
Prayers

To God

Rescue us, O Lord, from the frustrations and upsets of life that beset us from time to time. Save us from being controlled by them, and turn our eyes away from them towards You. Create in us a desire to worship You through everything we do and say, and may we therefore live a life which is victorious over all fear and distress. Thank You, Lord God; AMEN

For myself

Weekly theme: doubts

Pray for all who have doubts about the people they love or those they work with, and therefore find it hard to be at peace; people who doubt the integrity of their marriages, those who doubt the church, those who doubt their work colleagues ...

For others

Pray for your neighbourhood, and especially those who live in it who are poor. Pray for children who are not cared for properly, and for elderly people who are dependent and lonely. Try to make sure you know something about your neighbourhood so you can pray wisely about the people who live there.

Meditation

Lord Jesus, lead me on a path I have not known:
Take away from me the habits of my selfishness
By which I lived in sin with ignorant satisfaction;
My excuse to turn in blindness from Your call.

Take away from me the 'time' I think I have,
Time I spend on pandering to my wretched ego,
Thinking I know better, even that I know best ...
Eliminate my selfish heart and slay my will!

Lord Jesus, fill me with a spiritual joy reborn;
Open up my squandered life to living once again,
To chase love's dreams in bold unchecked resolve,
And be at peace with self, yes, unashamed of You.

Occupy me now, however, fill me once again, forever;

Firm, I grasp salvation's glorious truths,
So when the precious pearl of greatest price is found,
Eternal Truth holds me and will not let me go!

Bible Passage

James 3:6-12

⁶ The tongue is a fire, a world of evil amongst all our bodily parts. It pollutes the whole body and ignites its natural workings, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷ Every manner of beast, bird, reptile and sea creature, have been or are being tamed by people, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue; a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ Blessing and cursing comes from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, this should not be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour out both fresh and foul water from the same opening? ¹² Can a fig tree yield olives, my brothers and sisters, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water be fresh.

Review

James now lets loose with enormous energy. From writing carefully considered advice about teaching (3:1-5), he begins here to speak about something that must surely have been on his heart as he wrote. These verses graphically describe what happens when evil takes a hold of people's speech and wreaks havoc on human society (3:6) and their relationship with God (3:9), polluting everything in its pathway.

This is an extraordinary passage, and seem almost 'over the top'. James has already written some advice about speech in the previous chapters of his letter; in the first chapter, he challenged God's people to be '*quick to listen and slow to speak*' (1:19), in the second chapter he chastised the words of those who showed favouritism (2:1-7), and then in the previous reading he described the tongue as '*a small part of the body ... which makes great boasts*' (3:5). But now, James reveals the reasons why he is so concerned about speech and its susceptibility to evil, and he unleashes an amazing attack upon '*the tongue*'.

James himself is stunningly blunt, even in the original Greek. For the second time in the letter, he calls the tongue '*a fire*' (see 3:5,6), and he uses this picture to describe human speech overtaken by evil. He suggests that of all the parts of the human body, the '*tongue*' is most vulnerable to evil. It is a weak spot in the armour of the Christian which can be used with devastating power to '*pollute the whole body*' (3:6), and James is in no doubt; he describes this evil as coming from the fires of hell itself (3:6).

To drive his point home, James then turns to the subject of 'taming', in order to make his point about control, or the lack of it, and comment on why people find it hard to 'tame the tongue' (3:7). He indirectly refers to the Biblical description of Creation, in which God commissions humanity to have '*dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth ... to subdue it*' (Genesis 1:26,28 - see 3:7). His point is that humanity has had considerable success with this God-given task, but has failed to master or have dominion over personal powers of speech. People can master other animals and other people, but few can 'master' their 'tongues', that is, their own speech.

Is this a fair assessment? We can certainly argue about this because clearly, some people obviously have more control of what they say than others. But James was deeply aware of the damage done within the church because of people's uncontrolled and sinful speech. He knew that evil speech would always work in opposition to the Word of God, and this opposition could cause trouble to God's people. So having described the *'tongue'* as *'a restless evil, full of deadly poison'* (3:8), he picks up on the two extreme consequences of speech, well attested within the Old Testament, of *'blessing'* and *'cursing'*.

What does James mean by this? In Deuteronomy, Moses speaks about God's blessing and His curse, which are two opposite reactions to circumstances. If God's people obey Him they will receive His blessing, but if they go their own way they will come under His curse (Deut 11:26f.). God, of course, is consistent with his response because he is God, but James bewails the fact that with people, blessing and cursing come inconsistently, coming from the same mouth (3:9,10). His point is that God's people are supposed to be people of love and compassion, so why then do people who call themselves Christians curse each other? He is right to make the point.

So when James says of the tongue, *'with it we bless the Lord and Father and with it we curse people who are made in the image of God ... my brothers and sisters, this should not be so'* (3:9,10), he is complaining at the way people worship God with right and good speech, but feel free to speak harshly to each other after and outside of worship. Each one of us knows very well the damage done by things being said inappropriately at such times. But the fact that we address God one way and each other differently proves that if we so wished, we could speak to each other civilly, and with the same honour we give to God. James' point is clear enough, but he does not drive it home in quite the same way as Jesus, who calls on his disciples to see something of Himself in other people and treat them accordingly, *'in as much as you do it to the least of these you do it to me ...'* Matt 25:45).

Although there are many ways in which James could offer some hope that evil speech can be overcome, and this dichotomy resolved, he tackles this issue in a typically forthright and distinct manner. Verses 11 and 12 challenge God's people to demonstrate in life the changed heart they claim as a result of the Gospel of Salvation. He says, *'Can a fig tree yield olives ... or a grapevine figs'* together with two similar examples (3:12), to point out that the things people say come from the heart within. So evil and destructive words can only come where there is evil within the heart and soul, and pure speech comes from a cleansed heart. James' point is the same as the one he made in chapter 2; pure faith must show itself in pure speech, that is, in people's words and actions. He strongly implies that unless this is true, the faith people claim should be questioned, and this is a tough but necessary call.

James' target is the untamed tongue that is not under the control of God and has not been surrendered to God. It would be wrong to suggest that this scripture supports the notion that if you have trouble with gossip or swearing, for example, then there is no way of dealing with it at all and you are condemned for life. That would be to misinterpret James and to fly in the face of the message of God's salvation by grace. Neither should preachers use this passage to condemn those who have persistent difficulty with their use of words and already feel under condemnation because of it.

Then what purpose does this passage have in scripture? James speaks in this way to expose hypocrisy in the church, and we are led to this conclusion because of the general themes of his letter. He has just said that those who claim they have faith but do not show this by their actions have questionable faith (2:14-26). He now goes further and identifies the source of hypocrisy in the church, which is lack of control of the tongue and an inability to let faith govern speech and deeds.

Discipleship

Application

Dealing with bad speech

This message is still important for us, and the fact that James said this so strongly should remind us to deal with evil speech, double standards and hypocrisy wherever they occur. However, this should not make us condemn people unnecessarily. Most will confess that from time to time they have had trouble 'taming their tongues', yet this discernment is a sign of their desire to change, and if this is submitted to the Father, then He will help. This passage can and should challenge God's people about the seriousness of the problem of 'the tongue', and how words can affect people and relationships; but we should also let this passage guide us to the source of all healing, which is Jesus Christ. If we confess regularly (as often as necessary) and also ask others to pray for us and support us (see James 5:13ff), then the cycle of despair about this problem can be broken, and the enemy defeated.

Divisions within the church

I have come across many who have sought counsel about their use of language. Within the life of the church, I would suggest that such people have rarely been the source of real problems within the church. Those who do most damage to the church are those who persist in saying different things to different people, so dividing God's people and creating great problems. There is a strong hint here of this sin, and it is wise to watch out for this.

Ideas for what to do

- If you genuinely feel that you have been somewhat hypocritical in the things you have said; confess this to the Lord and ask Him to cleanse you by His Spirit.
- Reflect on how you can be more judicious in your use of words in the future, and if necessary talk to a friend about this.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which parts of this text do you find most difficult to read or understand? Discuss this within your group and try to help each other.
2. In what ways do people bless God yet curse others (see 3:9,10)? Try to give examples from real life.
3. Is there a Gospel answer to the problem raised in verse 8, and what is it?

Final Prayer

Praise You, Lord God, for the wisdom of Your Word. May it lead our steps, govern our behaviour, enlighten our lives and teach us the truth. Then, enriched by Your engaging Word, may we demonstrably show evidence of the truth of our salvation, found through Jesus Christ our Lord: AMEN