

Place: Lurgan Baptist 25:4:2004

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

Reading: James 3:1-12

22. A FORKED TONGUE

Xanthus, the philosopher, informed his servant that a few friends were to have dinner with him the next day and instructed him to serve the very best thing he could find in the market. The philosopher and his guests had anticipated a sumptuous feast but all the servant brought in was tongue. It was prepared in different ways but very course was tongue. Xanthus called his servant aside, and said with a note of disappointment in his tone,

“ Didn’t I tell you to serve the best thing in the market ?” To which the servant replied, *“ I did get the best thing that could be found in the market. Isn’t the tongue the organ of eloquence, the organ of kindness, the organ of worship ?”* Then the philosopher told his servant, *“ Tomorrow I want you to serve the worst thing that you can find in the market ?”* The next Xanthus and his guests were surprised to find that there was nothing changed in the menu. The philosopher was irate, *“ Didn’t I tell to serve the worst thing in the market ?”*

Again the servant told him, *“ I did for isn’t the tongue the organ of blasphemy, the organ of defamation, the organ of deceit, and the organ of lying ?”* That day the teacher was taught. Do you ever watching on your black and white television, the Lone Ranger and Tonto ? It was great wasn’t it ? I was all into that sort of thing ! Well, do you recall how the Indians used to speak of the white man ? The Indians used the term a Forked Tongue to describe conflicting, deceptive speech. Here in (3:9-12) James is dealing with the same issue. He is speaking about a Forked Tongue. You see, these believers in the 1st century were no different from us today. They were having problems with their tongues. In (3:1-2) James deals with the Teacher and his Tongue, in (3:2-5) he deals with the Potential of the Tongue for Good, in (3:5-8) he deals with the Potential of the Tongue for Evil, and now he concludes his teaching on the tongue by speaking about a Forked Tongue.

But is it our literal tongues that are the problem ? No ! Rather it is that culprit that controls the tongue. Do you recall what the Lord Jesus says ? *“ But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart and they defile the man.”* (Matt 15:18)

You see, the tongue is neither friend or foe. Its merely a messenger that delivers the dictates of a sick heart.

(Acts 8:21) Dr. Joseph Parker, said, “ *It is vain to attempt to tame the tongue until the heart has been subdued.*” Socrates said, “ *Speak friend, that I may see thee.*” Christ said, “ *Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.*” (Matt 12:34) What is dearest to the heart, will be nearest to the lips. What you are in the well of your heart, will come up in the bucket of your speech. My our tongues are good barometers of what is really in our hearts. Some of us think that because we made a decision for Christ years ago everything is all right yet we all too often speak with a forked tongue. Now in order to grasp what James is really getting at here I want you to notice:

(1) THE ACTIVITY THAT JAMES DESCRIBES

Look if you will at (3:9) or as the Amplified puts it, “ *With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who were made in God’s likeness.*” You see, our tongues are active. James tells us here that we use them in two different ways. He speaks about:

(a) THE RIGHT USE OF THE TONGUE:

“ *Therewith bless we God, even the Father,*” (3:9) Now there may be an allusion here to the custom that existed among the Jews, for whenever the name of God was mentioned, a Jew would respond, “ *Blessed be He.*” Jewish daily prayers always began with the words, “ *Blessed be Thou O God.*” What a wonderful way to use our tongues, to bless and praise the Lord. My is this not the great purpose for which the tongue exists ?

Time and again in the Scriptures we are exhorted to praise the Lord. The psalmist says, “ *Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands, sing forth the honour of His name, make His name glorious.*” (Ps 66:1-2) The Lord Himself says, “ *Whoso offered praise glorifieth Me.*” (Ps 50:23) My does the same vein not run throughout the N.T. ? The Early Church were a community of praising people. (Acts 2:47) When Paul wrote to the church at Colosse he exhorted them, “ *Singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*” (3:16)

My when we think of God as our Father, and His Fatherly care of us ought not our hearts and lips to overflow with praise ? Are you using your tongue to bless God ? It always me to see Christians who don’t participate

in singing during the service but who are quite prepared to engage in talking after the service.

An old farmer came into town one day with his farm clothes and overalls on. He had come into to get some feed stuff. While he was there he went into a fancy restaurant and ordered some food and they brought it and he bowed his head and began to praise and to thank the Lord.

Well, in that restaurant there were some people who saw him praying and praising God and they began to talk about this old farmer. “ *Dumb man from the farm, sitting mumbling,* ” they said. Finally when that old farmer raised his head one of them shouted, “ *Hey old timer does everything on the farm do that ?* ” The old farmer thought for a moment and then he said, “ *No, the pigs don't.* ” My are your tongue to glorify the Lord ? Martin Luther said, “ *The only thing that we can give God that He does not already possess is praise.* ” (a)

(b) THE WRONG USE OF THE TONGUE:

“ *With it we curse men who were made in God's likeness,* ” (A.N.T.) Now the word “ *curse,* ” here does not mean that we literally call down a curse on men. But rather that we are angry, bitter, callous, critical, we use unkind words about our fellow “ *men who were made in God's likeness.* ” You see, man is not merely superior to animals. He is in a unique relationship to God. The human race is the only part of God's creation which bears His image and is capable of rebirth and restoration into His likeness. (Gen 1:26-27, 9:6) Paul says the believer is someone who has “ *put on the new man which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him.* ” (Coil 3:10 Eph 4:24) You see, God is protective of His new creatures and that why we need to be careful about what we say about fellow-Christians, for they are created after God's image, choice pieces whom God hath restored out of the common ruins. Do you recall what the centurion said to the chief captain concerning Paul ? “ *Take heed, what thou doest for this man is a Roman.* ” (Acts 22:26) My take heed what thou sayest for that woman is a Christian. (Eph 4:24)

Do you see how inconsistent we are ? On the one hand we bless the Lord, on the other we speak evil of our fellow Christian who bears God's likeness. My do we recognise what we are doing ? In one setting we are adoring God, and in another we are reviling God as God is seen in His likeness in the lives of fellow-believers.

My ought this not to be a check on our tongues ? Are we going to

praise and fight with the same tongue ? Are we going to worship and war with the same tongue ? Are you going to bless God and tear apart your fellow Christian with the same tongue ? (1)

(2) THE INCONSISTENCY THAT JAMES DENOUNCES

Look if you will at (3:10) The tongue is so helpful yet so inconsistent. Now will you note that this inconsistency was:

(a) *CERTAINLY PRACTICED:*

“ *Out of the same mouth,*” (3:10) James is not talking about something that could happen, but rather about something that was happening. My even out of the mouths of the disciples came forth “ *blessing and cursing.*” (3:10) Do you recall Peter saying on one occasion, “ *Though I should die with Thee, yet will I not deny Thee.*” (Matt 26:35) Yet that very same tongue of his denied the Saviour with oaths and curses. (Matt 26:69-75) The same John who said, “ *Little children love one another.*” (1 Jn 3:18) was the John who had once wished to call fire down from heaven in order to blast a Samaritan village out of existence. (Lk 9:51-56) “ *Out of the same mouth,*” (3:10)

A large family sat around the table for breakfast one morning. As the custom was, the father returned thanks, blessing God for the food. Immediately afterwards, how ever as was his habit, he began to grumble about hard times, the poor quality of the food he was forced to eat, the way it was cooked, and much more. His little daughter interrupted him and said, “ *Father, do you suppose God heard you what you said a little while ago ?*” “ *Certainly,*” replied the father with confidence.

“ *And did He hear you what you said about the bacon and coffee ?*” “ *Of course,*” the father replied but not as confidently as before. And then his little girl asked him again, “ *then father which did God believe ?*” The answer is both, because both reveal the inconsistency of the tongue.

Winston Churchill and a woman named Lady Astor disliked each other. Because of their social standing they often found themselves together at certain events.

On one occasion they were seated next to each other.

Lady Astor said to Churchill, “ *Sir, if you were my husband, I would put poison in your coffee.*” Churchill replied, “ *If you were my wife, I would gladly drink it.*”

On another occasion Lady Astor walked into a lift that Churchill was in. He had a little too much to drink. Lady Astor said to

him, “ *Ah hah, you are drunk.* ” Churchill replied, “ *Yes and you are ugly but tomorrow I’ll be sober and you will still be ugly.* ” My isn’t there a bit of Churchill and Lady Astor in us all ? Do you know exactly what I am talking about ? Have you not come often on Sunday morning to praise God, but on the way home, you’ve given vent to your angry temper by scolding, condemning, fault-finding ? You have come to sing like a nightingale and you have gone home to speak like a devil ? You have uttered the most pious phrases on Sunday and you have repeated the most questionable stories on Monday ! Do you know what I am talking about ? Of course you do ! We have all done it and this the very thing that James is condemning. “ *My brethren, these things ought not so to be.* ” (3:10) Yes, this inconsistency was (a) notice also it was:

(b) VIVIDLY PORTRAYED:

Did you notice (3:11) ? “ *Does a fountain send forth simultaneously from the same opening fresh water and bitter ?* ” Now in the Middle East natural springs were very common. Some were salt springs and some were fresh springs, but none of them were both. Do you see what James was saying ? Inconsistency is impossible in the natural world yet we practise it in the spiritual world.

We not only do things that are contrary to the laws of grace we do things that are contrary to the laws of nature. Now if it were possible for a fountain to send forth simultaneously both sweet water and bitter water, do you know something ? We would never know for the bitter water would always prevail. You see, the damage of the sin of inconsistency in our lives is that it even sours our worship of God. Do you recall what the Lord Jesus says about our relationships one to another ? He says, “ *If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.* ” (Matt 5:23-24) If I in the presence of God, and while trying to worship God know that I am not on speaking terms with my brother my worship is useless and worthless. Let me put it another way, if we possess an uncontrolled tongue, an unruly tongue, a tongue that is always lashing out against our fellow-believers, then the very words of praise and worship coming from this same tongue will be unacceptable to God. (Ps 66:18) Yes, this inconsistency was (a) (b) but notice it was also

(c) GRACIOUSLY PROHIBITED:

“ *My brethren to be,* ” (3:10) And over every “ *ought not,* ” of Scripture you may write, “ *need not,* ” and over that

again you may put “ *shall not.* ” There is never any need to do what we ought not to do because we have the enabling Holy Spirit. The word “ *ought,* ” denotes “ *fitness,* ” and the thought is that it is abnormal and unnatural for us to bless and praise God and yet speak evil of the members of God’s family. A little girl sat one day with her arms wrapped around her Daddy’s neck. Her mother however saw that over her Daddy’s shoulder she was sticking out her tongue at her little brother. Her Mummy said to her, “ *take your arms from around your Daddy’s neck, for you cannot love your Daddy and at the same time stick out your tongue at his son.* ” My if we think that we can worship the Lord on Sunday and constantly speak evil of God’s family throughout the week we are liars according to God’s Word. Do you recall how John puts it ? “ *If a man say I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar, for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen ?* ” (1 Jn 4:20) (1)(2)

(3) THE REMEDY THAT JAMES DISCLOSES

You see, as James winds up his teaching on the tongue I believe that he hints at a cure for the tongue. Look if you will at (3:12) Notice that there is:

(a) A PRINCIPLE HERE:

“ *Can the fig tree my brethren bear olive berries ?* ”
(3:12) Of course the answer is no. But so you see the principle ? The principle is simply this. Like produces like. It’s a law of nature that as the root so will be the fruit. The fig tree will not yield olives, the grape vines will not produce figs, for like always produces like. You see, James is returning here to a point that he has made at the beginning of (Ch 3) namely that there is a close connection between the tongue and the heart. Do you remember what the Lord Jesus said ? “ *Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.* ”

(Matt 12:34) James is saying that evil speech can only emanate from an evil heart. You see, a heart for God will not produce a tongue that lies, slanders, gossips and curses. My the tongue displays what we really are.

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.* ” Tell me, what has your tongue revealed about your heart in this past week ? You see, there is a (a) but there is:

(b) A PANACEA HERE:

A panacea is a remedy and bless God there is a remedy for a forked tongue. As I thought about the tree in (3:12) my mind turned to another tree. Do you remember how the Israelites felt, having reached the oasis of Marah after three days in the desert ? Thirsty and tired they drank of the water, but it was bitter. Moses cried out to the Lord and the Lord showed him a tree. Moses cast the tree into the water and the waters were made sweet. (Exod 15:22-27) My that tree is symbolic of the tree on which the Saviour died. You see the cross of Christ can sweeten the flow of our speech and heal the poison of bitter tongue.

(Lk 23:34 Eph 4:32) My do you have a forked tongue ? A tongue that in one moment praises God and the next moment wounds God's family ? Do you have a bitter tongue ? An unruly tongue ? Throw in the tree. Bring your problem to the cross and allow the Saviour to turn the bitterness into sweetness.

Someone once said that one of the most challenging sermons he had ever heard was called “ **Ten Minutes after the Benediction.**” It spoke of those who moved from Gloria to Gossip, from Creed to Criticism, from Praising God to Wounding Men. My can you and I plead “ *not guilty.*” We have used our tongues this to praise the Lord, will we use them around the dinner table to wound men ? Do you remember that Peter's tongue gave him away when the Lord Jesus was arrested ? “ *Surely thou also art one of them, for thy speech bewrayeth thee.*” (Matt 26:73) Peter was recognised as one of the Saviour's disciples by the test of the tongue. Tell me, are you ? Oh, may the prayer of the psalmist be often on our hearts, “ *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.*” (Ps 19:14)