

The unfolding of your words gives light.

Faith That Works

An Exposition of the Book of James

See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire^a! ⁶And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity^b; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body^c, and sets on fire the course of our life^d, and is set on fire by hell^e. ⁷For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race^f. ⁸But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison^g. ⁹With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God^h; ¹⁰from the same mouth come both blessing

^a 3:5 **See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire.** Management of campfires was not invented by Smokey the Bear. All of human history has seen the destruction of a little flame left uncontrolled. Continuing the “little things can effect big changes” theme from the first part of the chapter, James turns to an example more negative than bits and rudders.

^b 3:6 **And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity.** By describing the tongue as the “the very world of iniquity” (or “the realm of unrighteousness”) it appears that James is saying we possess a little fallen world of our own right inside our mouth.

^c 3:6 **the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body.** Certainly there are things you can do to sin without using your tongue, but the thoughts of the heart are amplified when words come out. Bitterness increases in you and spreads to others when you voice what could have been extinguished in your heart.

^d 3:6 **and sets on fire the course of our life.** The word translated “course” means “wheel” or “circle.” The “circle of life” term has been used by pagan religions that teach the evil doctrine of reincarnation. Why would James make use of it? He is likely saying that an every aspect and every season of your life can be dominated and destroyed by the words you use.

^e 3:6 **and is set on fire by hell.** The word translated “hell” is *Gehenna*. Jesus used this word to describe the place of judgment. In the days of James and Jesus, Gehenna was a valley to the south of Jerusalem where refuse was dumped and burned. Centuries earlier babies had been sacrificed to the god Molech until King Josiah put an end to the practice (2 Kings 23:10). The place of continual rotting and burning, where cruel acts have been perpetrated is a valid description of the tongue.

^f 3:7 **For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.** James is likely referring to Genesis 1:26, where God gave man dominion over the fish, birds, cattle and “creeping things.” We have brought the earth into submission but the tongue is out of control.

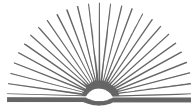
^g 3:8 **But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.** James is not stating that controlling the tongue is an impossibility, only a human impossibility. This phrase actually could read, “no one *of men* can tame the tongue...” Once again we are directed to the need for help from above, from whence comes “every good and perfect gift” (1:17).

^h 3:9 **With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God.** James, again following the teaching of his Lord, points out the hypocrisy of praising God while cursing men. The reason God has permitted capital punishment for murder is because it is an attack on those created in His image (Genesis 9:6). But would you consider slander or gossip a capital crime? Jesus placed anger at a brother in the same category as murder (Matthew 5:21-22). Like murder, such malicious behavior is an attack on the image of God. Under God’s economy, gossip and slander are akin to attempted murder.

James 3.5b-12
Steven Svendsen, Sr.

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and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way^a. ¹¹Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water^b? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh^{c,d}

^a **3:10 from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.** James is returning to his attacks on “double-mindedness.” A recurring theme in this letter has been the inconsistency of those who claim things that they deny with their lives.

- He said double-minded people—those who pray but doubt God—are unstable (1:8).
- He said people who claim to be religious without bridling the tongue deceive themselves (1:26).
- He said that those who put on a show of faith in Christ but favor wealthy people over poor people are judges with evil motives (2:4).
- He said that those who say they have faith but no works have a faith that does not save (2:14).
- Here (3:9-10) he points out the inconsistency of blessing God and cursing men.

^b **3:11 Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water.** This, James says, is unnatural. Why, then, would we think that a person without control of the tongue

^c **3:12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.** The problem, James says, is the source of the words. The Lord Jesus pointed this out while teaching about the dangers of blaspheming the Holy Spirit:

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. Matthew 12:33-35

To borrow an illustration from author Paul Tripp, if I shake a bottle of water, spilling some, and ask you, “Why did water spill on the floor?” you might say, “Because you shook the bottle.” In other words, the shaking is to blame for the water on the floor. If I ask you, “Why did water spill on the floor?” you might say, “Because there was no milk or pop in the bottle.” This is the point of James. Why does anger and vile language spill out of people? It is not because they are shaken or the fault lies with whatever did the shaking. No, the problem is that there is anger and vile language inside, waiting to be shaken and spilled.

^d 3:5b-12 Like an animal, you need outside help to tame it. Do you want to change the way you talk? Motivation:

1. Your whole life will follow your tongue. Proverbs 18:21 says that death and life are in the power of the tongue, that you will eat the fruit of your own words. Angry, bitter people use angry, bitter words and they do not “grow out of it.” Likewise people who are cruel or vulgar with their words.
2. Your tongue can destroy others. With the tongue you can destroy yourself and take others with you. Even using words that cast a shadow over the reputation of another can have terrible long-term effects. Remember what Jesus said about murder in Matthew 5:21-22.
3. Your words betray what kind of person you really are. We do not like to think of ourselves as bad people even if we use our tongues wrongly. The Bible says otherwise.
4. Your hope for change is clear. If you have concluded that you are a fire-starter, a poison-giver or a tongue-murderer, take heart. It is outside you and comes from the Giver of everything good.

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