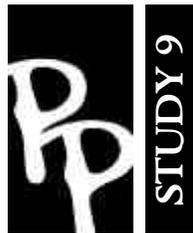


TAMING THE TONGUE



James 3:1-12

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: Does the Bible teach the doctrine of sinless perfection?
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

James has left us in no doubt that what we do is an important indication of the reality, or otherwise, of the faith we profess. Now we see that what we say is a big part of what we do, and in these verses our speech is subjected to the most severe examination. Since, as we have seen, James is most probably our Lord's brother, we can think of him recalling the perfect example he knew so well (Ps.45:2; Luke 4:22). Like James, Peter also was very familiar with the one of whom he said, "No deceit was found in his mouth," and "he did not retaliate" (1 Pet. 2:21-23). The words we are about to study also reflect the Lord's own teaching (Matt.12:33-37), "By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." If we have not realised how unruly our tongues can be, James will prove to us the need for them to be tamed!

What these verses mean

Verse 1

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers,

This might seem to contradict Paul who wrote, "If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task," (1 Tim. 3:1). James would agree

with Paul that teaching ("overseer" includes teaching) is to be highly esteemed. James would also approve of the qualifications Paul sets out for this noble task, which would surely deter anyone in danger of rushing too quickly into the work (1 Tim.3:2-7). Earlier in that same letter to Timothy, Paul writes about those who want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about (1 Tim. 1:7). The early church had to face the problem of the exalted teacher's position being one that men hankered after. It was a continuation of the puffed-up position of the rabbi in the Jewish church. The word that James uses, "presume", suggests that he is not addressing those teachers who are qualified to teach, but those who are eager to speak in public and have failed to recognise that the basic qualification for teaching is learning. This problem has not gone away and is so rampant in the Christian church today. There are many who scheme and plot to gain positions for themselves in the church. Such ambition is a deadly sin, arousing envy, pride, deceit and hypocrisy. Leadership is not a sign of worthiness or superiority, but is a God-given appointment to serve by example.

because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

Privilege always carries with it greater responsibility. Every Christian will have to give an assessment of his life on the day of judgement (Rom. 14:12). James has already given some teaching on judgement in 2:12-13 (Study 6). Now he returns to it with particular reference to those who teach the Scriptures to others. In our study of 2:12 (pages 55-56) we observed that in judgement there will be different degrees of rewards and also losses. Again we remind ourselves that this is not referring to our salvation, which is secure in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, but to our accountability before God of the Christian life we have led. Jesus taught that of those who had been entrusted with much, much more will be asked (Luke 12:48). This is the point James is now making and is a warning to those who aspire to positions to satisfy their own egos. The teacher will be judged not only on the content of his teaching but on the conduct of his own life. His life should reflect the subject of his teaching, Scripture. Scripture sets high standards and consequently more will be demanded of the teacher than of other believers. This is the reason why men should not presume to be teachers. See also Hebrews 13:17 for a further comment on this matter.

Verse 2

We all stumble in many ways.

James makes further comment to those who would rush, without thinking, to be teachers. He is warning those who want to be teachers simply because of their love of authority, or prominence, or who can speak well, but have no true understanding of God's truth. They will have a feeling of superiority

and a critical attitude, which will be seen in their style of teaching. It will be more legalistic (the rules to follow, the things not to do) rather than about the grace of God. Such people should remember that they are far from perfect and have many faults, along with everyone else. A good teacher will always be painfully aware of imperfection. This questions the wisdom of pushing new converts into teaching before they are spiritually mature. (See 1 Timothy 3:6; 5:22.) These verses should not be used to support a false humility that refuses to acknowledge the gift from God to teach despite the discernment of other believers. This might be a symptom of a lack of faith and unwillingness to bear responsibility in the church. These things need to be prayerfully considered when teachers are being appointed.

If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

It may be that James' original idea was to expand on the subject of teachers in the churches. Whether or not that is so, his reference to teachers leads him to a long section about the need for all Christians to be careful how they speak. These words sum up what James wants to say. In the rest of the verses of our study he gives illustrations and examples of what he says here. Whenever we might want to pass by the subject of the control of our tongues, James gives two reasons for us to take the matter seriously. Firstly, he says that if we never speak wrongly, it is a sign that we are spiritually mature and well balanced (perfect). This tells us that such control is by no means easy, and that it takes time for us to achieve anything like success. Secondly, such success has an effect on the whole of our conduct. At the same time as gaining control over our tongues, we will find that we are also getting mastery over all other areas of life with its trials and testings.

Verse 3

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.

We have the first of two illustrations to make the point very clear that the tongue is the most difficult part of the body to keep in check. It is the horse, a powerful, surging animal. Yet a small piece of metal placed in its mouth can bring such an animal under control.

Verse 4

Or 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.

The second example is taken from shipping. Although these vessels are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. In James' day the ships were wholly

dependent upon the wind as their power. The same point still applies to modern shipping, where ships such as the huge oil tankers, driven by large and powerful engines, are still steered by the pilot using the rudder.

The two illustrations James uses here both underline the need for skill.

- The jockey (horse rider) must learn to have a sensitive touch on the bridle and bit to save the horse from danger or from a wrong track.
- The pilot likewise needs much training to be able to steer the ship clear of the dangers of rocks and storms.

The way we handle the tongue requires great control, which does not come easily but demands discipline arising from a renewed spirit in Christ. Controlling the tongue will not come naturally to the person just because he is a Christian, as the sinful nature is still present.

Verse 5

Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

Here James is following the thought that the use of our tongues has a big effect, for good or ill, on the rest of our lives. James says that the tongue "makes great boasts", which means that it is capable of remarkable power and influence. We see this when an orator moves a country to courage, or a nation to racial hatred. The tongue may be small, but it can have greater consequences than we realise. For the Christian life to be pleasing to God requires a conduct, including most importantly the control of our tongues, that can only be achieved by much prayer, thought, persistence and care.

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

Until this point James is simply reminding us of the importance of controlling the tongue, because, though it is small, it is capable of big influence, which might be either good or bad. But now he is warning his readers and us of the terrible harm that an uncontrolled tongue can do. Just as a small spark can destroy wide areas of woodland, so gossip, lies, impure, angry or unwise words can ruin our own lives and those of many people around us. Paul says much the same in Romans 3:13-18.

Verse 6

The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.

The idea here seems to be that the evil world around us has its representative within us – the tongue. All the characteristics of the evil world find, in our tongues, an easy channel of expression. The force of James' teaching here is

that we must not think of the tongue as neutral. Its potential for evil is so powerful that, left without control, it will automatically become an instrument for wrong.

It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire,

This means that words spoken without thought or with evil intent can affect our own feelings and attitudes to ourselves and to others. They can then affect for a lifetime the way other people think about us. The result of the wrong use of our tongue can be immediate, and it can stay with us for a very long time.

and is itself set on fire by hell.

This is very strong language, but it reminds us that there is an evil one, Satan, who desires our destruction, and that he is easily able to prompt us to say things that are false, unkind, lustful or impure. We are very foolish if we forget, ignore or even deny the influence Satan can have on our lives! (There is an example recorded in Matthew 16:21-23). Our tongue can become an instrument of Satan, unless we control its use very carefully.

Verses 7

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man,

This is a confirmation that the instruction given to Adam to rule over the animal world (Gen.1:28) continues for all generations. This must never be used as a reason for cruel methods of control or exploitation for financial gain. We are to manage God's world with a view to its preservation in strength and beauty. Training animals is a skilled occupation and one that many people master. It is remarkable how many animals are tamed, from elephants and lions to dolphins and birds of prey. Man has been able to harness animals to help in the labours of life, with elephants in forestation work to donkeys in underground coalmines.

but no man can tame the tongue.

Despite all that we can do with the large and wild creatures of this world, few of us have complete control all the time over what we say. This is much the same as saying that we humans have learned to harness all the elements of creation, except ourselves. We fail in the area that is most important, because it can affect the very course of history; therefore it should be our priority. The really worrying thing about all that James says here is that he includes everybody ("but no man can ..."). He does not say some people have tongues that are liable to do harm; but that this is the character of the tongue in us all. Also we must remember that he is writing to Christians!

It is a restless evil,

If we are restless other people cannot be sure what we will do next. We will be liable to do something that is unexpected. James says that the tongue is

like that. If it is not under strict control, you never know what evil it might do.

full of deadly poison.

Our tongues are capable of poisoning the fellowship of our church or the reputation of earnest Christians and many other evils. But we do have the Spirit's enabling to make sure that such things do not happen. "No man" can do it without the Spirit's aid.

Verse 9

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness.

Once again James is not content to rest his case on general principles, but he makes sure he is understood, by an example that cannot be misunderstood. Here we have someone in worship, singing God's praise, and the same person immediately follows this with unkind, pernicious words to a member of the congregation. This is, in itself, bad enough, but when we remember that the person who is addressed bears the marks of God's creation (Gen.1:26), that unruly tongue has cancelled out the value of his praise expressed to God by despising his creation.

Verse 10

Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.

We continue with the inconsistency of the tongue. James will reinforce his point with two further illustrations taken from nature to make this clear. Before he does so he reminds us that this inconsistency is not acceptable in the Christian believer. How can a believer be in worship, singing praises, listening to God's Word one moment and a few moments later be saying harsh things about fellow-Christians? What conversations take place immediately amongst the congregation as soon as the service closes?

Verse 11

Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?

It is impossible for such inconsistency to take place in the natural world. James shows us this by asking his readers two questions. Can fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? There are both natural water springs and salt water springs, but they are separate, never together as being one source for the two types of water.

Verse 12

My brothers, can a fig-tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?

In the same way we are asked to answer the question, "Can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs?" James is reflecting the teaching of Jesus

(Matt. 7:16-20, 12:33-37, 15:18,19). The conclusion is simple; no one can doubt the answer.

Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Nature is ordered and follows the basic laws. It is not inconsistent. A tree can only bear its own fruit. So too a salt spring can only produce salt water; fresh water cannot flow from it. This impossibility from the natural world is now applied to the spiritual realm to show how improper is such an inconsistency. Now we see the reason for the tongue being so prone to evil. The secret is that what we say comes from what we are in the depth of our being. The spring is the heart. We cannot escape the truth. If our tongues are not under control, this means that our heart is defective. If we say harmful and destructive things, then our heart must be corrupt, which means that Christ is not in control. James' teaching compels us to examine our hearts to see if they are dominated by love for the Lord Jesus and a desire to please him in all we say and do. If our thoughts are right, our words will also be right.



Summary

As a Jew, now converted, James is painfully aware of the tendency of his people in the past to rely on the possession of God's law and the observance of religious rituals to give them credit with God. But they did not match this knowledge and ritual with their conduct. They were being careless in their lifestyles. James is continually insisting that our way of life should be consistent with our profession of faith, and for him that way of life includes the way we speak. Furthermore, the way we speak is a most accurate indicator of our spiritual state, so much so, that if our tongues are not under control, then James would question whether we really do have new life in Christ.



A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

Theme: Gracious speech

Introduction

James leaves us in no doubt about two things –

- i. that our tongues can be used for good or ill.
- ii. that our manner of speech is a good indication of our spiritual state.

1. We do well to examine our manner of speaking in the light of Jesus' example

A. It is said of Jesus that the people marvelled at his gracious words (Luke 4:22).

- i. This was true not only on that occasion but at all times.
- ii. It means that his words were always for the good of others.
- iii. It also means that his way of speaking was attractive so that people wanted to listen to him.

B. It is said that Jesus spoke without deceit (1 Pet. 2:22).

- i. This means that he always spoke the truth.
- ii. It also means that he never tried to deceive people.
- iii. Such speech is without exaggeration, flattery or saying one thing whilst meaning another.

2. We do well to confess our sins in the use of our tongues

Isaiah was a man of God and yet, when he faced the holiness of God, he was convicted of "unclean lips" (Isa.6:5-7).

- i. Sins of speech are as offensive to God as murder (Matt.5:21-22) and merit God's judgement.
- ii. If we confess our sins, God will forgive us (1 John 1:8-9).

Application

Our constant prayer needs to be Psalm 141:3.



Focus Point: Does the Bible teach the doctrine of sinless perfection?

With the phrase in verse 2, "If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man ..," there may be a suggestion that James is saying that we ought to achieve perfection. There have always been some in the church who have taken various texts such as Matthew 5:48, 2 Corinthians 7:1 and 1 John 3:6 to argue that man should be able to obey God's commands perfectly. Their reasoning is that since God gives these commandments then he must give us the ability to obey them perfectly. Being perfect in obedience is known as the doctrine of sinless perfection. Phrases such as *perfectionism* or *perfect holiness* mean the same thing. Is that what the Bible teaches?

In our own verse 2 James begins with the phrase, "We **all** stumble in many ways." James doesn't leave anyone out - all human beings stumble. A closer examination of the texts in Matthew and 2 Corinthians show us that the Bible does not teach that God gives commands and then the ability to obey them perfectly. He commands us to obey and then holds us accountable for

not obeying. The standard which we are set is perfect because it shows that God is morally pure. The fact that we cannot attain that standard does not mean that the standard will be lowered for us. It does mean that we need God's grace and forgiveness to overcome all remaining sin. These various texts point us to the goal that God desires us to reach and aspire to.

In 1 John 3:6 the Greek verbs in the present tense are best translated to indicate a continual activity. When John says, "No one who abides in him sins," it means that no one who lives in Christ will keep on sinning. No one who keeps on sinning has either seen Christ or knows him. The Bible throughout teaches that it is impossible for us to lead lives completely free of sin. Jesus himself taught the disciples when praying to ask for bread each day and for our sins to be forgiven. Our growing in spiritual maturity (sanctification or holiness) will not be completed whilst we are on earth.

The danger to be avoided is to use this teaching for not trying to lead godly and holy lives. There are many commands in the New Testament that are clear on this point. Just because we cannot attain perfection on earth is not an excuse for not trying and instead lead a sinful life. Another danger is that some may lose hope of making any progress in the Christian life. This is where the teaching of the resurrection power of Christ in a believer's life enables sin to be overcome. Sanctification will never be completed in this life but it enables Christians to grow in maturity. It is possible for Christians to be daily free from conscious or wilful acts of disobedience to God. This is not the same as being perfect.

The material used in preparing this Focus Point was taken from Wayne Grudem's Bible Doctrine – Essential teachings of the Christian faith (Inter-Varsity Press).



Over to you

Consider your own position. Do you presume to be a teacher or were you appointed to be one by others recognising that God has given you the gift to teach? (Remember your accountability before God; you'll have more to answer for than those in your congregation.)

Notice that James starts off this passage with teachers. The tongue is used as their main means of communicating with the listener. If you were to preach on this passage now, would your listeners call you a hypocrite?

Have you discovered that it is possible to speak of God's hatred of sin and of the judgement to come in a gracious manner? (See Matthew 23:37-38 and 1 Timothy 4:12.)