

# WHICH ROAD WILL YOU TAKE?

## A STUDY IN JAMES

### *Did I Say That?*

***Psalm 141:3 (ESV)*** <sup>3</sup> *Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth;  
keep watch over the door of my lips!*

This lesson takes us to the world's smallest but largest troublemaker – our tongue. Time etches the words spoken by the tongues of others upon our memories. Some are encouraging words that still bless and direct us long after they have been spoken; while others are words that have cut us to the heart and the scars never leaves us. Ironically, often the speakers themselves have long forgotten the words that the hearer so vividly remembers.

Charles Wesley was inspired to write the hymn “*O For a Thousand Tongues To Sing*” by a word of praise made by Peter Bohler who expressed his spiritual joy when he said, “Oh, Brother Wesley, the Lord has done so much for my life. Had I a thousand tongues I would praise Christ Jesus with every one of them!” Think of it! A remark made in 1749 influenced a man to write a hymn still sung today. *O for a thousand tongues to sing, my Great Redeemer's praise, the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of His grace.* It is sobering when we realize that our words become embedded in the hearts of others. ***Proverbs 25:11 (ESV)*** <sup>11</sup> *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.*

Sometimes words are not so wonderful. I had a great aunt named Charlotte - Choddy was the nickname for this redheaded child whose physical beauty did not measure up to the standards of the day. Choddy was resting on a pallet on the floor and her aunts supposed her to be sleeping when she was not. One said, “Poor Choddy, she is so homely. It is a shame she does not have the beauty of her sisters.” Choddy who was in fact a very talented child who could play the piano by the age of 4 was scarred by this careless remark. In order to tame our tongues, it may help to realize that we will be held accountable for what we say. Jesus made this clear. He said in ***Matthew 12:36 (ESV)*** <sup>36</sup> *I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak.* Wiersbe comments, “If God is going to judge our ‘small talk,’ how much more will He judge our deliberate words? It is by our conversation *at unguarded moments* that we reveal our true character.”

We should be careful of what and when we speak especially when we consider that someone may remember what we say for a lifetime. And even when everyone forgets, the Lord still knows. Speech is a precious gift from our Almighty God. For us to communicate a thought in our mind to the mind of another person using a certain combination of sounds is amazing. Only God could have created us with the capacity to do this. God is concerned, therefore, with how we use our special gift of speech. Speaking from the voice of experience, controlling the tongue will be a lifetime project for most of us. .

**Power to Direct**

**Read James 3:1-4 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.* <sup>2</sup> *For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.* <sup>3</sup> *If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.* <sup>4</sup> *Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.*

Apparently, everyone in James' church wanted to teach and be a spiritual leader. James warned: "*Not many of you should become teachers*" James' point is that a person should not take on the role of teacher unless God has called him to it. Those who teach the Word face the stricter judgment and personally I find that frightening. Think of the damage that can be done by an unprepared teacher or a teacher who speaks from the flesh rather than the Spirit. James did not just point out the problem. He included himself in the warning when he said, *for we all stumble in many ways.*

The perfect man James mentions is a full-grown mature Christian. James says the perfect man is *able also to bridle his whole body* meaning if we can control our speech, we can control our entire body – our whole life. Our speech tells who we are. Remember on the night that Jesus was arrested: **Matthew 26:73 (ESV)** <sup>73</sup> *After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you."*

Notice how James contrasts sizes in his illustrations. He begins by mentioning the small bit in the large horse's mouth. I can easily visualize James' picture of a horse responding to the bit in its mouth as I grew up with horses. I have experienced more than once a horse deciding to race for the barn with me on its back. It was only the bit in the horse's mouth and my hand on the bridle that kept me from being flattened by a stall door as the horse barreled to the feed bucket. The small bit kept the large horse under my control. The question is, can I control my tongue like I controlled that running horse? The truth is that horse got out of my control a few times even when I was holding the bridle. It can be the same for my tongue. But, I have the power to direct my tongue – the power comes from the Holy Spirit living in me.

The second picture James uses is the small rudder on a large ship. A fierce storm may drive a ship, but a little rudder can control the entire vessel causing the ship to steer either right, left or straight ahead depending on the needed direction. Our tongue is small but it drives our bodies and our lives. We should remember that the tongue is razor sharp and we must use the greatest care for our tongues to bring healing and not injury. Our tongues can not only injure others – our tongues can injure ourselves.

Think of the things you say to yourself. If we are always saying things like, "I'm so stupid!" "I can't do this." "I'm no good to anybody!" Those words will direct the course of our life down a negative path. But if we say things like: "I can do all things through Christ who gives me the strength!" (**Philippians 4:13**) "I will not give up! I won't be afraid." (**Joshua 1:9**) These words will direct us down a positive path!

The tongue, a small muscular organ, can determine the course of our lives. God's children must control our tongues – not only to avoid damage to self but to avoid the devastation the uncontrolled tongue often brings to others. Be careful with your tongue – it possesses the power to destroy. The reputation and lives of men and women have been ruined by many a gossiping tongue. Just as a horse needs a guide and a rudder needs a pilot, so our tongues need to be directed by the power of the Holy Spirit – the choice is ours.

### Power to Destroy

*Read James 3:5-8 (ESV) <sup>5</sup> So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! <sup>6</sup> And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup> For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, <sup>8</sup> but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

We need to avoid allowing our tongues to become weapons of mass destruction. James' illustration of contrasting the tongue to a destructive fire is still relevant as we have seen recently when small sparks set off out of control wildfires in California.

These destructive wildfires are a picture of how small sparks fanned by the tongue can destroy a life or a relationship. The uncontrolled tongue is a tool of Satan to divide people and pit them against one another. Idle and hateful words spread destruction quickly, and no one can stop the results once they are spoken. Don't be careless with words. Oh, we may apologize later for our out of control mouth, but even when we do, the damage is already done and scars will remain. Be warned, we cannot control or reverse the injury our words do.

Our tongue often is a blabber-mouth that reveals what is going on in our heart. It reveals the true nature of the person and monitors the spiritual temperature of an individual. The rabbis spoke of the tongue as an arrow rather than a dagger or sword, because the tongue can wound or kill from a great distance. Scientists state that once a sound wave is set into motion, it continues on a never-ending journey. If we had sophisticated enough instruments, we could re-capture and reproduce these waves. That would mean that our words could be retrieved. Men do not have this capability, but God does.

James reminds us that animals can be tamed; and, for that matter, fire can be tamed. When you tame an animal, you get a worker instead of a destroyer. When you control fire, you generate power. The tongue cannot be tamed by man, but it can be tamed by the Holy Spirit's Power.

In this passage, James only mentions the negative side of a fiery tongue. However, we know that when the tongue is controlled by the Holy Spirit it can bring a blessing to lives like the warmth of a fire on a cold day. I believe one of the ways to control the tongue is to do more listening than speaking and our listening needs to be focused on listening to the Word of God and attuning our hearts to the echoes of

the Holy Spirit within us. **Proverbs 12:18 (ESV)** <sup>18</sup> *There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

### Power to Delight

**Read James 3:9-12 (ESV)** <sup>9</sup> *With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.* <sup>10</sup> *From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.* <sup>11</sup> *Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?* <sup>12</sup> *Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.*

Every believer has two natures warring inside of us - the spiritual and the carnal. We praise God in the sanctuary and then before we get home we are ‘running our mouth’ about someone. An old saying often used in TV westerns says, “White man speak with forked tongue.” Another popular saying ‘talking out of both sides of your mouth’ generally means a person says one thing and means another, or says one thing to one group of people and something different to another group. Whether our tongue is ‘forked’ or we speak out of both sides of our mouth is not pleasing to the Lord. **Psalm 19:14 (ESV)** <sup>14</sup> *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

In the autumn when it is time to pick pecans, we don’t go to an oak tree. We don’t expect to find fresh drinking water in the ocean. We cannot expect to draw people to the Savior if our witness is ruined by our tongue.

We need to continually remind ourselves that not every thought we have needs to be expressed. **Proverbs 10:19 (ESV)** <sup>19</sup> *When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.*

There is power in our words and we must use them carefully. Remember perfect in Scripture means mature. Practice makes perfect so it makes sense to practice daily controlling our tongues. **Proverbs 15:4 (ESV)** <sup>4</sup> *A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.*

Finally, as Christians our speech should not mimic the world’s, **Proverbs 15:1-2 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.* <sup>2</sup> *The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly.*

**If we truly want to control our tongue,  
it starts with our hearts.**