

# 52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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## 49. The Tongue (James)

The book of James was perhaps the first New Testament book that was actually written. We believe that the author was Jesus' earthly brother. This is the James who eventually became head of the Jerusalem church that we read about in Acts 15. It is not the James who was the brother of John, who was martyred in Acts 12.

### I. Theology of James is very much like that of Paul, but with a twist

The theology of James is very much like that of Paul and yet with an interesting twist. Paul taught that justification, becoming right with God, is by faith. It's not by works. Becoming justified isn't something that you do. It's not something that you earn. And so for Paul, "works" is a bad word. And yet Paul also emphasizes that the justified life will necessarily show itself in growth towards holiness.

When you come to the book of James, we find that he emphasizes the second half of this: that a justified person moves toward holiness. The confusing thing in the book of James is that he uses "works" as a good thing. So if you have been reading in Paul and then switched over to James, it can be very confusing. For example, James says in 2:24, "A person is justified by works and not by faith alone." In verse 17 he says, "Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

Now both Paul and James are saying the same thing. They're just using different language. It can become confusing. Both of these men would agree that you cannot earn your salvation by works; but both of them agree that justification must show itself in works, in a growth towards holiness.

James states his thesis most clearly in chapter 2 starting at verse 14. Let me just read some of the verses. James tells his people, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works? Can that faith save him?" The Greek has an amazing ability to indicate the expected answer to the question. If this verse had been fully translated we would have said, "That kind of faith can't save him, can it?" The answer "no" is embedded in the question.

In verse 17, "Faith by itself, if it does not have works, [if it does not show itself in a move towards holiness] is dead." If you just say, "Well, I have faith. I believe in God. I believe in Jesus", but not having works, not having it affect your life. James says in verse 19, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder!" In other words, if you believe in God and believe in Jesus, but it doesn't change your life, big whoop! You're as good as the demons.

Verse 22, talking about Abraham, "Faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works." He's not saying that you work to earn your salvation, but he's saying that a person who is justified, that kind of faith is completed; shown to be true by his life, by his works.

Verse 24, "A person is justified by works, not by faith alone." Verse 26, "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead." The ditty that we use is "The faith that saves is faith alone. But the faith that saves is never alone." You and I cannot work hard to earn our salvation; and yet for those of us who are truly saved, for those of us who are truly justified, that kind of faith is never all by itself, it always shows itself in a movement towards holiness.

All this provides the theological framework for much of what James teaches.

This is the basic theological framework for the entire book of James. He uses a lot of illustrations and examples to drive the point home; but I don't think any of his illustrations are as powerful as his discussion of the tongue. Understand, that as he talks about the tongue, that's one example of this basic premise, that a justified life will show itself in a movement towards holiness. And that movement towards holiness includes our tongue.

## II. Tongue (3:1-12)

James introduces the topic of our tongue back in chapter 1 verse 26 where he says, "If anyone thinks he is religious [if anyone thinks he's a Christian] and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." If someone thinks he is a disciple of Christ but doesn't bridle his tongue, the inspired James, (not your pastor) says that your heart is deceived and your religion, your Christianity, is worthless. He goes on to say in chapter 2 that if it's useless, it is in fact dead. But if that weren't enough, James is just warming up for chapter 3 because his main discussion in chapter 3 is about the tongue. I'd like to read the first 12 verses:

"Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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. [I read it somewhat sarcastically because he's about to say that that's impossible. So that is a hypothetical situation. There is no such thing as a perfect man or perfect woman.] If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 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. So also the tongue is a small member [it's a small part of our body], yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members [among the different parts of our bodies] staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life [James is speaking to the church] and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, or reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water."

### A. The tongue is an amazing part of our body

The tongue is truly an amazing member of our body, is it not? It's a world of unrighteousness. It's set on fire by hell. It cannot be tamed. It's a restless evil full of deadly poison. The tongue is a small fire, but can ignite a great blaze, a blaze that destroys forests as well as lives. It stains the whole body. It sets on fire the entire course of life. Wow!

## **B. How can the tongue be so powerful?**

How can the tongue be so powerful? Why is James describing it with such extreme language? We're given a hint of it back in verse 4 where he's talking about the little rudder of a ship. "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." The reason the tongue is so powerful is that the will of the tongue is the human heart. Just as the pilot directs the rudder of the ship, so our heart directs, is the will, of our tongue.

In other words, the tongue is a traitor; the tongue is a snitch because the tongue proclaims to everyone who will listen what you and I truly think; what you and I truly believe. The tongue is a snitch because it tells the world what's going on inside our hearts.

That's what's going on in verse 12. James says when you see olives, you know they can't come from a fig tree. That when you see figs, you know they can't come from a grapevine. That when you see fresh water, you know it can't come from a salt pond. Jesus said the same thing, "by your fruits you will know them." In other words, as you look at our fruits, as you look at our lives and when you look at how we behave, and in this context, what we say that is the fruit of our lips, it's the fruit of our lips that shows the roots of the tree. It shows what's really going on inside. Later on in that passage in Matthew 12 Jesus says, "For it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks."

The tongue is a traitor because it broadcasts to all who will listen what you really believe and what you really think. That's why it's so powerful.

## **C. 1:26 is a frightening verse**

I don't know about you, but verse 26 is a frightening verse to me. I know sometimes we see verses like that and we want to gloss them over and say, "Well, it can't mean what it seems to be saying, so I'm going to ignore it and come back to it in the fifth year of the millennium and figure out what it means." At least that's what sometimes goes through my mind. "If anyone thinks he is religious [a disciple of Jesus Christ] and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." We must work to bridle the tongue, as well as visiting orphans and widows and keeping ourselves unstained from the world (verse 27). We must do this, mustn't we?

Yet there are so many ways in which we can rationalize not controlling our tongue. In the created genius that we all have, the ways in which we can rationalize not controlling our tongues: ways in which we say it's okay to gossip; ways in which we say it's okay to slander; ways in which we say it's okay to destroy a person, to destroy that person and his reputation; to destroy a church's reputation. You'd think that in light of 1:26 and chapter 3, we would be frightened to do this kind of rationalization.

As I've been reflecting, I came up with at least four ways in which I think people in general can rationalize not bridling their tongue. You need to understand that I'm speaking to myself as well as to you. One of the things that is most uncomfortable about my job is that I know too much. I don't like some of the stuff that I know and I just wish I didn't. But it gives me this whole other reservoir of stuff that I've got to watch my tongue over. Sometimes ignorance is bliss. So I'm speaking to myself as much as to you.

### III. Four ways in which I think we rationalize not bridling our tongue.

#### A. It is true – “I can say whatever I want as long as it is true.”

First and perhaps foremost: “But what I’m saying is true.” Is there not something inside us that says, “I can say whatever I want about you as long as it’s true”? Of course, if we were truly honest we would have to say that as long as I think it’s true or as long as I’m willing to assume that’s it’s true, because how many of us really have firsthand knowledge of the things that we’re tempted to speak about? Truth can start destructive fires just as easily as a lie, can’t it?

In fact, in many ways the truth is more powerful than gossip and slander. You see, gossip and slander don’t have to be false to be destructive and sinful. Just think about it. Do you and I really want to make truth the criterion of whether or not we can say something about someone else? Do you want to do that? Well if we do, that means that in public I can say, “So are you still emotionally abusing your husband?” “Oh hey, are you still visiting your favorite porn site every week?” It’s true. In the words of Malachi, “Hey, you still robbing God by not paying your tithe?” Anyone here want truth to be the criterion of whether we say it or not, the sole criterion? And yet so often I can hear it in my own head that I want to say something and I can hear it go through, “But it’s true, go ahead and say it.” And gossip and slander can be true and it can still destroy and rip the heart out of a person and rip the heart out of a church.

#### B. She/He hurt me – right to say whatever I want

There’s another way I think that we rationalize not bridling our tongue, and perhaps this is just as strong. We say, “Well, she hurt me, he hurt me. I have a right to say whatever I want.” That’s right, we’ve all been hurt. I would suspect that every single person in this room has been deeply, deeply wounded by someone. Perhaps it was a pastor; perhaps it was an elder or a group of elders; perhaps it was a long-time friend in the church; perhaps it was your spouse; perhaps it was your parent. I don’t know, but I suspect that all of us have been deeply hurt. But just because we’re hurt does that mean we have a right to rip the bridle of the Holy Spirit out of our mouth and say anything we want, destroying that person’s reputation, destroying a church’s ability to minister? Does being hurt give us the “right” in this entitlement society to say anything we want? The verse that Robin and I have been talking mostly about this past month is Ephesians 4:32, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” You may have been hurt, I may have been hurt; but you know what? None of us have been hurt in the way that we hurt God.

One of the things that is so powerful in Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, is that it was Mel Gibson’s hand that held the stake that was pounded into Jesus’ hand. Mel Gibson was trying to make a point very clear: who killed Jesus? You did. I did. And I’ve not been crucified lately. I’ve not had anyone run stakes through my hands. I’ve not been asked to bear the sins of the world in a moment. But that’s what God did for us and he forgave us. No matter how much he hurt, he forgave us. And so also, you and I are called to do something that is insignificant in comparison. You and I are called to forgive those who have hurt us. Not lash out in slander and gossip, ripping the bridle

out of our mouth; but to respond tenderheartedly, forgiving. I don't want to minimize the hurt and pain that exists in any group of people, but that doesn't give us a right to gossip and to slander and to destroy, does it? That only gives us an opportunity, as difficult as it can be, to forgive, understanding that God has forgiven us in Christ for what we did to him.

### **C. Feign piety**

I think there's a third way in which we rationalize what comes out of our mouth and our refusal sometimes to bridle our tongue; and that is, we feign piety. We love to be fakes. How many times have you heard these things, "Well, I probably shouldn't tell you this, but..."? Or how many times have we heard someone speak in generalities, "Well you know, I shouldn't speak [then you probably shouldn't], but you know I have a problem with that person."? And we fake piety by somehow being general as we lacerate these people.

What about this one: "Well, I'm just going to tell you, but you need to keep it a secret." This is all fake. It's fake piety. And sometimes when I'm in those situations and I'm trying to figure out how to respond, I just want to say and sometimes I do and sometimes I don't, "I probably shouldn't tell you this but..." Then don't!! Don't! If you shouldn't do it, keep your mouth shut. Somebody asked me the other day what I was preaching on. "The tongue." "What's the point?" "Keep your mouth shut!" "I'm not coming." "I'll send you the tape." When someone says, "I probably shouldn't tell you," then can we please stand up and say, "Then don't." If somebody says, "I'm just going to tell you, but keep it a secret." Say, "I don't want secrets. I don't want to know secrets. If it has to be kept a secret then keep it a secret, don't tell me."

I suspect that when we listen to slander and gossip voluntarily, we're just as guilty as the first, slandering as the person gossips. We feign piety and then the reception of it.

### **D. Pretend to be really religious – cloak gossip and slander in religious language**

A fourth way in which we can sometimes not bridle our tongue is when we pretend to be really religious. We're good at this. If you have been raised in a church, you are the master of this because we can cloak anything, even gossip and slander, in religious language. We are so good at this.

I am very glad to announce to you that in two years of mid-week prayer services, only once have I heard someone say something I considered slanderous and gossip and it wasn't someone who goes to our church. Mid-week prayer meetings, historically, can become a cesspool of slander, can't it? Someone was sharing with me the kind of set phrases as we go through generations and one of the set phrases was, "Well, let me just tell you a little about this person so you will know how to pray better." Yeah, right. We can be so religious and all it really is is a cloak and God's not fooled.

Jim Cymbala is the pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle and wrote a book, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, and there is a half a page here I want to read to you. It's one of the most powerful things I've read. Listen to what he says: "One Sunday about 20 years ago, back in our days in YWCA I said something impromptu while receiving new members

into the church that has stuck with us ever since. People were standing in a row across the front before me and as I spoke the Holy Spirit seemed to prompt me to add 'And now I charge you as pastor of this church that if you ever hear another member speak an unkind word, a criticism or slander against anyone, myself, another pastor, an usher, a choir member or anyone else, you have the authority to stop that person in mid-sentence and say, 'Excuse me, who hurt you? Who ignored you? Who slighted you? Was it Pastor Cymbala? Let's go to his office right now. He will get on his knees and apologize to you. And then we'll pray together so God can restore peace to this body. But we will not let you talk critically about people who are not present to defend themselves.' New members, please understand that I am entirely serious about this. I want you to help resolve this kind of thing immediately and meanwhile know this, if you are ever the one doing the loose talking, we will confront you.' To this very day every time we receive new members I say much the same thing. It is always a solemn moment. That is because I know what most easily destroys churches; it is not crack cocaine; it is not government oppression; it is not even lack of funds; rather, it is gossip and slander that grieves the Holy Spirit." Gossip and slander, a judgmental and critical spirit are fires of the heart that ignite the tongue and destroy lives and destroy churches.

## **IV. So what are we going to do about it?**

So what are we going to do about it? Keep our mouths shut? No, that's not the answer. Let me suggest three things that we can do about this issue.

### **A. Start with our heart**

We've got to start with our hearts and we better start with our own hearts, because it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. So if in our hearts there is arrogance, then the tongue will put the other person down in order to elevate ourselves. If there is sin living in our hearts, then our tongues will seek to destroy; but if there is humility in our hearts, then we will put the needs and the reputation of others ahead of ourselves. If there's forgiveness in our hearts, then our mouths will be full of tender words seasoned with kindness, with extra servings of grace and thanksgiving. This is one example where legalism just fails. When legalism puts all its emphasis on external conformity, its answer to the tongue is then, just keep your mouth shut. We've got to start with our hearts. When we say critical things, when we gossip and we destroy, we've got to stop and say, "Why did I say that? What is it inside me that drove me to say that?" It starts in the heart, doesn't it?

### **B. Take every word captive to Christ**

Secondly, I would encourage all of us to take every thought, take every word captive to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). I run off at the mouth all the time. That's just me. My mom used to say to me, "Bill, you've got to engage your brain before you start up your mouth." It just flows out of my mouth. It's natural. And I had to learn, and I am learning, and I fail, but I'm working on it by the power of God's Spirit, to think before I talk; to take every word, to take every thought captive. I pray that God's Spirit will, "Please whisper in my ear, yell if you need to, that before the words leave, I need to hear, 'does what you are about to say bring glory to God? Is the word you're about to

say full of grace and thanksgiving, or is it going to destroy a person's reputation? Will it edify or will it criticize?" And I need God's Spirit whispering sometimes, screaming other times, and hitting me over the head with a 2X4 at other times to get my attention: "Bill, is what you are about to say going to glorify God, or is it going to destroy someone?"

On the other side of the tongue, I think we need to ask the same thing. As we listen to words and as we listen to thoughts, we need to have the sensitivity and the strength to say, "You know what, I don't need to hear this. Go and poison someone else's life." How's that? Does that sound harsh? It's Biblical. James 3 says that our tongues are full of deadly poison. What does deadly poison do? It kills. It poisons, not only the person speaking, but also it poisons the person hearing. And wouldn't it be great to be a part of a church that we are so sensitive that when we hear something that is destructive, we say, "Stop. Who hurt you? Let's go to him. If you need support, I'll go with you. If you're not willing to do it, then go poison someone else's life. I don't want to hear it."

### **C. There is a time and place to talk about issues – confront as well as comfort**

Thirdly, what are we going to do about it? There is a time and a place to talk about issues. The Bible is not saying to ignore problems. It's the last thing the Bible is saying. There is a time to confront as well as a time to comfort.

But the Bible is clear that the time and the place to talk about difficult issues of when you've been hurt is when you are talking to the person (singular) who has hurt you. There's a time and a place to talk about issues; when your heart is to reconcile, to forgive and be forgiven. There's a time and a place to talk about difficult issues when our words are an expression of grace and thanksgiving; when the motivating forces are love, and humility and gentleness. There is never a time, ever a time, to gossip and to slander. Ever.

## **V. This is one of the central struggles of the Christian walk**

This is certainly one of the central struggles of the Christian walk, is it not? I could not cover 52 major events of the Bible and not talk about this thing in my mouth.

### **A. Must rise to the challenge**

It certainly is one of the central struggles of the Christian walk and I call you as I am called to rise to the challenge. If we as individuals and as we as a church do not rise to the challenge, our tongues will stain the entire body. They will stain our body. They will stain the body of Christ that meets in this building. If we do not rise to the challenge, then our tongues, individually and collectively, will set on fire the entire course of the life of this church.

## **B. Faith without works is dead**

Faith without works is dead. That doesn't mean you get a smaller house in the millennium. That means you're dead. And a justified person will most certainly show it in a life lived towards holiness; and part of that holiness is learning to control our tongues.

## **C. Never be fully successful this side of heaven**

We're never going to be fully successful this side of heaven. It's ultimately impossible to completely bridle the tongue because it's impossible to completely have a pure heart. But we can move significantly in the right direction as we fill our hearts with tenderness and kindness, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave us. We can become, continue to become, the kind of people James applauds in chapter 4:8 when he says, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." Verse 10: "Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you."

Let's covenant together to continue on this difficult journey of a heart cleansed from sin and bridled tongues, saying only that which extends grace and thankfulness to one another.