

THE TONGUE IS A DANGEROUS WEAPON

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Text: James 3:1-12

■ In 1899 four newspaper reporters from Denver, Colorado, set out to tear down the Great Wall of China. They almost succeeded. Literally.

The four met by chance one Saturday night, in a Denver railway depot. Al Stevens, Jack Tournay, John Lewis, Hal Wilshire. They represented the four Denver papers: the *POST*, the *TIMES*, the *REPUBLICAN*, the *ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS*. Each had been sent by his respective newspaper to dig up a story—any story—for the Sunday editions; so the reporters were in the railroad station, hoping to snag a visiting celebrity should one happen to arrive that evening by train.

None arrived that evening, by train or otherwise. The reporters started commiserating. For them, no news was bad news; all were facing empty-handed return trips to their city desks.

Al declared he was going to make up a story and hand it in. The other three laughed. Someone suggested they all walk over to the Oxford Hotel and have a beer. They did.

Jack said he liked Al's idea about faking a story. Why didn't each of them fake a story and get off the hook?

John said Jack was thinking too small. Four half-baked fakes didn't cut it. What they needed was one real whopper they could all use.

Another round of beers.

A phony domestic story would be too easy to check on, so they began discussing foreign angles that would be difficult to verify. **AND THAT IS THE REST OF THE STORY.**

China was distant enough, it was agreed. They would write about China. John leaned forward, gesturing dramatically in the dim light of the barroom. Try **THIS** one on, he said: Group of American engineers, stopping over in Denver en route to China. The Chinese government is making plans to demolish the Great Wall; our engineers are bidding on the job.

Harold was skeptical. Why would the Chinese want to destroy the Great Wall of China?

John thought for a moment. They're tearing down the ancient boundary to symbolize international goodwill, to welcome foreign trade!

Another round of beers.

By 11:00 p.m. the four reporters had worked out the details of their preposterous story. After leaving the Oxford Bar, they would go over to the Windsor Hotel. They would sign four fictitious names to the hotel register. They would instruct the desk clerk to tell anyone who asked that four New Yorkers had arrived that evening, had been interviewed by reporters, had left early the next morning for California.

The Denver newspapers carried the story. All four of them. Front page. In fact, the *TIMES* headline that Sunday read: GREAT CHINESE WALL DOOMED! PEKING SEEKS WORLD TRADE!

Of course, the story was a phony, a ludicrous fabrication concocted by four capricious newsmen in a hotel bar.

But their story was taken seriously, was picked up and expanded by newspapers in the Eastern U.S. and then by newspapers abroad.

When the Chinese themselves learned that the Americans were sending a demolition crew to tear down their national monument, most were indignant; some were enraged.

Particularly incensed were the members of a secret society, a volatile group of Chinese patriots who were already wary of foreign intervention. They, inspired by the story, exploded, rampaged against the foreign embassies in Peking, slaughtered hundreds of missionaries.

In two months, twelve thousand troops from six countries joined forces, invaded China with the purpose of protecting their own countrymen.

The bloodshed which followed, sparked by a journalistic hoax invented in a barroom in Denver, became the white-hot international conflagration known to every high school history student as the BOXER REBELLION. (Harvey, 136-38)

Isn't it amazing what can be done with the tongue? Just as the Bible has said, it can be used to bring a blessing or a curse. James is well aware of the tongue's power and is taking this opportunity to make his point that we must be careful not to sin through impure speech—a subject he has already covered briefly in Chapter 1:19 and 1:26. **His feelings are that genuine religion should make it possible for an individual to control his or her tongue.** He covers this in some depth with particular *warnings* concerning problems with our speech—problems that have always plagued Christian people. Simply put, at times, we just do not think before we speak.

■ As someone has said, “Maybe the eyes are the windows of the soul, but that still doesn't make the mouth the door to the brain.” As well intended as we are, we would all do better to depend upon God in this area.

I. JAMES WARNS THOSE WHO WOULD BE TEACHERS (vv.1-2).

A. There is a great responsibility placed upon a teacher (v.1).

It is not an office to be taken lightly. The Lord will scrutinize a teacher more closely.

B. A teacher is at greater risk because his/her main tool is the most unruly member of the body (v.2).

We all make mistakes. But anyone who can bridle the tongue is able to control the whole body. As a matter-of-fact, this is just the type of individual that God is looking for to do the work of a teacher. It may be a great privilege to be a teacher but it is also a great responsibility.

II. JAMES WARNS US CONCERNING THE INFLUENCE OF THE TONGUE (vv.3-6).

A. The tongue is small but exerts a great deal of power (vv.3-5).

- A controlled tongue is a positive power (v.3).
- Like the rudder of a ship, it is small but able to influence the whole vessel (v.4).
- In addition, the tongue is small but it is able to boast of the effect that it can have (v.5).

B. The power of the tongue can be harnessed or allowed to be destructive (v.5b).

The destruction can be as rapid as a forest fire when uncontrolled. The power can be as great as that of a massive sailing ship or as powerful as a young stallion. An animal or ship can be controlled by a small object but also remember that a small spark can destroy a forest. In other words, the tongue can be controlled or allowed to destroy.

C. The tongue can corrupt (v.6).

Few sins are committed without the tongue. How many times, although it was not on your mind before, has talking about something provoked you? Then you started to dwell on it. Then it started to eat at you.

The mind, which controls the tongue, can corrupt the whole person. It inflames the entire existence of man. A corrupt tongue has its origin in the devil. Satan knows that if he can get you to talk about it he can get you to think about it and dwell on it.

III. JAMES WARNS US CONCERNING THE PERVERSITY OF THE TONGUE (vv.7-12).

A. The fact that man cannot tame his tongue shows its perversity.

All types of creatures are being, and have been tamed. No man can tame the tongue without God's help. The tongue is "full of deadly poison" like a serpent ready to strike.

B. The tongue's inconsistency proves that it is perverse.

We use the same instrument both to praise God and to grumble and criticize.

■ In his book, *THE BEHAVIOR OF BELIEF*, Spiro Zodhiates tells this story: 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 afterward, however, as was his bad 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 with, "Father, do you suppose God heard what you said a little while ago?" "Certainly," replied the father with the confident air of an instructor. "And did He hear what you said about the bacon and the 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?" (Hewett)

James states this kind of inconsistency of speech is simply not compatible with Christian living. **"My brethren, these things ought not to be so."** Cursing and blessing from the same mouth of a Christian is like fresh water and salt water coming from the same well. It is like a fig tree bearing olives or a grapevine bearing figs.

CONCLUSION

To illustrate how something small can cause a great deal of problems,

■ On September 11, 1995, a squirrel climbed on the Metro-North Railroad power lines near New York City. This set off an electrical surge, which weakened an overhead bracket, which let a wire dangle toward the tracks, which tangled in a train, which tore down all the lines. As a result, 47,000 commuters were stuck in Manhattan for hours that evening. As James 3:5-6 teaches us, even something as small as the tongue can cause a lot of damage.

-- Sherman L. Burford in *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching* (Baker), from the editors of *Leadership*.

We know there are *warnings* about those who would be teachers because of the awesome responsibilities of controlling the tongue. The tongue exerts great influence that can be detrimental if its perversity is unleashed.

Yet, the tongue can be used for the glory of God—if kept under His control. We can use it to PRAISE, WITNESS, ENCOURAGE, and other edifying things. But if we haven't learned to let God control our tongues, remember silence can be golden.

References

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Hewett, James S. (Ed.). (1988). *Illustrations unlimited*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House.

