



## The Power of the Tongue

### James 3:1-12

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Even though I am a native New York, my parents were both from the South, Alabama and Georgia. And so instilled in me are southern ways, most of which I learned in church. Like if someone came to church and their dress was too tight or too short, or their wig hadn't been combed well, I would here the other women say, "O bless her heart". But then they would say, "what in the world was she thinking putting on that dress!"

Have you ever stopped to think how important the tongue is? While it is considered an organ, just like the heart or the brain, its smaller size also makes it the most unnoticed organ, but it is equally as important to the human body.

The tongue is not only important to speech but also to food digestion for the tongue actually pushes the food into the esophagus, into the digestive tract. So without a tongue we couldn't speak and we couldn't eat.

In the early days of Christianity cutting out the tongue was often used as a form of punishment for Christians for it was believed that their speaking for Jesus Christ was speaking against the king and the Roman Empire. Can you imagine if that were still the punishment today?

Such vivid images and experiences of brutality only underscores how important the tongue is to the body. For with the tongue we are able to make sounds, those sounds become words and those words are used to express meaning and emotion. The tongue helps us let others know what we are thinking and feeling. That's what makes the tongue so powerful.

So when we read James 3, we think that maybe all this talk about the tongue is a little over the top, but it's not. James says,

<sup>8</sup>*but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

<sup>9</sup>*With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.*

<sup>10</sup>*From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.*

Proverbs 18:21 says *“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.”*

Death and Life, curse and blessing; all because of the power of the tongue.

But James, in verse 10, makes clear that blessings and curses coming from the same mouth *“ought not be so”*.

In essence he is saying we need to have control over the words we use, the meanings we convey and the emotions we express.

Speaking of those southern ways, my grandmother used to say’ *“if it’s in you, it’s coming out of you”*. For her, that phrase meant that whatever meanings and emotions we have in us, no matter how hard we try to dress them up, *“O Bless her heart”* at some point, what you really think and feel will come out. And what dictates those meanings and emotions that we speak? Basic human nature.

What do we really mean when we say blessings and curses? Blessings seek to the Lord, praise, magnify, and glorify God so that our actions become blessings to others, recognizing that we are all God’s children. Curses however, seek to differentiate ourselves from one another so that are actions curse others. Those curses are all the ways in our daily lives we seek to see others in some way different from ourselves. But seeing each other, and relating to each other out of our differences and not through the lens of what makes us the same, is what makes the tongue such a challenge for us, because the tongue, and what we say then becomes a tool in our perpetuation of difference. It is how we get the vocabulary of *“the other”* or *“them”* or *“those people”* *“that group”* and for as harmless as those phrases might be, there are a curse because the seek to focus on our differences, which can separate, and not blessings which can unite. While we are made in the image of God, and are God’s children, if we do not see ourselves as God sees us, then when we could be blessing each other, we may instead curse.

Why was that such a big deal to those early Christians, because they were the ones who were *“different”* they were the *“other”*? As Christians, they were no longer willing to hold on the societal norms that ranked humanity. No longer was there Jew or Greek, bond or free. All were equally welcomed and welcomed as equal.

Remember I said that the tongue produces sounds which develop into words, and words can convey meaning and express emotions. Words help others know what we are thinking and feeling.

But honestly, it’s not the tongue that curses and blesses, it’s the words we convey and express with the tongue. While the tongue may have power, the power comes from the words we say. The power to bless or to curse. But power doesn’t mean control. Just because the tongue is powerful, doesn’t mean we can’t control our tongue.

Think about the fruits of the spirit, to *“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control.”* Those gifts, when in operation, help us not to curse one another, but to bless.

One of the reasons why the lens through which my own personal theology is lived out in my beloved community is because focusing on community returns me to a point of recognizing that as God’s children we are all equal and equally loved. We are not the same, but we are loved the same by a God whom created us and a Savior who died for us and we should be able to figure out how to love one another with the same love.

I don’t think it will surprise anyone if I say using our words to bless and not curse is hard work. It is a daily work, and to be honest some days we will get it right and others we will fail miserably. The key is to know that we have a God who forgives us and gives us continual opportunities to let the Holy Spirit, have control, let the fruits of the Spirit manifest in our lives.

Just remember this, in the gospel of Luke, when the angel Gabriel appears to Zachariah to tell him that his wife Elizabeth was to give birth to John the Baptist, Zachariah said, “How will I know this is so? And those seven words rendered him silent for 40 weeks, until John was born. After his birth, Zachariah’s first words began what we now know as Zachariah’s song. The first seven words were, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.”

<sup>10</sup>*From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.*

How can you use the words to bless and not to curse.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.