

Place: Lurgan Baptist 30:3:2004

Reading: James 3:1-12

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

21. A SUBJECT THAT IS IN EVERYBODY'S MOUTH

I heard about a man that worked in the produce department of a grocery store. One day a lady asked if she could have half a head of lettuce. He replied, “ *Half a head ? Are you serious ? God grows full heads and that is how we sell them.*” The lady said, “ *You mean that after all the years I’ve shopped here, you will not sell me half a head of lettuce ?*” The man, “ *Look if you like I’ll go and ask the manager.*” The lady said she would appreciate that, so the man walked to the front of the store into the managers office. He said, “ *You won’t believe this, but there’s a lame brain idiot of a lady that wants to know if she can buy half a head of lettuce.*” About that time he noticed that the lady was standing behind him. Quickly he added, “ *And this nice lady was wondering if she could buy the other half.*” Later that day the manager said to the man, “ *that was the best example of thinking on your feet I have ever seen. Where did you learn that ?*” He replied, “ *I grew up in Grand Rapids, and if you know anything about Grand Rapids, you know that its known for its great hockey teams and its ugly women.*” The managers face flushed and he interrupted, “ *My wife is from Grand Rapids.*” Without batting an eye, the man asked, “ *And which hockey team did she play for ?*” Sometimes what we say can get us into trouble. A farmers wife had spread a slanderous story about her pastor through the village and the whole countryside had heard it. Some time later the woman had taken ill and confessed the story was untrue. After her recovery she came to the pastor and asked for his pardon. *Of course I will forgive you, if you just do one thing. “ Go home, kill a black hen, pluck the feathers, and put them in a basket and bring them here.”* In a short time she was back, “ *Now,*” said the pastor, “ *go through the village and at each street corner scatter a few of these feathers, the remaining ones take to the bell tower and scatter them to the winds and come back.*”

She did exactly what she was told. “ *Now,*” said the pastor “ *go through the village and gather the feathers again and see that not one is missing.*” “ *Why,*” she said “ *that is impossible, the wind has scattered them everywhere.*” “ *So,*” said the servant of God, “ *never forget that you can never undo the damage your untrue words have done.*” You see, Christian ladies do have

a problem with their tongues. George Gobel says, “ *One picture is worth ten thousand words, but for some reason most women prefer to use ten thousand words.*” One man said to another, “ *do you object to your wife having the last word ?*” “ *Not at all,*” he said, “ *I am delighted when she gets to it.*” A preacher visited a family where the father had just died. He asked the young son, “ *What were your father’s last words ?*” “ *He didn’t have any,*” said the boy “ *Mummy was with him to the end.*” Christian ladies, have a problem with their tongues, but Christian men have a problem with their tongues. Indeed we would all have to confess that this beast in our body has often slipped its leash and “ *grieved the Spirit of God.*” (Eph 4:30) Now one way how to judge how important a Biblical subject is, is to discover how frequently it is mentioned in the Scriptures. James mentions the tongue in every chapter of this epistle. But its right in the middle of this letter that he deals with this subject most comprehensively. In (3:1-2) he deals with the Teacher and his Tongue, in (3:2-5) he deals with the Potential of the Tongue for Good, and now in (3:5-8) he deals with the Potential of the Tongue for Evil. I want to talk to you about (title) Notice that James tells us here three things about the tongue.

(1) THE TONGUE IS UNDERESTIMATED

That is, we underestimate the power of the tongue for evil. We underestimate what Matthew Henry calls, “ *the sins of the tongue.*” Now lets do a little test. My what has been your response to James’s teaching on the tongue ? Have you said, “ *Well, this is an area where I need to exercise more control, I need to think first and talk less.*” Or has your response been, “ *Well, this is all so trivial !*” Really ! Is it not sad that sins of speech are not regarded about believers, at least not in a way in keeping with the importance given to them in the Scriptures. Its interesting that when a Christian slips up and smokes, or drinks, or gambles, or does something that can be seen externally the whole of professing Christendom comes down hard on that person. But when a believer slits throats, divides families, destroys reputations, and splits churches no-one says a thing.

Now believers may underestimate the power of the tongue for evil, but God doesn’t, for here is something that God wants us to be concerned about.

(Ps 15:2,3 34:13) Now did you notice that James illustrates the power of the tongue for evil by telling us that the tongue has:

(a) THE POWER TO DESTROY:

The Amplified Bible puts it like this, “ *See how much wood or how great a forest a tiny spark can set ablaze.* ”

And James adds, “ *And the tongue is a fire.* ” I think of the great Chicago fire of 1871. The fire reportedly began when a cow kicked over a lantern in Mrs. O’Leary’s barn. The fire that started in O’Leary’s barn turned into one of the most terrible disasters in the history of the United States. The blaze started on a warm, dry Sunday evening and at first the O’Leary’s and their neighbours tried to put it out by themselves. But after about ten minutes had gone by, one of the neighbours ran for the nearest alarm box, and called the fire department. It took several more minutes for the horse drawn fire equipment to arrive, and by then a swift wind had begun to blow, causing the fire to spread. The damage was unbelievable. More than 300 people lost their lives, and 18,000 buildings worth about \$200 million were destroyed. One whole section of the city, four miles long and a mile wide was completely flattened. My did you know that your words can start fires ? Proverbs 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.* ”

(26:20-22) Now lets face some facts. In some churches there are some folk who can never control their tongues.

The result ? Destruction !

Let them change their address, or be replaced in office and a beautiful spirit of peace and love takes over. My do you see how destructive the tongue is ? A word dropped at one end of the country or town can end up bringing grief, damage, heartache at the other. You can drop a malicious word, repeat a slanderous, untrue story about someone that you don’t know, about someone who lives thousands of miles away, which will cause untold damage and harm. You see, the very range of the tongue is one of its perils. (Ps 52:2 Pro 18:18) That little word, Mean, envious, harsh, untrue is a fire that has disrupted more churches, destroyed more friendships and dug more graves than anything else. My who can begin to measure the hurt caused by one spark from a tongue burning with anger ? Do you recognise that you can kill at a distance ? Do you realise that your tongue could start a fire long you’re gone ? The tongue has (a) and:

(b) THE POWER TO DECEIVE:

Look at (3:8) or “ *full of death-bringing poison.* ” Here James echoes the

psalmist who speaks of people with
“ *with adders poison under their lips.* ” (Ps 140:3 Pro 18:21) You know certain kinds of poison work slowly and secretly until they kill. My is the tongue not just like that ? When a few poisonous words are injected into a conversation, they slowly and secretly create havoc and destruction. Like a serpents poison, the venom of an untamed tongue can kill reputations that have been years in the making. You see, you don’t have to make a long speech, just drop a word and mischief is set afoot. A peace has been ruined, a reputation has been blackened, a fellowship has been embittered and a life has been blasted.

*I lost, a very little word only the other day
It was a very naughty word I had not meant to say
But then it was not really lost, when from my lips it flew, my little brother
picked it up and now he says it too*

My do you see how destructive, how deceitful the tongue is ? (1)

(2) THE TONGUE IS UNRIGHTEOUS

Do you see how he refers to it ? “ *A world of iniquity,* ” (3:6) Or “ *a world of wickedness set among our members.* ” The word “ *world,* ” here is the Greek word “ *cosmos,* ” which nearly always in the N.T. means the whole world order of things in opposition to God.

(1 Jn 5:17) James is saying that all the evil that the Bible associates with the world estranged from God is focused in and finds expression through the tongue.

Boastful pride, destructive anger, cutting bitterness, flattering lust the tongue communicates them all.

Indeed James tells us that an evil tongue:

(A) STAINS:

Do you see (3:6) ? The word “ *defile,* ” comes from a word meaning “ *to make a stain.* ” Does this not tie up with what the Saviour said ? “ *But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies these are the things which defile a man.* ” (Matt 15:18-20) Did you notice how many of those things involve the tongue ? You see, just as no man can isolate himself from society, neither can he isolate one part of his body from the rest. You can’t say, “ *Well, I know that I have an unsanctified tongue but the rest of me is fine.* ” No ! There is a spread, a stain, a seeping pollution that comes out from the tongue into every part of our

body. Just as a rotten apple in a basket of good ones contaminates the rest, so you find that a contaminated tongue has an effect on the parts of our body and personality. This is why the Bible commands us, “ *do not allow your mouth to cause your body to sin.* ” (Eccl 5:6) An evil tongue stains !

(b) STAYS:

For “ *it setteth on fire the course of nature.* ” (3:6) Now do you see that word “ *course* ”? It means “ *wheel.* ” The wheel was the ancient symbol of the cycle of life, something that rolled on and on and James may be saying here that the tongue sets on fire the whole cycle of life from beginning to end. You see, the potency of the tongue for evil begins at birth and stays with us right throughout the course of our lives. The tongue penetrates life at every level, work, home, church, society. But the tongue penetrates life at every stage. Think about this !

The incapacities of old age make it unable for us to commit sins that we committed in our youth. Sinful habits are corrected by age and the process of time. They drop off from our lives. But as John Calvin says, “ *The vice of the tongue spreads and prevails over every part of life. It is as active and potent for evil as ever it was in the days of youth.* ” Should that not make some of you

“ *senior citizens,* ” sit up ? Isn't it lovely to meet a “ *senior saint,* ” whose maturity is reflected in their speech ? Isn't it horrible to meet “ a senior saint,” who in old age is still going around with a chip on their shoulder and breathing out the fumes of hell from their tongue ?

My do you realise that the power of your tongue for evil will be as great on your death bed as it was when you first began to use it ? James is talking about evil tongue and he says it stains, it stays and it is:

(c) SATANIC:

“ *And it is set on fire of hell,* ” (3:6) Or as the Amplified puts it, “ *being itself ignited by hell*

(*Gehenna*) ” Isn't that an amazing statement ? The Lord Jesus is the only other person than James to use this particular word for hell. Gehenna refers to the valley of Hinnom just outside the city of Jerusalem where the refuse of the city was burned. At one time this valley was the home office of the idol god Molech. His arms were heated white hot and little children were thrown into them as part of a heathen sacrifice.

(2 Kings 23:10) Eventually this valley became a garbage dump where the refuse of Jerusalem was burned. It was known as *the Gehenna of Fire* and as approached that valley you would always see those ever-burning

flames. My without Christ do you realise that this is where you are headed ? Hell is a place of never ending torment and ever burning fire ! Now do you see what James is saying ? He is telling us that the evil tongue is like Gehenna. Its like a torch lit with a live coal from the pit of hell. Its under Satanic influence. You see the fire that:

1. Comes Down from Heaven Mobilises the Tongue for God:

Do you recall that on the Day of Pentecost as the disciples waited for the promise of the Father, cloven tongues like as of fire appeared unto them and sat on each of them, “ *and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost,*” (Acts 2:3-4) The result ? They spoke as they had never spoken before. A tongue set on fire from above speaks of a rule from above. Such a tongue can be a mighty tool for the winning of the lost and the establishing of the church. 1.

2. Comes Up from Hell Mobilises the Tongue for Satan:

My do you recognise that this is where your evil tongue is fed from ? Hell and Satan ! You see, there is a fire that rises from the very pit of hell to kindle within us all that Satan desires. Have you not been around professing Christians including ourselves whose speech does not reflect the Spirit of Christ and you can almost smell hell on their breath ? Do you recall that occasion when Peter used his tongue for Satan ? The Saviour was speaking about going to the Cross and Peter sought to dissuade him. But Christ said unto Peter, “ *Get thee behind me Satan.*” (Matt 16:23) Tell me, who are you using your tongue for God or Satan ? Is your tongue being nurtured from Heaven or Hell ? My when you and I engage in character assassination, scandal, untruths, do you recognise that at that moment your tongue is being “ *set on fire of hell,*” that its got the very smell of hell upon it. Now remember James is underlining the potential of the tongue for evil here. The tongue is (1) (2)

(3) THE TONGUE IS UNRULY

Look at (3:8) The word “ *unruly,*” could be translated “ *unsettled, unstable, disorderly,*” or as J. B. Philips renders it “ *always liable to break out.*” Now

(a) IN (3:7) WE HAVE A FACT:

“ *For every kind of beasts,*” (3:7) While on a preaching tour of South Africa in 1983 I visited the Hluhluwe Game Park, north of Durban.

I can recall going to a water hole before dawn, sitting quietly waiting for the animals to come down to be refreshed.

There they were in their natural habitat, giraffe's, elephants, cheetahs, wildebeest. Now isn't it amazing to think that we can capture these beasts and train them to jump, to sit. Just think of Lassie, Flipper, Trigger and Shamu. That is a fact. But:

(b) IN (3:8) WE HAVE A FAILURE:

Do you see the contrast ? “ *But the tongue can no man tame.* ” Man can tame a tiger but not the tongue. We can train falcons to land on our wrists, pigeons to carry our messages, dogs to fetch the paper. But the tongue ? Impossible ! Sir Winston Churchill once said, “ *the power of man has grown in every sphere except over himself.* ” My we can send a man to the moon and bring him back again and forecast the landing point within yards and seconds. But you cannot tell where the tongue will travel, where its words are going to land and where its influence is going to stop. Its always “ *liable to break out.* ” Not one of us can say, “ *I am now in perfect control of my tongue, it will never let me down again, never would anyone, never slander again, never grieve the Holy Spirit again.* ” Its always liable to break out.

Now this whole section in James has been dark but let me end on a positive note. James says, “ *the tongue can no man tame.* ” (3:8) Many men have offered counsel on how to keep our tongues checked and caged. William Norris the American journalist once wrote:

*“ If your lips would keep from slips
Five things observe with care
To Whom you speak
Of Whom you speak
And How, and When, and Where. ”*

Publius the Greek sage out his finger on another technique we tend to forget when he admitted,

“ I have often regretted my speech, never my silence. ”

James says, “ *the tongue can no man tame.* ” But I know someone who can. The Lord. (Mk 7:35) For “ *the things that are impossible with man are possible with God.* ” You see, there is:

1. A CONTROL WE MUST SEEK:

We must be daily to be filled and controlled by the Holy Spirit and He will assume control of our tongue.

2. AN EXAMPLE WE MUST FOLLOW:

Was the Lord Jesus not impressive in His speech ?

They “ *wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth.* ” (Lk 4:22 Jn 7:46) Do you desire to be like Christ in the world ? Do you feel the urgency to have something about you which the world cannot explain ? A controlled tongue. (1) (2)

3. A PRAYER WE MUST PRAY:

A request that should become one of our regular morning petitions, “ *Set a watch O Lord, before my mouth, keep the door of my lips.* ” (Ps 141:3 19:14)