

International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

Lesson Text: James 3:1-12

Lesson Title: Control Your Speech

Introduction

Most of us have heard the saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." That saying was quoted when someone called us names or said things that made us feel humiliated, or not welcome in certain circles. The saying was an effort to teach us to have a thicker skin and not take things so personally. In other words, let it go in one ear and out the other and don't let those words bother you...after all, they are only words.

Evidently James believed words were more than "only" words? He believed that little things, especially "words" can make a big difference. As James continues to address Jewish Christians, he opens his third chapter with much needed teaching concerning the tongue and speech. The tongue or speech is mentioned directly or indirectly in all five chapters of James (James 1:19, 26; 2:12; 3:1-18; 4:11; 5:12). He gives several illustrations of little things that have a big effect. James wanted his readers to understand what a significant role our tongues and speech play in getting us into or out of trouble. Perhaps James had heard his half-brother say, *"And he called the multitude, and said unto them, Hear, and understand: Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man"* (Matthew 15:10-11).

People often pride themselves in the fact that they are not alcoholics, drug addicts, murderers, whoremongers, liars or thieves. However, those same people will use their tongues to talk about those who are. Most Christians will never stumble until they trip over their own tongues. In fact, misuse of the tongue is the easiest way to sin (Romans 3:13-14). The average person would never think of striking another person or using a weapon to do bodily harm. But the tongue is a weapon that is always with us, easily accessible, and extremely deadly (Psalm 64:3). A sharp tongue is the only edged tool that gets sharper with use (Psalm 52:2). The more we use our tongues to cut people, the more skillful we become in that task. On the other hand, the more we use our tongues to help and encourage others, the more we are able to control our tongue and the greater the benefit to those to whom we speak.

Most Christians never pray about their tongue or ask God to keep their speech pure. For most Christians, the sin of gossip and the uncontrolled tongue is not a big deal! The Bible teaches us that our tongue and speech is a big deal (Proverbs 15:28; 16:27; 26:20). Jesus said, *"O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned"* (Matthew 12:34-37). Jesus is saying that your speech is such a revealer of your heart that based upon the way you talk, your eternal destiny can be determined. The tongue provides evidence of what is in the heart.

Your Speech Has an Effect on You (James 3:1-6)

Verse 1-2

"My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body."

This passage begins with a prohibition, "My brethren, be not many masters..." James is saying, "Stop lining up to be teachers." Why would James tell his readers to stop seeking to be a teacher? Isn't it a good thing to be a teacher of God's Word? Doesn't God call men to teach and preach His word?

Evidently the prohibition, "be not many masters" or "stop lining up to be teachers" suggests that there were some in the early church who were seeking a teaching position without taking their responsibility seriously. Teaching in Jewish life and in the earlier church was a prestigious position. It was thought that a "master" or a teacher was one who was especially blessed of God. As a result of the prestige and recognized position, some were pursuing this teaching ministry without realizing the great responsibility and accountability involved. Since it is so easy to sin with our speech, it would be foolish to put yourself in a position where "words" and "speech" is the main thing you're doing.

It seems that in the early church, there was some format where people could rise up and give a teaching or some revelation they had received. At the church of Corinth, it had gotten so bad that it caused confusion (1 Corinthians 14). We still have a lot of that today in our churches. God's Word recognizes the office of pastor- teacher, and evangelists and teachers who are called by God and anointed by the Holy

Spirit specifically to the function of teaching and preaching God's Word (Ephesians 4:11). Those who go out on their own and start a ministry without the call of God of a local church to mother them and hold them accountable to biblical doctrine and walking on dangerous grounds! Some of those ministries turn out okay but that's also how cults get started and false doctrine is spread. James says, "Be not many masters." Think before you decide to start a ministry or just start teaching God's Word. It is serious business (1 Timothy 1:3-7).

The prohibition from James is followed by a warning. "Knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation" or the greatest judgment. "We" means James includes himself in this warning. Those who teach and preach the word of God on any level have a tremendous accountability before God (2 Timothy 2:15). "Greater condemnation" is speaking of judgment. God will require from each of us who preach and teach in proportion to the responsibility to which we are called in the Body of Christ (Luke 12:48).

"For in many things we offend all..." does not mean that we offend everyone to whom we minister. It means in many things we all offend, or, we all stumble in many different ways. James wants us to know that he was not zeroing in on speech and the tongue as the only way to sin. James is saying that sinning with our tongue and speech is not the only way we sin (Proverbs 20:9).

"If any many offend not in word, the same is a perfect man." If you can avoid sin in the area of speech, then you are a "perfect man." "Perfect" means "you have reached ripe spiritually maturity." Furthermore, if you can "bridle" or control your tongue, you are "able also to bridle your whole body."

Note: If you are someone who like to do the hardest tasks first, then start with that tiny and terrible tongue!

Verses 3-7

In verses 3-7, James gives three notable illustrations of how one's control over a small thing gives him control over a larger thing. He uses the illustration of a horse and a bit, a ship and a helm, a small fire kept from spreading. These verses illustrate the directive nature of the tongue.

Verse 3

"Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. "

By the illustration of a "bit" in the mouth of a "horse," James is telling us that the "tongue" has great power like that of a "horse" but it can be controlled. A "bit" is a very appropriate illustration because a "bit" operates in a "horses' mouth." A "bit" is a metal bar that goes into the horses' mouth. When the rider wants the horse to stop, he pulls back on the reins and the "bit" presses against the horses' tongue. A "horse" out of control can do great damage just like a "tongue" out of control (Psalm 39:1). A "horse" in control can be a great asset and perform much valuable service. How many Christians could be a great service to the kingdom of God if they could only control their tongue?

Verse 4

"Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth."

By the illustration of the "small helm" guiding a "ship," James is telling us that the direction of the "tongue" can be controlled. It is absolutely astounding to look at the size of a "small helm" or, as we know it today, a rudder, and see how "small" it is in proportion to the size of the "ship" it controls. Many of the modern day cruise ships carry thousands of passengers and the destination of the passengers is controlled by the rudder at the rear of the ship. Massive Navy aircraft carriers house thousands of sailors and carry tons of ammunition and equipment all under the direction of the rudder.

The "small helm" controls the destiny not only of the "ship" but also all those on board. Sometimes an entire family is controlled by the tongue of one member of that family. Often the direction of a church is determined by the speech of a pastor or some self-appointed individual who gossips.

Illus. Someone added up the number of words in Adolf Hitler's book, "Mein Kampf," a book in which Hitler outlined his political ideology and plans for the world. The number of words was then divided into the number of lives lost in the Holocaust and World War II. The result was that for every one word in Hitler's book, there were 125 lives lost in World War II.

Verse 5

"Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!"

The "tongue" is so small, one of the smallest "members" of the human body, and yet it "boasteth great things" or, has so much potential (Proverbs 18:21). "Behold," look "how great a matter a little fire kindleth." "Matter" is a something combustible such as wood or straw. A single spark from a campfire or a cigarette thrown out of car window has been known to burn thousands of acres and destroy countless lives and property. The same is true of one "tongue" in a family or church. If not controlled by the power of the Holy Spirit a "tongue" can destroy countless lives.

Verse 6

"And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell."

By the illustration of the "fire" James is telling us the "tongue," if not controlled, can cause great destruction. James says, "The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity." When we think of "fire" we immediately think of spreading destruction.

James' reference to the "tongue" being "a world of iniquity" means that everything that represents this sinful world is expressed more through our tongue than any other member of our body. As mentioned earlier, some people would never pick up a weapon and kill someone. But few people have any problem destroying others with their tongue.

"Setteth on fire the course of nature" means an uncontrolled tongue has the capability of setting everything in life on "fire." A family or a church can be doing just fine and then someone make a phone call, make a comment, spread a rumor, or tell a line and then it seems that everything begins to burn. That is the nature of an uncontrolled tongue. It can start a "fire" at every point in life. The untamed and uncontrolled "tongue" can destroy people and places smart bombs and sophisticated weapons could never reach. Many families and churches are destroyed today. Not because the military bombed them, but because someone in the family destroyed the love and unity of the family with their "tongue." Indeed, the "tongue" can "defile the whole body."

Could there be any more serious and solemn words about the tongue than "and it is set on fire of hell." James is saying that the only comparison for the destructive potential and inflammatory nature of the human tongue is the very flames of "hell." Behind every word that is untrue, unclean, unkind, divisive, and angry, is "hell" and Satan himself.

Your Speech Has an Effect on Others (James 3:7-12)

Verse 7-8

"For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison."

Most of us have been to the circus or viewed pictures and programming where wild animals have been "tamed." James mentions different species of animals from the field, the air, and the sea that had been "tamed" or domesticated by man (Genesis 1:28; Psalm 8:6-8). It is amazing to see the mighty elephant confine himself to a three ring circus or the mighty lion and tiger jump through rings of fire and lay down at a man's command. With that truth presented, James then says, "But the tongue can no man tame." Man does not have the ability to control his speech, but Jesus can! Although we cannot do it on our own, the Lord can.

Just because the "tongue" cannot be "tamed by man" doesn't mean we should give up. Christ has the power and the grace to give us victory in our speech. Everyone who has been saved by God's grace can experience sanctification in our speech life through the Lord's help. Our bitterness can be turned to blessing. Our cursing can be changed into words of blessing and purity. But that can never happen in our own power.

One of the reasons the "tongue" cannot be "tamed" by man is because "it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." "Unruly" suggests the idea of "restlessness and instability." "Full of deadly poison" magnifies the destructive and deadly possibilities of our speech. "Poison" is deadly and the last place you want "poison" is in your mouth!

Pastor and author, Guy H. King writes: "A deadly drug does not need to be taken in large doses, a drop or two will suffice; and the tongue does not need to distil long speeches, it has but to drop a word, and the mischief is set afoot. Thus has a peace been ruined, thus has a reputation been blackened, and thus has a friendship been ended."

Verse 9-10

"Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be."

James describes someone who "blesses God" or praises the Lord with his tongue and then uses that same tongue to "curse" his fellow man which is created in the image of God. The fact that "blessing and cursing" come out of the same mouth is deceptive. James says, "My brethren, these things ought not so to be." This type of deceptive and destructive speech should not be among God's people. Sadly, it is.

Verse 11-12

"Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?" Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

To further make his point, James illustrates the truth he is teaching by a "fountain" and "the fig tree." The key words in verses 11-12 are "doth" and "can." The obvious answer is no.

It is impossible for "sweet" and "bitter" water to come from the same "fountain." "Water" was highly valued in James' culture and the thoughts of thinking that you were going to drink "sweet water" and then it was "bitter water" would have been devastating. The same is true when you think that you are speaking to a Christian and then out of their mouth comes profanity, gossip.

A "fig tree" cannot "bear olive berries" neither can a "vine" bring forth "figs." Such inconsistency is impossible in the natural world. Just as the fruit of the tree shows what kind of root system it has, so our tongues and our speech reveal the root system of our heart. Conflicting speech may deceive for a while but eventually everyone will produce what is in their heart.

Conclusion

In a serious and sobering way, James reminds us that our tongues and speech reflect us. Our tongues put our thoughts into words. If our minds and hearts are full of the fire of evil intentions, our tongue will be the flame thrower that sets it all ablaze. If you are able to praise the Lord at church and then speak evil of those you worship with, you are a contradiction to your Christian profession of faith. James simply said, "My brethren, these things ought not so to be."

The bit may stop the horse and the rudder may turn the ship but remember you hold the reins and your hands are on the wheel. No matter how hard you try, you cannot tame your tongue. The good news is, Jesus can.

King David ended one of his psalms with a prayer that all of us would do well to pray: *"Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer"* (Psalm 19:14).

Amen.