisdom on our life so that our tongue is a friend, not a fiend of hell, and “all may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).”