

Place: Lurgan Baptist 21:3:2004

Reading: James 3:1-11

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

20. BRIDLING THE BEAST IN YOUR BODY

There is a new phenomenon capturing Western society today. Radio and Television talk shows dominate the media. We are a nation of talkers. People everywhere have something to say and want to be heard. Many years ago, Richard Nixon said, “*America has suffered from a fever of words. We cannot learn from one another until we stop shouting at one another, until we speak quietly enough that our words can be heard as well as our voices.*” Long before President Nixon voiced those words, James put it like this, “*let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.*” (1:19) What comes out of our mouths is so vitally important that James devotes so many verses to it in his epistle. Indeed in every chapter James touches upon the tongue. Medically, they tell us that it is only a two-ounce slab of muscle, mucous and membrane, nerves that enables us to chew, taste, swallow and articulate words.

Scripturally, the Bible says that the tongue frames deceit, (Ps 50:19) it devises destruction, (Ps 52:2) it devours, (Ps 52:4) it is a sharp sword, (Ps 57:4) it breaks bones, (Pro 25:15) it flatters, (Pro 28:23) and it poisons. (Rom 3:13) A woman once told her pastor that he had wounded her feelings. He was concerned and asked how he had done it. She told him that the length of his tie was the source of her problem. He was stunned. After he had recovered himself he told her, “*Well, I am sorry I have caused you such anguish of mind. I won't let it be a source of trouble to you any more.*” He produced a pair of scissors from his desk drawer and instructed her to cut the tie and she did. When she started to go, he said, “*Wait now you have hurt my feelings.*” She wanted to know where she was at fault.

The pastor said, “*Its your tongue, its absolutely too long. One good turn deserves another. Let me cut it too my wish.*” Needless to say she wasted no time getting out of his office. I heard about another lady who was a notorious gossip. She would spend most of her day on the phone sharing titbits with any and with all who would listen.

She came to the pastor one day and said, “*the Lord has convicted me of my sin of gossip. My tongue is getting me and others into trouble.*” Well, the pastor knew she was not sincere because she had gone through that routine before. Guardedly he asked, “*what do you plan to do ?*” “*I want to put my tongue on the altar,*” she replied with pious fervour. Calmly, he replied, “*there isn't an altar big enough.*” One issue more than any other seemed to weight heavy on the heart of James the tongue. His bitter experiences in pastoral oversight had made him keenly aware of the problems that can come to the church by uncontrolled tongues.

(Acts 15:13 21:18) Bridling the beast in your body is not easy, that's why we need to heed the words of the psalmist, “*I said, I will take heed to my ways that I sin not with my tongue.*” (Ps 39:1) Now if you look at (3:2-5) you'll notice that there is:

(1) AN INFERENCE HERE

“ *If any man body,*” (2:2) Now we must be sure to draw the right conclusion from this statement for its easy to draw the wrong one, because on the surface there is a seeming contradiction. At the beginning of (3:2) James says, “ *for in many things we offend all,*” but now he goes on to say, “ *if any man offend not in word the same is a perfect man.*” Now is there a contradiction here ? Is James saying on the one hand that we all make many mistakes, but those who avoid sins of speech are perfect ? That would be a contradiction. Indeed we could infer from that there are some people living on earth who are perfect. Now that would be a wrong inference because it would be completely unscriptural. There are three words that will help us to unlock the truth here. The first word is:

(a) MYSTERY:

There seems to be a contradiction and the mystery is this. The Bible commands us to be perfect and yet there is not a single person in the world who is perfect. Now the Word of God does command us to be perfect. Moses says, “ *Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God.*” (Deut 18:13) Do you recall the words of the Lord Jesus ? “ *Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.*” (Matt 5:48) You see, every virtue in the Bible is commanded and every vice is condemned. Yet the Bible makes it clear that not a single person in the world is perfect. You see, perfection is the goal that none of us will reach this side of glory. Do you recall Paul’s familiar words ? “ *Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect.*” (Phil 3:12) Now Paul is aiming for the goal, sinless perfection, but he knows he will never reach it this side of heaven. Some well meaning Christians think they are sinlessly perfect but Paul did not think so, rather he had a correct lowly estimate of himself.

You see, the mystery is this. The closer a man gets to the Lord the more conscious he is of the fact that he is falling short of God’s glory. *Do you see the mystery ?* God is fitting the believer for heaven, and yet the closer he gets there the more conscious he is of his unfitness. No amount of improvement can qualify a believer for heaven, but every Christian is absolutely certain to go there. A Christian is commanded to grow in grace, but his justification before God does not depend in the slightest decree on whether that growth is present or absent, vague or vigorous. Now these things are a mystery but because God has ordained them, we must bow in humble adoration, not slackening our efforts because God’s standards are so high. You see, James is setting before us here an ideal case, what to aim for, “ *if any man offend not in word the same is a perfect man.*” And that brings us to the second word:

(b) MATURITY:

The Amplified Bible puts it like this, “ *If any one does not offend in speech never says the wrongs things he is a fully developed character and a perfect man.*”

You see the test of Christianity is not only by the way we walk, its also by the way we talk. Justin Martyr the famous Christian apologist who lived 1800 years ago said, “ *by examining the tongue of a patient, physicians find out the diseases of the body, philosophers find out the diseases of the mind, and Christians find out the diseases of the soul.* ” I’m told that many diseases show their symptoms on the tongue, the inside of the cheek, the roof of the mouth, or the back of the throat. By a quick look into your mouth, the Doctor can sometimes tell what is wrong a little further down. You see, the mouth helps to show the state of one’s physical health.

My is the same thing not true spiritually ? You see, the Christians tongue is a spiritual thermometer. The word “ *perfect,* ” here could be translated “ *mature.* ” Do you see what James is saying ? He is saying that the tongue is the evidence of and a means to spiritual maturity. My the real mark of maturity is not how you control *your talent,* it is not how you control *your time,* it is not how you control *your treasure* but how you control your tongue. We have people today who are saying that the real mark of spirituality is whether or not you can speak in tongues. I believe that the real mark of spirituality is not whether or not you can speak in tongues, the real mark is whether or not you can control the one tongue that you do have ! My are you maturing, developing in this area of your tongue ? Is that tongue of yours as boastful today as it was a year ago ? Is it as slanderous as it was a month ago ? Have you learnt from the mistakes that you’ve made with your tongue in the past ? *Now remember James is not promoting silence, but he is proposing control.* (a) (b)

(c) **MASTERY:**

For James says, “ *if any man and able also to bridle the whole body.* ” (3:2) Mastery ! Control of our faculties. Now James is not saying that such a perfect man exists. He is simply saying that if a man really is able to control his tongue, then he is able to control every other part of his body, because the tongue is the most difficult part of all to control. I mean the tongue is a very slippery customer. Its very difficult to get hold of the tongue. You can get hold of a finger, or a little toe, but to get a good grip on the tongue is far more difficult. When the Lord asked Cain, “ *Where is Abel thy*

brother ? ” the answer that Cain gave began like this,

“ *I know not.* ” (Gen 4:9) The very first recorded words spoken by man after his expulsion from the garden of Eden were a lie. Is that any sort of indication of the proneness there is to sin with the tongue ? When Isaiah got a glimpse of the glory of God, he said, “ *Woe is me ! for I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips.* ”

Why did he say that ? Was it because his lips were involved I the worst or the most frequent of his failures ?

Peter says of the Lord Jesus, “ *who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.* ” (1 Pet 2:22) Now why did Peter add the reference to His speech ? Was it because the thing that first of all marked out the Saviour was that He did not sin with His tongue ? Socrates tells the story of a simple man called Pambo who went to a wise man and asked him to teach him one of the Psalms.

The wise man decided to teach him (Ps 39) which begins, “ *I said I will take heed to my ways that I sin not with my tongue.* ” The wise man was about to go on to the next part when Pambo said, “ *Wait a minute I will go away and learn that bit.* ” Some months later the wise man met

Pambo and asked, “ *When are you coming to learn a little bit more of that Psalm ?*” Pambo replied,

“ *I have not yet learnt that lesson properly.*” The story goes on that forty years later Pambo gave the same answer to the same question. “ *I will take heed to my ways that I sin not with my tongue.*” My is this not an area in which we must be seeking constantly to go on to maturity and then mastery ? (1)

(2) AN ILLUSTRATION HERE

James is a master illustrator and in order to drive home his point he brings before us here two pictures. Picture number is that of:

(a) A HORSE CONTROLLED BY REINS:

Look at (3:3) With a length of rope or a few strips of leather, and a small piece of metal in a horse’s mouth, the rider controls the horse’s whole body. James’s point is that something small can have a big influence. After all a bit, that metal bar that goes into the horses mouth is just a few inches long, and yet that bit, those reins can force a raging horse to turn in a certain direction. You see, the picture is that of a young horse, strong and good to look at. Champing and chafing at restriction, longing to be on the go, caring not much where, so long as he is moving. Not of himself very capable of knowing which is the right or best way to go, but that little “ *bit,*” will regulate all that and direct his fine energies into useful and wise channels. My whenever I think of the young horse champing and chafing at the bit, I think of young folk who don’t the way to go, but a “ *bit,*” of a word from you and me could set the direction of their lives for God and for good. My just a touch may

“ *turn about their whole body.*” Have you ever considered how just one or two words can determine the course of an entire life ? When a woman says “ *I will,*” she basically determines for the rest of her life where she is going to live, what kind of financial status she is going to achieve, as well as the kind of children she is going to bear, including the sex of the children. Just a few words and the course of our lives can be determined ! I can well remember when I started out on my very first gospel mission. One word one night from one of God’s servants changed the whole direction of my life. I was having a mission in the little village of Loughbrickland.

The year was 1971, I was enjoying my daily work and then I went out every night to preach the gospel. Just like a young horse I started my work at 7.00am in the morning and I worked until 7.00pm that night. Got home at 7.25pm and was just about in the pulpit for about 8.00pm. But you know something happened on the last night of that mission that changed the whole direction of my life. No, it was not that someone got saved though salvation did visit that place, rather one of God’s servants shook me by the hand and said, “ *the Lord makes preachers do you not think its time you took the next step and equipped yourself for the days ahead ?*”

Do you know something ? That “ *bit,*” of a word stayed with me and challenged me. “ What about the nest step ? What about the next step ?” It changed the whole direction of my life for in a

very short time I found myself in the Irish Baptist College, on Sandown Road in Belfast. Older folk, all around this are precious young people and just a little “ *bit*, ” of a word from you can set the direction of their whole life for God and for good. Will you give your tongue to the Lord so that He might use it to bring enlightenment to the young ? James pictures (a) and then:

(b) A SHIP CONTROLLED BY A RUDDER:

Look at (3:4) You know, through the centuries as ships have grown larger and heavier, James’s illustration has grown more poignant than he could have possibly imagined. Yet despite the fact that our floating hotels could swallow whole the vessel’s of James’s day, they still have their course determined by a comparatively small slab of metal called a rudder. My whenever I think of the “ *horses*, ” I think of the younger generation needing enlightenment, but whenever I think of the

“ *ships so great*, ” I think of the older generation needing encouragement. So many of them are battling across life’s ocean often “ *driven of fierce winds*, ” wave after wave of misfortune breaking over them, sometimes not knowing where to find a haven of peace. Are such folk near you ? Believers who need a word of comfort, a word of cheer, of counsel ! My are you willing to be a Barnabas to them ? A son of encouragement !

(Acts 4:36) Will you give your tongue to the Lord so that He might use it to bring enlightenment to the young and encouragement to the old ? (1) (2)

(3) AN INFLUENCE HERE

For James says, “ *Even so the tongue is a little member and boasteth great things*, ” (3:5) That is to say, like the bit for the horse, like the rudder for the ship, the tongue is little in relation to the body but in spite of its smallness the tongue achieves great results. Its power and influence are enormous. You see,

(a) The Influence of the Tongue can be BAD:

The Bible makes that crystal clear. “ *Thy tongue deviseth mischiefs like a sharp razor working deceitfully*. ” (Ps 52:2) “ *Violence covereth the mouth of the wicked*, ” (Pro 10:11) “ *Grievous words stir up anger*, ” (Pro 15:1) My let us not forget that. The tongue is a slitter of throats, a divider of families, a breaker of friendships, a creator of violence. The tongue can grieve the Holy Spirit, destroy reputations, spread distrust and hate, bring nations to the brink of war and split fellowships of God’s people in two ! (a)

(b) The Influence of the Tongue can be GOOD:

Do you what Proverbs says ? “ *The mouth of the righteous is a well of life*, ” (10:11) How true that is.

My who can measure the goodness and blessing that has poured from the lips of God’s people over the years ? How much blessing the tongue has been the instrument of bringing, love, comfort,

encouragement and inspiration. Think of this ! The tongues of God's people have been used to Rebuke Error: Mary, Queen of Scots once said that she was more afraid of the tongue of John Knox than of 10,000 fighting men. The tongues of God's people have been used to Reach Souls: Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost and 3,000 souls came to faith in Christ. On the 21st April 1855 Edward Kimball went into a Boston shoe store and led D. L. Moody to Christ. The result ? One of history's greatest evangelists, a man whose ministry still continues to this very day. My is your tongue an influence for God and for good ? (a) (b)

(c) The Influence of the Tongue can be ABIDING:

Luke Short was a New England farmer. He reached 100 years of age fit and well. He was sitting in his field meditating one day when he suddenly remembered a sermon that John Flavel had preached 85 years earlier in Dartmouth, England, before Luke Short had left for America. As he turned Flavel's words over in his mind, they came to him with such power that he was born again, there and then and became a happy Christian before he died. What a wonderful thrill, and yet what a tremendous warning that your words and mine can have an abiding influence for good or for evil. My in the light of all this may our constant prayer that of Francis Ridley Havergal,

***“ Take my voice and let me sing
Always, only for my King
Take my lips and let them be
Filled with message from Thee.”***