

It Only Takes a Spark

Speech Therapy for Saints-Part Two

James 3:5b-8

There's an old praise chorus from the 70's that I can remember singing as a teenager that went like this; *It only takes a spark, to get a fire going; And soon all those around, can warm up in its glowing.*ⁱⁱ The fire in that chorus had to do with the love of God.

James will use that same idea—only his theme is our tongue—and he warns us of another kind of spark, a different kind of fire that won't warm any of us and set our hearts to glowing. Instead it just might scorch us, torch us, and burn our lives to the ground and others with us.

In the letter from James, we now arrive at his most convicting description of the nature, power, and influence of our speech.

James has already told us that the tongue is powerful enough to control our body as the bit and harness is able to control a powerful horse.

Take 550 pounds—which is right around the world record for an Olympic heavyweight lifter to hoist overhead—and set that on the back of a one of those Clydesdales my father used to use on the farm for hauling and that powerful horse wouldn't even snort under the burden. That same horse could run a mile in under a minute. It's a magnificent half-ton of raw power. You put a bit in its mouth and a little girl can climb up on that horse and take control.ⁱⁱ The power of that bit is the power of the tongue.

James shifts the analogy to the rudder on a boat. Something so small, can control something much larger.

In other words, there is no other part of our body—even the totality of our body which is larger and stronger than the tongue—nothing about us has

the power and potential as that little two-ounce mass of muscle and nerve in our mouths.

Webster says that the tongue is that movable muscular structure attached to the floor of the mouth.ⁱⁱⁱ

The trouble we have with it is that in biblical terms it is not only connected to our heart, it often comes loose . . . unhinged.

So what James does next is simply warn us with the strongest of language about the nature, the power, the perversion, and the potential of the tongue for evil.

James will describe our tongue with at least eight different descriptive phrases—at least that's how many of them we'll cover in our study today.

In the view of many that James was preaching this—this letter was first a sermon transcribed while he preached it. Each phrase comes in rapid fire, one after another, all pouring out, one analogy after another without ever taking a breath.

James is passionate about our spiritual maturity, remember? He knows that **the tongue is going to represent audibly our greatest challenge and our greatest threat.**

The first thing James says about the tongue is...

1. The tongue is destructive

*James chapter 3 and the last part of verse 5—James writes **See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!***

James starts off by writing, *See*—literally “Look”. This is another imperative. He doesn't

want anybody sleeping through the Bible Study. He is literally saying, *You need to pay close attention!*^{iv}

See - Look how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! In other words, it only takes a spark; just a little spark of fire and a forest can be consumed.

Because fire spreads . . . Fire has the capacity to effectively reproduce in an unlimited way as long as there is something to burn. Water is poured out and that's all you get; it doesn't create more water having spread out. But fire will burn indefinitely as long as there is enough flammable material and oxygen.^v

Its destructive power is incredible. I learned that first-hand. *When I was a kid I poured some gasoline in that little cement gutter that sat underneath the downspout just to the side of our garage near that lovely bush that grew by the corner of our house.*

I had no idea what would happen, but I wanted to find out. So I poured some gasoline into that gutter and threw a match over toward it. The whole area seemed to explode with fire. The flames shot up about four feet into the air, completely scorched that bush, and then fairly quickly died out. I can still remember standing there staring at that blackened cement gutter, scorched downspout and that bush where every leaf was shriveled and withered up. I stood there thinking, "What have I done?" and an even more important question, "What will be done to me?"

My father came home and gave me the answer . . . and I learned not to play with fire.

Fire spreads . . . and so do words. The analogy would have been immediately recognizable to James' audience especially because uncontrollable fire was one of the most feared disasters during that day. People were nearly helpless to stop it.

In one of his letters, Pliny, a Roman author and naturalist who lived during the same time of James, wrote about a fire that took place in Nicomedia and consumed private homes and two public buildings, including the Temple of Isis. He wrote that the people were unable to do anything more than watch.^{vi}

Even in 1871, much of the city of Chicago was destroyed by a fire. It began at 8:30pm when a cow kicked over the lantern as she was being milked. The cow belonged to a Mrs. O'Leary, who became famous as a result. That small lantern started the Great Chicago Fire—burning over 3

miles of the city, destroying 17,000 buildings, leaving 100,000 people homeless, and 300 people died.

The fire burned for 2 days and when it was finally put over, it took the city of Chicago more than 400 million dollars to rebuild.^{vii}

To the readers in James day, uncontrollable fire was the most destructive force they could think of.

So he's effectively telling us we are carrying around, in our modern understanding, an atomic bomb.

He's reminding us that we've got amazing fire power in our mouths. We all carry around with us a weapon of mass destruction, and there is plenty of proof on that one.

Solomon writes, ***A worthless man's words are a scorching fire (Proverbs 16:27).***

Solomon gives us another model to pursue—he writes, ***He who restrains his words has knowledge and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding (Proverbs 17:27).***

We use that same analogy today when we say, "Did you hear that guy? Man, was he hot under the collar" . . . or "I was so impressed with that woman as I watched her keep her cool." James lays it out—the tongue is destructive.

2. Secondly, the tongue is depraved.

Verse 6 says ***The tongue is a fire***, now note this—***the very world of iniquity.***

You thought you had to go to Vegas to get to "sin city". No, James says, you got one operating inside your mouth. It's a world of iniquity.

The original word translated "world" is *kosmos* (κοσμος). James will use it three times in his letter and every time he uses it, he uses it in the sense of a depraved, fallen, sinful world system.^{viii}

He isn't talking about the planet. He's talking about the world's values; the world's arrangement; the world's plans; the world's system of operation at its very basest and evil forms.

In other words, the tongue is capable of spewing out everything that vaunts itself against the plans and values of righteousness—the system of God's heavenly world.

The tongue has the potential for any and all kinds of human corruption. It is as corrupt as the values of the world system that covers our planet.

where man is ultimately the idol and his throne pre-eminent.

You bring a child into the world or you adopt a baby, and while he's growing up, he's learning how to talk. He has two teachers: primarily you on the outside and his fallen nature on the inside.

After a few years, that little guy will not only talk, but he'll talk with your accent. He'll shape his words the same way Dad does. That little girl will sound just like Mom.

But his heart—his depraved and fallen nature is also at work. It develops far more than an accent.

In fact, before he can even speak he sins with his hands and his head. Who taught him to shake his head, "No!"

Where'd he learn to slam down on the plastic top of the high chair with his chubby little hands because he didn't like the food?

You Mom's are thinking, he learned that from his father, right? You're right! He learned that from his father Adam!

Where'd he learn how to lie? Mom and Dad always told him the truth!

Remember from our last discussion that the tongue is the tattle-tail of the heart. The tongue constantly tattles on the depraved condition of the heart.

In his commentary on this verse, Spiros Zodhiates told the funny story about the little boy who got his verses mixed up, but he ended up with perfect honesty when asked in Sunday school to define what a lie was. He said, "A lie is an abomination to the Lord and a very present help in time of trouble."^x

The truth is, his depraved heart taught him to lie and his tongue joined in the conspiracy.

James goes further in his description of the tongue. He effectively says the tongue is destructive, depraved, now thirdly;

3. The Tongue is Defiling

Notice the middle part of *verse 6, the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body.*

In other words, if not checked and controlled by the Spirit of God, our entire body will get involved.

Defilement is hatched in the heart, touted by the tongue, which is supposed to set off alarm

bells because it will be fulfilled by the flesh. The rest of the body joins the conspiracy of rebellion against the holiness of God, and James isn't writing to unbelievers.

This is speech therapy for the saints. It begins and daily requires the understanding that we all have the same speech impediment: defiling, degenerating, and ever ready to play out sin.

In fact, James uses the present tense for this verb (again with realistic theology, not pie in the sky) this defilement could happen over and over again.

You need to understand that James isn't writing this for the believer to excuse himself, but to remind/warn himself. Here's the warning: **Apart from our surrender to the bit and rudder, and the spark into the skillful, controlling direction of the Holy Spirit, a forest fire is waiting to break out.** Defilement is just ahead!

James also says...

4. The Tongue is Determinative.

Notice the next phrase in *verse 6 – it sets on fire the course of our life.*

What does he mean? James is using fire again, which is the negative description of the evil power of the tongue, but he's saying the evil potential expands even beyond today.

It influences not only us but others throughout the course of our lives.

If your father demeaned you and cut you down with his tongue, that affects you. If you demean others and cut them down it also affects you.

This power to determine can be for the good or for the bad. Think about it. You were interviewed for a job and your resume looked just like a dozen others that were turned in.

You graduated at the top of your class, but so did the others. You earned a master's degree in that field, but there are others with the same degree.

In that interview you said some things that caused them to hire you and turn down the others. Your tongue determined the direction of your life.

Think about it this way. You proposed to your sweetheart and she said, "Yes." Was that a shock or what? She said, "Yes." It might have taken some convincing . . . some begging . . . a diamond ring . . . who cares! She said "Yes."

That one little word determined the course of your life!

James says, “[*the tongue*] sets on fire the course of our lives. In other words, what you say with your tongue can change the rest of your life.

In fact, your tongue defines who you are in many ways even now.

An evil tongue makes people around you think you’re evil. A complaining tongue gives you the reputation of being discontented. A dirty tongue makes everyone around you think of you as a dirty man or woman. An untruthful tongue gives you the reputation of being a dishonest man.

That plumber you know who lies will not get the contract on your new house, which will affect his life in a dozen ways. Why, because as one author put it, he is considered to be no better [or different] than his tongue.^x

You say, but wait... it’s only vocabulary! James writes with inspired insight—vocabulary determines the course of your life.

Our speech determines our reputation, our friends, our influences, our jobs, our spirit, our service, and categorically, James writes, the entirety of our lives.

The tongue is destructive, depraved, defiling, determinative, and now about the time you think he might lighten up, he says, fifthly;

5. The Tongue is Diabolical

The last description in *verse 6* says, “*it – the tongue – is set on fire by hell.*”

In this negative context, all evil talk, James says, all sinful use of the tongue is actually fueled by—is sourced by—the fire of Hell.

In other words, the evil use of our tongue is the propaganda of Hell . . . it is an advertisement for Satan.

When Jesus Christ challenge the Pharisees He told them that their slandering tongues, which had only moments earlier accused Jesus of being born out of wedlock and his mother Mary a fornicator (*John 8:41*), were proving that they were of their father the Devil; the Devil constantly lies and when he lies, he speaks his native tongue—for he is a liar and the father of lies. (*John 8:44*)

So when the tongue is used sinfully it is actually at that moment in league with the world of demons . . . it is an instrument in the hands of Satan.

James is shocking us with the truth, isn’t he? He’s effectively stating that the fire we start

with our tongues has actually being borrowed from hell.^{xi}

Now the word for “hell” here in this phrase is the word *Gehenna* (γεεννηα). It’s the Greek form of the Hebrew *ge-henom* which means ‘Valley of the Sons of *Hinnom*’ – or the Valley of *Hinnom*.^{xii}

The only men in the New Testament who referred to the future, eternal home of Satan and his demons, along with all the condemned of the world as *Gehenna*, were Jesus Christ and his half-brother, James.

The Valley of *Gehenna* lies just southwest of the walls of Jerusalem. For centuries the valley— basically a deep gorge—was used as a landfill, a place where trash was dumped, along with the carcasses of dead animals and also the bodies of executed criminals. A fire was kept burning in that valley to destroy the rubbish and filth. It was a place of filth, rotting, burning garbage, maggots, and the constant burning flames.^{xiii}

Jesus Christ would use that valley as His primary description of a place far worse—though similar—in that Hell is a place. The Lord said, ***where the worm does not die out and the fire is never quenched (Mark 9:46).***

Nothing good comes from Hell—only evil and suffering.

James makes the point that when the tongue is used for evil and to inflict suffering, it is merely reproducing little ‘hells’ all around.

James writes, “***our tongue is set on fire by hell.***” He uses again the present active tense for the verb – ***set on fire*** – to indicate that this is a continual state.

We have a fireplace in our living room. But it has gas logs . . . I know— it’s real fire, but it’s fake at the same time.

There’s a pilot light burning in there if you look closely. That pilot light just burns. You can barely see the little flame, but there’s a switch on the wall, and all I have to do is flip that switch and the flames just burst on. It’s wonderful, and that’s why we like gas logs, by the way.

As long as there’s gas in the line (which tracks from the fireplace to my backyard where there’s an underground tank) as long as there’s gas in that tank, we can have a fire at the flip of a switch.

This is what the analogy of James means. We're carrying around a pilot light—it's a little flame.

Your pilot light will never go out as long as you are alive, and it's ready to burst into flames at any moment.

Just the flip of a carnal switch and it will burst into flames, and the flames can last as long as you keep the switch on.

Why, because James informs us that the gas line reaches down into hell . . . so be careful . . . the gas supply is endless.

6. The Tongue is Disobedient

James moves now to the world of animals in *verse 7. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race, but no one can tame the tongue.*

James groups animals into general categories – grouping them into pairs: those animals that walk and fly and those that crawl and swim.^{xiv}

From within these categories, James is saying, animals have been tamed. We've tamed lions, horses, elephants, dolphins, parakeets, and eagles. We've trained seals to clap, elephants to twirl, and horses to jump on command.

The word for tame, by the way, used by James does not imply perfect domestication; the verb simply means to subdue, to bring under control for one's purpose.^{xv}

The wildest, smartest, fastest and strongest of creatures have been subjugated and subdued by the taming hand of mankind.^{xvi}

Then James delivers the stunning news that is not all that surprising. Our tongue is a one-of-a-kind creature, and it can't be tamed by mankind!

Because of the fall, mankind has lost the commanding subjugation of his tongue. He has literally lost dominion over himself.^{xvii}

James writes in this verse – no one can tame the tongue. No one literally means – no one without exception.

No one of men can tame the tongue.

There's the first inclination of hope! James is describing the tongue as it is by nature, not what it can become by the grace of God.^{xviii}

No man can tame the tongue, but God is no mere man.

There is a lion tamer; there is a horseman for unbroken stallions; there is a keeper of bees; there is a trainer of wild animals.

The Spirit of God can hold the reins that control the bit; he can handle the wheel that turns the rudder. He can and must do what none of us can! Why can no one tame his own tongue?

James provides the answer in yet another description.

7. The Tongue is Dangerous

James writes in *verse 8, it is a restless evil.*

It's as if the tongue looks for opportunities to sin. It resists the subjugation of the Spirit of God.

James used this word earlier in chapter one where it is translated unstable—a double minded man is unstable in all his ways.

Now in this text it is used of the tongue. What James means is that the tongue is dangerous, because it cannot be trusted.

It's unreliable and prone to, at any minute, break out of its cage where it has been kept behind the bars of teeth and the gate of lips. James describes it as if it were looking for an opportunity to escape.

One author put it this way, "The tongue is like a caged wild animal, ever pacing uneasily up and down its den.^{xix} About the time you think it's going to behave . . . it lets loose.

I really want you to see this video clip . . . this is a perfect example of this word "restlessness." What seems to be a controlled animal suddenly breaks loose in fury.

The video clip was sent to me by a group of guys in our church that meet regularly for fellowship and Bible Study. They sent me an email that reads, "Stephen, we'd like to adopt this loving cat for you . . . he would be an excellent mouser, moler . . . but I would advise you not – I repeat – do not put Pinky in a harness."

<http://goo.gl/T8nWP>

By the way, I wrote these guys back and said, I will accept this cat if it's declawed, defanged and then stuffed . . . I haven't heard back."

So our tongues are described by James as destructive, depraved, defiling, determinative, diabolical, disobedient, dangerous, and now – James adds one final description to the list. James writes at the end of *verse 8, The tongue is full of deadly poison.*

Literally, the tongue is death-bearing.^{xx}

Within the tongue is a death-bearing poison. James is alluding to the venom of the poisonous serpent that brings about death. It's the only time the word "poison" shows up in the New Testament.

Imagine, the potency of this poison is reserved for the tongue alone. Man, what danger we carry around with us to be dispensed whenever we choose, venom as deadly as a cobra . . . a toxin as lethal as cyanide.

No wonder Solomon would write, "***Death and life are in the power of the tongue.***" (*Proverbs 18:21*)

So choose life—choose blessing. Daily choose life giving words.

If you haven't picked up on it by now, the battle of the tongue—the war of words—the daily skirmishes over our speech won't be over until the day we die, but I hope you're also picking up on this, that the battle is worth it! The stakes are so high . . . so don't give up . . . and don't give in.

Thomas Manton, the 17th century Puritan pastor and author wrote on this text in James, our difficulties and impossibilities regarding these [battles] are established so that we may continually run to God.^{xxi} He wrote, although we have lost *our* power, God has not lost His ability. Weakness does not exempt us from duty – though we cannot bridle it, God can. ^{ibid, p. 195}

And so daily . . . sometimes hourly . . . we run to Him with fresh confession, fresh surrender, and fresh control, which is exactly what He wants for our good and our progress in this matter of Divine Speech Therapy, which advances us in spiritual maturity.

Martin Luther, the great reformer, said, "All of life is repentance." That's so true. Repentance isn't something you felt or did when you came to faith in Christ; it isn't just an act that you exercise after sinning in some way. It is a *life*. **All of life is repentance!**

And here's the good news. This means that all of life for the Christian is one of forgiveness. Continually forgiven—present active indicative is the tense of the verb. ***I John 1:7 – the blood of Jesus God's Son cleanses – the tense means continuously, the blood of Jesus continuously – without ever stopping – cleanses us from every sin.***

So don't give up because His cross work has not and will not give up on you!

If Jesus Christ will continually cleanse us, we can then continually confess . . . **the gas line might reach down to Hell, but the *bloodline* reaches all the way to Heaven.**

May our tongues exercise the precious gift of confession often this day and the coming week – knowing the fountain of His blood will never run dry.

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- i 1969 Bud John Songs, Inc; Words and Music by Kurt Kaiser
- ii Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, James: A Faith that a Works (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 137
- iii Ibid
- iv John MacArthur, James (Moody Press, 1998), p 154
- v Ibid
- vi David P. Nystrom, The NIV Application Commentary: James (Zondervan, 1997), p. 177
- vii Warren W. Wiersbe, James: Be Mature (Victor Books, 1979), p. 94.
- viii Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James (Zondervan, 2008), p. 157
- ix Spiros Zodhiates, The Labor of Love (AMG Publishers, 1985), p. 112
- x Zodhiates, p. 111
- xi Zodhiates, p. 113
- xii D. Edmond Hiebert, James (BMH Books, 1992), p. 197
- xiii Ibid
- xiv Hiebert, p. 198
- xv Ibid
- xvi MacArthur, p. 158
- xvii Hiebert, 199
- xviii Newton, p. 69
- xix Hiebert, p. 199
- xx Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 734
- xxi Thomas Manton, The Crossway Classic Commentaries: James (Crossway, 1995), p. 196
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