

YOUR TONGUE ONLY SPEAKS YOUR MIND!

Today's Text: James 3:1-12

Extracts:

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. *If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn the whole body...Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.... But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison* [James 3: 1-8]

During my childhood years in my village in the mid-west part of Nigeria, there was a cobbler (shoe-mender) who had his workshop in the village square. He was a cripple. One day, some elders reported him to the council of elders for allegedly disclosing a confidential matter which the elders had discussed in secret a few nights before. They brought the cripple to come and defend himself. He told the council, "I was not at your meeting. How then did I know about your discussions?" "The accusers replied, "True, but who told your clients?" If the cripple was not at the said meeting, it suggests that one of the participants brought the matter to him in his workshop. Therefore, the blame should go beyond the cripple. The human tongue is like that cripple.

The tongue is only a microphone, for "out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks" [Matt. 12: 34].¹ It can bless or praise or worship just as it can slander and backbite, depending on what is in the speaker's heart. Therefore, the tongue has the power of life and death [Prov. 18: 21], depending on what the heart throws at it.

In today's study, we shall use the 3rd chapter of James' epistle to examine the tongue and how to make it work for our good.

¹ http://bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_2/PDFs/Mytonguetobless.pdf

1. Background: The tongue is untamable-really?

According to an African proverb, the drum sounds as the drummer beats it. Its melody is influenced to a large extent by its drummer. The human tongue is like that. It speaks as we “order” it. We can order unpleasant music or blessings with our tongue. For example, when you ask some people how they are doing, they are likely to reply, “life is hard.” In anger, some people curse their children with “you are stupid,” “you will never make it,” “you are a failure.” When they turn out that way, we blame our enemies or the devil- or even God! Death and life are indeed in the power of the tongue. That is why it is not a matter to be taken lightly.

Located on the floor of the mouth, the tongue is capable of various muscular movements. It is an important accessory organ for chewing and swallowing, and a major medium for tasting. In human beings, the tongue aids speaking. ***Most vertebrates (that is, creatures with the backbone) have tongues but only the human tongue can facilitate speech!*** Anatomically (i.e., in structure), you can say that it is because only human beings have the larynx which houses vibrating elements called the vocal cords. Spiritually, however, there is much more to it.

The book of Genesis Chapter 1 tells the story of how God created the world. In **vv. 3-25**, God began creation with “Let there be...” and it was always so. And God made the beasts of the earth each after his kind and cattle after their kind; and everything that creeps upon the earth after his kind; and God saw that it was good [**Gen. 1: 25**] However, when it came to creating man, He said: “Let Us make man ***in Our image, after Our likeness***: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over the cattle and over the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” [**Gen. 1:26**]. God is Spirit [**Jn 4:24**] and He creates by His word that goes forth out of His mouth: “it shall not return unto Him void but it shall accomplish that which He pleases, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto He sent it” [**Is. 55:11**]. Remarkably, it was Adam, the man created by God, that gave names to all the things created by God [**Gen. 2: 19-20**].

Do you have a problem with your tongue? Is it untamable? How can you bless, not curse with your tongue? In today’s study, the third chapter of James’ epistle will help us to answer such questions and more. We shall pay attention to the following themes:

a) *The tongue is not tamable*

James writes, “No man can tame the tongue” [**Jam. 3: 8**]. In other words, no man can control the tongue. The same tongue we bless with is the one with which we also curse. Is it possible to tame the tongue such that it only blesses and no longer curses? That is a big challenge!

Take the case of Balaam, the soothsayer hired by Balak to curse the children of Israel in the wilderness, on their way to the Promised Land from Egypt. Balak did that because he knew that whomever Balaam blessed was blessed and whomever he cursed was cursed [Num. 22: 1-6]. However, God put blessings in Balaam's tongue and he told Balak, "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced?" [Num. 23: 8]. Three times he was given the privilege to curse the children of Israel and each time he blessed them. Was the soothsayer's tongue now tamed? No! When the children of Israel arrived in Moab, they committed harlotry with the women of Moab and twenty-four thousand of them died in the plague that God put on the offenders [Num. 25:1-9]. The women did so "through the counsel of Balaam to trespass against the LORD" [Num. 31: 16]. His tongue was not tamed. When he was with Balak, God took control of his tongue and he blessed with it. When he was with the women of Moab, his tongue gave evil counsel that encouraged them to commit prostitution with the children of Israel. His tongue only spoke what his mind dictated.

b) *It is an unruly evil*

James writes that the tongue is "an unruly evil" [Jam. 3: 8]. This is to be expected because a drum only plays the melody as beaten by the drummer. Even from the time of creation, God "saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of the heart was only evil *continually*" [Gen. 6: 5]. God told Jeremiah, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" [Jer. 17: 9]. Like their bow, people "have bent their tongues for lies... for they proceed from evil to evil" [Jer. 9:3].

Since the heart is inherently evil, it can only play evil music (through the tongue) unless/until it is transformed by God. Look at the case of Saul (Paul). When Stephen was martyred, the perpetrators laid their clothes at the feet of Saul [Acts 7: 58]. He consented to his death and followed it up with a great persecution of the church in Jerusalem [Acts 8: 1]. But after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Saul became a different man- now preaching the Christ as his Lord and Saviour [Acts 9: 1-21]. Therefore, *the tongue is an unruly evil if the heart is in an unruly state.*

c) *It is full of deadly poison*

James writes that the tongue is [Jam. 3: 8-10]:

full of deadly poison. With it we bless God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.

A curse like poison harms or kills. Take the case of Elisha soon after he had received a double portion of Elijah's anointing, following the latter's departure to heaven "by a whirlwind" [2 Kgs 2: 1-14]. As he was returning to Bethel, a group of spoilt urban kids came out and started to mock him, saying, "go up, you bald head; go up, you bald head." He turned around and cursed them in the name of the LORD. Immediately, two female bears came out of the woods and mauled 42 of the children [vv. 23-24]. In deed, death and life are in the power of the tongue and those who love it will eat the fruit thereof [Prov. 18: 21].

From the forgoing, it is clear that most of us cause trouble for ourselves by the way we use our tongues. On the surface, it may look harmless but it can have far-reaching effects. The tongue may be untamable, evil or unruly but it is only a tool! It speaks what comes out from within you- from your heart. ***It follows that you have to control your heart if you want to tame your tongue.***

2. But your tongue is the window to your heart!

During one of His numerous encounters with the Pharisees, Jesus said [Matt. 12: 34-37]:

For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.... For by your words, you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Consequently, we cannot afford to conform to this world; rather, we should strive to be transformed by the renewing of our minds that we "may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" [Rom. 12:2]. Thus, we can make our tongues bless and praise if we practise the following principles:

a) It speaks the abundance of your heart!

No matter the circumstances you are facing, you can deal with them if your heart is full of the abundance of God. For example, look at Job's situation. He had lost his children and wealth even when he did not do anything wrong. In his intense pains, he said he knew that his Redeemer lives [Job 19:25], and "though He slays me, yet will I trust Him [Job 13: 15]. In the midst of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, Prophet Jeremiah lamented. Yet in his anguish, he said, "Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassion fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness" [Lam. 3: 22-23]. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day" [2 Cor. 4: 16].

Your future may look bleak and challenging but do not curse yourself with discouraging words. For example, the Shunamite woman left her dead child on Prophet Elisha's bed in their home. Without telling her husband anything, she took a donkey to look for the prophet. When her husband asked her where she was going, she answered, "All shall be well!" When the prophet saw her from a distance and sent his servant to find out if all was well with her household, she answered, "It is well." It was only when she got to the prophet that she mentioned her problem. The prophet went home with her and prayed to God. She received her miracle [2 Kgs 4: 8-37]. She relied on her faith in God to pronounce hope and blessing with her mouth. You can also do so!

b) It does not speak unless you want it to do so!

Many of us cannot keep quiet! We must speak all the time. In the process, we sin with our tongues. However, we can be more effective sometimes when we do not speak at all.

Take the case of Jesus when He was brought before the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. The governor asked Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" Jesus replied, "It is as you say." Then the chief priest and Jewish leaders poured in their charges against Him, and Jesus answered nothing! Then the governor said to Him, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?" We are told *Jesus "answered him not one word, so that the governor marvelled greatly"* [Matt. 27: 11-14].

The word of God says, "He who has knowledge spares his words, and a man of understanding is of a calm spirit. Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive" [Prov. 17: 27-28]. Therefore, you may be speaking more effectively when you are an active listener!

c) Therefore, let your tongue bless God and other humans!

The Psalmist says, "Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise; be thankful to Him and bless His name" [Ps. 100: 4]. For the tongue to be able to thank and praise God, the heart must have good treasure because a heart with evil treasure can only produce curses and evil [Matt. 12: 34-35]. Therefore, let your tongue bless God and fellow human beings.

Take the case of Job in the height of his suffering. His wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!" Job replied, "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?" We are told, "In all this Job did not sin with his lips" [Job 2: 9-10]. Paul adds, "Rejoice in the

Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!...Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” [Phil. 4: 4-7].

In sum, here is the heart of the matter: no matter the circumstances that you face, watch what you think or speak for, as a man thinks in his heart, so is he [Prov. 23:7]. Never ever speak hardships or curses into your life or that of others. Instead, thank God for His love and promises for you, your loved ones and others.

3. Conclusion: Make your tongue tamable!

The lion “is mighty among beasts and does not turn away from any” [Prov. 30: 30]. It is the king of the jungle. But it is also found in zoos. In the zoo, it is a tamed animal in that it does not attack people. They put it in a cage. Even so, the zoo-keepers ensure that it does not break loose to attack visitors. The tongue is said to be untamable but it can be put in a zoo cage, built with the Spirit of God. Writing to the Corinthian church, Paul said, “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned... For who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ [1 Cor. 2: 14-16].

Your tongue only speaks your mind. If your mind is led by the Spirit of God, your tongue becomes tamable. So, make your tongue tamable-for your own good!