

A Mouth that Builds, Not Destroys  
James 3:3-12

When I was a kid, we used to sing a little song that stressed the importance of our speech. *"O be careful little tongue what you say, O be careful little tongue what you say, for the Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful little tongue what you say."* James 3:2-12 is the biblical basis for the song.

**I. The tongue has power.**

The first paragraph (v.2-5) makes no moral pronouncement on your speech. Simply put, the tongue has, or your words have, power. We know already that "a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver" (Proverbs 25:11). The Hebrew word translated "apples" is jewelry. Have you noticed the power jewelry has over people? Words can also have the deadly power similar to a "pierce of a sword" (Proverbs 12:18). In our text, the tongue is compared to two small things with great power:

- A. A bit** (v.3). This piece of metal goes in the mouth of a horse to control. We get the phrase, *"chomping at the bit"* from watching horses raring to go!
- B. A rudder** (v.4). This piece of metal (or wood in the old days) at the back of the boat directed and controlled the boat under power of wind, oars, or engine.

**II. The tongue has power to destroy.**

The incredible power in the words you speak can be used by you to destroy people. Your words can be like an uncontrollable fire. "How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire." (v.5b)

- A. Your words can be like an ugly stain** (v.6b) "The tongue is set among our members, staining our whole body." With a foul tongue, there is something ugly about a man or a woman, no matter how much physical beauty they possess.
- B. Your words can be like an unyielding poison** (v.8) "full of deadly poison."
- C. Your words can be like an unintentional toxin** (v.11) "salt water."  
Sometimes the destruction is unintentional; yet, the damage is done to the soul.

**III. The tongue has power that can only be controlled by a Higher Power.**

"No human being can tame the tongue" (v.8). Some read that verse and say, "I knew it, there is no reason to even try to get control of the tongue, for I'll never succeed." Is this what you believe?

Jesus was once accused of being the devil. He told the scribes and Pharisees that he could not be the devil since he was casting demons out, and "a house divided will not stand." He then explains what is happening when he delivers people from demons. "No one can enter a strong man's house [the devil is the strong man; his house is a person in whom he resides] unless he [Jesus] first binds the strong man [the devil]. Then indeed he may plunder his house" (Mark 3:27).

Plunder means "to appropriate something as your own." Someone might ask you, "Has the cat got your tongue?" but the more important question is, "Has the devil got your tongue?" For those of us who feel convicted that our tongue is destroying people, there is only one Hope. It lies not in a plan, or a personality change, or a program. You are a captive, held by a strong man, fully armed. You must cry out to the One who is stronger. He will set free the tongue by changing your heart. Ultimately, the tongue is only the thermometer that mentions the temperature of the heart.