

**Lesson Seven**  
**THE TEST OF THE TONGUE**  
**3:1-12**

James has been putting our faith to the test. He has been seeing if our profession matches our possession. Thus far our faith has been examined:

- (1) by trials (1:2-12),
- (2) by temptation (1:13-18),
- (3) by the Word of God (1:19-27),
- (4) by our attitudes and actions toward others (2:1-13),
- (5) and by our good works (2:14-26).

We now come to have our faith examined by how we use our tongue. This is contained in chapter 3:1-12.

The tongue is of great concern to James in that he mentions it in every chapter of his letter (cf. 1:19, 26; 2:12; 3:5, 6, 8; 4:11; 5:12). The Bible has much to say concerning the power of speech for either good or evil, and this chapter is the classic exposition of the problem of controlling the human tongue. In James 2:14-26, James argued that a living faith must reveal itself outwardly in production of good works. In this chapter, he insists that a living faith must demonstrate its reality by producing an inward result, the development of self-control in controlling the tongue. James agreed with Jesus (Matthew 12:34-37) that a man's words are the revelation of his inner-character. As the organ of speech, a man's use of his tongue reveals his inner nature, for **"out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."** (Matthew 12:34).

James does a masterful job of personifying the tongue and the mouth as representatives of the inner person. Your tongue is the real you in a unique way. It is a tattletale that tells on the heart and discloses the real person that is within. What you are will be disclosed by what you say. It might be said that a person's speech is a reliable measure of his spiritual and moral temperature, which reveals at any given time the inner condition of the soul. The power of speech is one of God's greatest gifts to men, and believers must be on a constant alert against perverting the use of this great gift.

**I. THE NEED OF THE TONGUE TO BE CONTROLLED - vs. 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."***

Apparently there were many in the assembly who wanted to teach, and be a spiritual leader, because James begins with a warning "Not many of you should presume to be teachers." They had become impressed with the authority and honor that goes with the office of a teacher-elder, and had overlooked the responsibility and accountability that attends the office. While God's word does not discourage people from desiring the office of a teacher (1 Timothy 3:1), it does restrain these who would seek to rush into the office, while lacking the spiritual qualifications for it (1

Timothy 3:2-7). The point is that no one should begin any form of teaching God's word without a deep sense of the seriousness of the matter. It is bad enough when we sin with our tongue when we are by ourselves, or with a few others, but to sin with the tongue in public, while acting as a speaker for God, is far worse.

In verse 2, James enlarges his concern beyond the work of a teacher and includes all men, including himself. We all show our imperfection and sinfulness by committing sins of the tongue. By the same measure we show our maturity by controlling the tongue. If one can control his tongue, he can control his entire life. The Proverbs of Solomon have much to add to this subject. Proverbs 10:19 - ***"In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refrains his lips is wise."*** Proverbs 12:22 - ***"Lying lips are abomination to the LORD: but they that deal truly are his delight."*** Proverbs 13:3 - ***"He that keeps his mouth keeps his life: but he that opens wide his lips shall have destruction."*** Proverbs 15:1 - ***"A soft answer turns away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger."***

## II. THE POWER OF THE TONGUE TO DIRECT - vs. 3-5a

***"Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. 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. Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things."***

James now uses two illustrations to show the power of the tongue to influence and direct the course of one's life. Both illustrations picture the ability of a small object to control or influence a much larger object.

The rider of a horse can use a small bit in the horse's mouth to manage and turn the large horse wherever he wants the horse to go. A small helm or rudder on a ship enables the pilot to steer the ship in the direction in which he intends it to go. The lesson is that though the tongue is small in relation to the body, it has the powerful ability to achieve great results, either good or bad. It can stir up violence or promote peace. It can crush the spirit or soothe the discouraged. The words we speak affect the lives of others. How important it is that our tongues direct people in the right way.

This means overcoming contrary forces. The bit must overcome the wild nature of the horse, and the rudder must fight the winds and currents that would drive the ship off its course. The human tongue must also overcome contrary forces. We have a sinful nature that wants to control us. There are circumstances around us that would make us say things we should not say. Sin on the inside, and pressures on the outside, are seeking to get control of the tongue.

In verse 5, James says that if the tongue could personally express itself, it could legitimately boast of its great accomplishments.

### III. THE POWER OF THE TONGUE TO DESTROY - vs. 5b-6

***“Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! 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.”***

While fire under control can be used for many helpful purposes for mankind, when it gets out of control, it is one of the greatest destructive elements in the entirety of nature. A fire can begin with just a small spark and spread so quickly. The word translated “matter” in our KJV is the word for wood. It can refer to a forest of trees or a stack of firewood.

On October 8, 1871, a fire reportedly started in a barn in Chicago, Illinois. Legend has it that a cow kicked over a lantern. The fire spread quickly and before it was put out, over 100,000 people were left homeless, 17,500 buildings were destroyed, and 300 people died. Property damage came to over \$400 million dollars.

Our words, as small as they might be, can start huge fires. Proverbs 26: 20-22 says, ***“Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth. As coals are to burning coals, and wood to fire; so is a contentious man to kindle strife. The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly.”*** Fire spreads, and the more fuel it has to grow on, the faster and further it will spread. In some churches there are members who cannot control their tongues, and the result is destruction. Let them be put out and a spirit of love and peaceful harmony takes over. Proverbs 14:29 reads, ***“He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding: but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly.”***

Fire burns and destroys, and our words can do likewise. Fire can also defile by the smoke damage it causes. Fiery words can harm a marriage, a church, or an entire nation. Heresy may slay its thousands, but gossip slays its tens of thousands. Morgan Blake, a sportswriter for the Atlanta Journal, wrote the following words,

I am more deadly than the screaming shell from the howitzer. I win without killing. I tear down homes, break hearts, and wreck lives. I travel on the wings of the wind. No innocence is strong enough to intimidate me, no purity pure enough to daunt me. I have no regard for truth, no respect for justice, no mercy for the defenseless. My victims are as numerous as the sands of the sea, and often as innocent. I never forget and seldom forgive. My name is Gossip. (Sweeting, *Faith That Works*, pp. 76, 77).

It is our evil tongue that sets on fire the course of our life, not only contaminating our selves, but everything we come in contact with through out the cycle of natural life in this world. The fire in the tongue is energized by the hellish purposes of the Devil himself.

**IV. THE POWER OF THE TONGUE TO REBEL - vs. 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.”***

James now deals with the rebellious nature of the tongue. He appeals to the animal kingdom and how the wild animals resist being subdued or controlled by man. He lists four classifications of animals which men have tamed or subdued. They are animals which could walk, which could fly, which could crawl, and which could swim. The four categories are given in Genesis 1:26, and of which man was to have dominion over. It is interesting that when Noah left the ark after the great flood, that God said to him in Genesis 9:2, ***“And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered.”*** Notice the listing follows the same order in which James presents in chapter 3:7. This same order is listed by Solomon in I Kings 4:33.

The word tamed does not require the idea of domestication. It means “to subdue, to curb, or subjugate”, thus to bring under control for one’s purpose. It is used in only one other place in the New Testament, and that is in Mark 5:4 where it describes the demoniac of Gadara, who could not be subdued or tamed even by the use of chains. What James is setting forth is the amazing ability of man to control and exercise dominion over the animal kingdom. This is in the purpose of God for man (Psalm 8:6-8).

In verse 8, James uses the word “but” to introduce the sad contrast. No man has even been able to tame or control the tongue. The word “unruly” was rendered “unstable” in 1:8. The picture is of some caged but unsubdued wild animal pacing back and forth in its cage. It represents the tongue as highly unstable, and cannot be trusted to remain submissive in its proper place. It is constantly prone to break out with harsh and vicious words, which can injure and kill.

The impact of the tongue is deadly like that of a poisonous snake. James may be referring to the words found in Psalm 58:3-5. ***“The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies. Their poison is like the poison of a serpent: they are like the deaf adder that stoppeth her ear; Which will not hearken to the voice of charmers, charming never so wisely.”*** Only God can control the tongues of men.

James is saying that poisonous tongues can do great harm to individuals, families and churches. Would any of us want a cage full of hungry lions or angry snakes released into our Sunday worship service? One can only imagine what degree of disruption would occur. And yet, a group of unstable, restless tongues can produce the same results. Remember that out of all the wild creatures in the natural order, the most poisonous thing in the entire world has its den just behind your teeth!

## V. THE POWER OF THE TONGUE TO PRAISE AND CURSE - vs. 9-12

***“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. 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.”***

In verses 9-12, James shows forth the moral inconsistency of the tongue. He mentions both a positive and negative use of the tongue. The positive use involves the praise of God, which is the highest use of human speech. The negative use involves cursing human beings made in the likeness of God. Cursing refers to personal verbal abuse which is insulting as well as profane. Verse 10 highlights the inconsistency of such action. No man can acceptably praise God while expressing bitterness toward his fellow man, who bears God’s image. The praise to God loses its noble character and becomes tainted with bitterness of the cursing.

While fallen man is sinful, he still retains the image of God. This likeness of God consists in the fact that man is a personal, rational, moral being. Above all of God’s creatures, he possesses the attributes of reason, will, and conscience; the ability to know and serve God. Thus, to curse a man is to insult the God whose likeness men bears. Instead, man’s innate nobility should inspire, respect and demonstrate good will, even toward those who irritate and harm us.

James delivers a rebuke for such conduct in a spirit of gentleness and full affection. ***“My brethren, those things ought not to be.”*** Praising God and cursing God’s creatures, constitutes a moral abnormality that both nature and grace repudiate. To show the consistency in nature, James asks four questions which require a “no” answer. The illustrations from nature would have been familiar to the inhabitants of Palestine. Areas around the Dead Sea contained many salty springs. Further north of the Dead Sea, travelers could find springs which gave forth fresh water. But one spring could produce only one type of water.

The farmers of Palestine grew figs, olives and grapes in abundance. James emphasized that a tree produced its own kind of fruit. We don’t find figs on grapevines. We do not pluck olives from fig trees. Nature is consistent and produces after its kind. The new creature of grace ought to produce after its kind. A Christian who praises God and insults men is a contradiction. Colossians 4:6 provides a fitting conclusion to this section with these words, ***“Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.”***