

Guarding the Tongue

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Introduction.

- A. For some reason, human beings tend to group sins into “bad” sins and “good” sins. We think that some of the things that God warns us not to do are somehow worse than others. Generally, the “bad” sins are sins that we ourselves don’t struggle with, and in this group, we include things like murder, theft, homosexuality, and so on. Then, we get to the sins we DO struggle with, and we tend to regard those sins in a more positive light. We admit that gossip is a sin, but we tell ourselves that it’s not really that bad when we do it. We agree that lust is a sin, but we don’t place it on the same level as the really bad stuff. We acknowledge that our ungodly anger is sinful, but we tell ourselves, “I might have a temper, but at least I don’t do thus-and-such.”
- B. Of course, God doesn’t grade sins on a curve. To God, sin is sin is sin, and any sin that we commit reveals a heart that is not turned toward God. One of our challenges as Christians, then, is first, to recognize that the sins we think are “little” aren’t little in the eyes of God at all, and then, to uproot them from our lives.
- C. These “little” sins can occur anywhere in our lives, but they are perhaps most prominent in the things we say. It takes very little effort to sin with our lips, but this does not excuse the sins of the tongue in the eyes of God. God’s attitude toward this kind of sin is evident throughout Scripture, but nowhere more so than in James 3:2-12. It both explains the evils of the tongue and advises us about how we are to monitor our speech. Let’s consider this section of James, then, to learn what we must do in guarding the tongue.

I. The Tongue Is Untamable.

- A. The first thing we must recognize about the tongue is that it is untamable. Now, this is something of an ominous thing to say, but this is what Scripture says. Look with me at James 3:2. Essentially, what James is telling us here is that someone who does not sin with his tongue is also not going to sin anywhere else, that the tongue is the last barrier standing between the Christian and perfection. As we all know, we will never arrive at perfection, so it stands to reason that we will continue to stumble with our tongues as long as we remain alive. James makes this point explicit in James 3:8, which confirms that the tongue is untamable.
- B. So . . . just what is it that we need to do with our tongues? Just give up hope and shoot our mouths off whenever we feel like it? Not hardly. Even though we cannot tame the tongue, even though we cannot master our tongues until there is no possibility that we stumble in word, it is still possible for us to learn to guard our tongues. This is what Solomon advises us to do in Proverbs 21:23. Practically speaking, here’s the difference between guarding and taming: Taming implies complete control, just like a tame dog does whatever its master tells it to. By contrast, guarding implies keeping a watch over that which is not controlled.
- C. Let me give you an example, from what is now, amazingly enough, history. Any of you still remember the Cold War? I know, though, that a lot of you don’t, so here’s what was going on: From about 1945 to 1990, the two superpowers in the world were the United States and the Soviet Union, and they were bitter enemies. The Soviet Union wanted to take over the world for Communism, and we wanted to stop them. Now, even though the Soviet Union was our enemy, we never tried to tame them. We never tried to invade them, take them over, and convert them to democracy, because we knew they were much too powerful an enemy for that. Instead, we guarded them. We had hundreds of thousands of soldiers watching on borders from West Germany to South Korea, protecting against the possibility of invasion from the Soviet Union and its allies.
- D. Brethren, in our lives, we need to have that same kind of constant vigilance over our tongues. Our tongues are a powerful enemy to the desires of our spirits, and we need to watch them to make sure that they don’t become an avenue for sin. To do this, we have to recognize our weak spots. It may be that we are likely to sin by using foul language, or by saying unkind things about another, or by gossiping, but somewhere, we’ve got an area of speech where we’re spiritually weak. We need to recognize that area, figure out when the devil is likely to exploit it, and then watch like hawks for the inevitable temptation. Most of the time, we sin with our lips not when we’re thinking about it, but when we’re not thinking about it. Once we start thinking about it, once we start remembering our commitment to God in temptation, we guard our tongues successfully.

II. The Tongue Is Powerful.

- A. In addition, we also learn from James that the tongue is powerful. This is his point in James 3:3-5. The tongue is not the largest member of the body, it is not the most necessary, but it is certainly among the most powerful. Human history bears witness to the power that the tongue can wield. Helen of Troy may have had the face that launched a thousand ships, but there have been far more wars started by tongues than by faces. Both the greatest things and the worst things that mankind has ever done have come from the tongue.
- B. The power of the tongue is equally evident within our own lives. So much of our own identity and the identity of those around us is shaped by the tongue. How many of us can remember some chance remark that our

parents made years ago, that they probably forgot five minutes later, that still affects us to this day? How many of the things that kids and teachers said to us at school do we still remember? How about the things that our spouses and families say to us now? All of those things have a powerful impact on who we become.

- C. This serves to emphasize, friends, how much of a spiritual priority controlling the tongue should take in our lives. Our tongues are just as powerful as anyone else's, and they too can make an enormous difference. The effects of godly or ungodly speech may be subtle, but they are also profound. This is not an area in which we can afford to slack off in our service to God. Instead, we need to be committed to guarding our tongues.
- D. Even beyond this, we need to ensure that our tongues are used in the service of righteousness and truth. Consider Paul's positive instruction on the use of our tongues in Ephesians 4:29. He tells us that we should use them to edify and to impart grace to our hearers. Now, when we think of grace in the Bible, we think of the grace of God, the undeserved forgiveness of sins that He imparts to His people. However, grace can have a more general meaning too, just that of a gift or blessing, and that's the sense in which Paul is using it here. We should think of our speech as a means of giving gifts to those around us, gifts that build them up.

III. The Tongue Is Destructive.

- A. Sadly, however, the power of the tongue is not a power that can only be used for good. Indeed, it often is not, and James next highlights the destructive nature of the tongue. Let's look at what he has to say in James 3:6-8. This discussion is built around James' comparison of the tongue to a fire, which is a wonderful way of looking at our speech. No human being ever tames fire. Fire is never completely safe. However, despite its danger, fire, when it is dealt with in a cautious and safe way, becomes extraordinarily useful. Almost every possession we own is the direct or indirect result of man's controlled use of fire. However, when fire becomes uncontrolled, it becomes extraordinarily destructive instead. I can remember some years ago when my family and I went to Yellowstone National Park shortly after it had been ravaged by a forest fire. The park was devastated. Mile after mile of woodland had been reduced to nothing but debris and ashes.
- B. Our tongues are the same way: extremely useful when kept within bounds, extremely destructive when not. Sometimes, destructive speech is the most powerful of all because of what it can produce. Look at what Solomon tells us in Proverbs 25:23. This is particularly true within our family and our church. In a moment of irritation, we can say something to someone who loves us that will lay them open to the bone, that will leave a scar that lasts for a lifetime. Just one particularly juicy bit of gossip whispered in the wrong ear can set off a chain reaction that lasts for decades. We need to pay attention to the consequences of our words.
- C. Indeed, we need to remember that sometimes, the greatest effects of the words we utter are on ourselves. A study came out some years ago about the expression of anger. Participants in this study were asked to rate their anger on a numerical scale, then engage in some outward display of anger like screaming or throwing a tantrum, and then rate their anger again at the end. It quickly became apparent in this study that those who vented their anger ended up far angrier than those who do not. Brethren, the same is true of all the evils of the tongue, which is why James warns us that they defile the whole body. If we use our speech to give voice to our lust, that only makes us more lustful. If we are so filled with spite that we gossip, it only makes us more spiteful. Expressing the evil within us only feeds it. Let's stop the cycle before it starts.

IV. The Tongue Is Revealing.

- A. Finally, James tells us that the tongue is revealing. Although it's not obvious at first, this is the point of James 3:9-12. James calls us to consider our speech, how almost all of us at one time use our tongues for good, and at another, use our tongues for evil. He points out that this is contrary to nature. No spring ever sends out both fresh and bitter water; no tree ever naturally bears more than one kind of fruit. By implication, then, no tongue will naturally produce that which is both genuinely good and genuinely evil. If we spend Sunday morning talking, singing, and praying about how good God is, then go home and abuse our families with our tongues, it shows that when we are allowed to be who we truly are, we are evil people.
- B. Jesus further develops this theme in Luke 6:45. He tells us that our speech reveals our hearts. If we have righteous hearts, our speech will reflect that. If we have unrighteous hearts, our speech will also reflect that, because over time, our tongues cannot do otherwise than show who we really are.
- C. This warns us, then, that the Christian's struggle to guard the tongue must begin with guarding the heart because the tongue is always the servant of the heart. As Proverbs 4:23 observes, the springs of life flow from the heart. That means that the tongue is downstream. If we allow our hearts to become polluted, the pollution will flow downhill, and our speech will become corrupted as well. By contrast, when we keep watch over our hearts, we will keep the springs that flow from it pure, and so the speech that results will also be pure. Now, our tongues are extremely sensitive to contamination from our hearts. Evil that has begun to pool within us will show up in our speech before it shows up anywhere else, so it is our tongues that are one of the best indicators of the state of our hearts. Let's remember, then, to listen to ourselves. Let's listen to what we say because it tells us who we are, and whether we have a heart in which God rejoices.

Conclusion. If you have sinned with your tongue or in any other way, God will receive you if you repent and return.