

Text: James 3:1 - 12 (NIV)

¹Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ²We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. ³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or 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. ⁵Likewise 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. ⁶The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. ¹¹Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹²My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Theme: The Tongue Reveals What's in the Heart

How is your heart? We have all kinds of test today to reveal heart problems. There are EKG's, stress tests, ultra sounds and many other things. But the test to see how spiritually sick the heart might be is much easier. The words that the tongue speaks, reveals what is in our hearts.

I. Often the tongue reveals a lot of bad stuff.

We all have bad stuff in our lives. James writes in verse 2, "*We all stumble in many ways.*" A few weeks ago we heard Jesus' words from Mark 7, "*What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.'* For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'" When we think of the 10 Commandments, we can all find ways that we have stumbled and fallen. It's interesting that James compares the tongue to a rudder of a ship. It is the tongue, the things that we say, which sets the direction for the other sins that we commit in our lives.

James describes first of all how the tongues proclaim false teaching. He writes in verse 1, "*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*" It is a big temptation to twist the Scriptures or to misunderstand them, and then to lead others into our error. Our country definitely has the record for the most groups that completely twisted the words of Scripture and led many people astray. Most of them were founded in the mid-1800's in upstate New York. Among them were the Millerites, whose founder William Miller predicted that Jesus would return between the spring of 1843 and 1844. The Oneida Community, which believed that they were perfect while engaging in sexual immorality stemmed from that period. Their religious group disbanded, but the silverware company that they founded continued to this day. During that time the Mormons, Shakers, Christian Scientists, and Jehovah Witnesses were all founded in the same area of New York in the same period. They all had leaders that wanted to preach something new, and they have led many people astray in the last 150 years. Today the Scriptures are also twisted. People preach their own revelations instead of the Scriptures.

People are still looking for something new and innovative in theology, rather than what God has given to us in His word. It is tempting to focus people on something or someone other than Christ and His salvation for us in their preaching and teaching.

The tongue can also set the whole world on fire. James writes in verse 6, *“The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.”* James says that the tongue is a world of unrighteousness, which means that it is hell itself. Think of what our tongues often do. They curse, tell lies, slander, shout, and put other people down. All of the bad stuff that is in our hearts comes out of our tongues. In some ways we are like fire breathing dragons as our tongues spew out all of the unrighteousness that is in our hearts. There are so many times when we speak before we think. Those words, better than anything else, reveal exactly what is in our hearts. Sadly there is a lot of unrighteousness.

II. But a renewed heart in Christ brings forth a different kind of speech.

Christ changes our hearts. After King David sinned, he prayed, *“Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin... Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me... Then I will teach transgressors your ways.”* Christ paid for all of our sins on Calvary’s cross. He is the perfect man whom James talks about in verse 2, who is able to keep His whole body in check. He was able to do that so much, that even on the cross He forgave His enemies and commended His Spirit to His Heavenly Father. Through faith in His forgiveness, He clothes us with His righteousness. In baptism He washes away our sins, renews our hearts, and gives us a rebirth as God’s children. Our hearts are made righteous and holy through Christ. He washes away our sins and fills our hearts with His Spirit.

That reveals itself by what we say also. We praise God for all of His goodness and mercy for us. The Bible is full of praise to God for all that He has done for His people. We recount how He has saved us, how He has blessed us, and how He has delivered us from evil, even the evil within our own hearts. We can’t help but sing songs of praise to God for all that He has done for us. Later in this letter James writes, *“Is anyone happy. Let Him sing songs of praise.”* (James 5:13) As Christians our mouths praise God, and they pray to Him in every time of need. They glorify the God who sent His only Son to save us.

They also speak words of blessing for our fellow man. Think of some of the good things that our mouths speak. There are times when we encourage people, when we comfort them or when we rejoice with them. We give people hope by what we say. Our words show our love and faithfulness to other people. We share the Gospel with other people to point them to Jesus as their Savior too. There are all kinds of good and righteous words which our lips share. These words also reveal what is in our hearts. They show that God’s Spirit has washed away our sin and taken residence in our own hearts.

III. Now comes the hard part of this text. Your tongue can't bless God and curse people.

James writes in verses 9 and 10, *"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's image. Our of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this cannot be."* James is not saying that our words will ever be perfect. There is only one perfect Man. However, we cannot praise God and then use our mouth to hurt other people. How we speak about and speak to other people reveals the attitude of our hearts toward God. If God's Spirit has truly changed our hearts, then our words to and about of people will be encouragement and blessing. Our words will bless others, even our enemies.

You've probably seen the commercial, "What's in your wallet?" Today's text asks, "What's in your heart?" It is our tongue which reveals what is in our hearts. It is important to realize that our hearts are never perfect in this life. There is always something that needs to be cleaned up. Our words reveal those areas that we need to address in our hearts, but they also reveal the faith that we have in our Lord Jesus Christ. May God's Spirit cleanse our hearts, that our lips may declare God's praise in how we speak to God and our fellow man.

Amen.

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