

• Three negative uses of the tongue

3. The tongue is like a fire

• Strong words on the destructive and defiling potential of the tongue

4. The tongue is like a wild animal

• Needs taming!

5. The tongue is like poison

• Words can kill

Examples of harmful words

• Untruthfulness

• Exaggeration

• Words spoken in anger

The next three of James' illustrations are negative. They speak of the danger, the possible destructiveness, of our talk.

3. **The tongue is like a fire.** *'The tongue is also a fire. The tongue is set as the wicked world among the members of our body. It defiles the whole body and sets on fire the whole course of human life, and it is itself set on fire by hell'*¹. These are strong words indeed! The tongue is the representative of 'the world' within our body. It is part of our lives which is taken hold of by wicked forces who would like to use what we say to do their own work. The world – human sinfulness in the grip of Satan – finds a way into our lives through what we say. So it is easy for what we say to defile and damage the rest of our life. An immensely powerful blaze can be set on fire by foolish talk. It can set on fire the whole course of our lives. Hell – the home of the devil – is the source of a lot of what gets into our talk.

4. **The tongue is like a wild animal.** *'For every kind of animals and birds, of reptiles and sea creatures, are being tamed and have been tamed by men and women'*¹. *But no human being can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil; it is full of deadly poison'*². Men and women are very clever at taming even the wildest animals, but no one can tame the tongue, either of other people or of themselves! The tongue is restless, ever tending to leap into action!

5. **The tongue is like poison.** James says it is 'full of deadly poison.' These last three illustrations point to the evil possibilities that are present in careless talk. Fire may destroy goods beyond recovery. Animals may savagely attack and kill. Poison is used in murder and suicide. All of James' last three illustrations point to the powerfully damaging consequences that loose and evil talk may have.

Again let us dwell on his point, considering some of its details. The Bible gives us plenty of examples to expand his point. We can think of the many examples of **untruthful** words. 'Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord'¹. Even godly people fall into sins of deceitful talk. Think of Peter in Matthew 26:31, and others. Peter fell into sins of terrible lying², just like the unsaved³. **Exaggerated** words are almost as bad. Christians often exaggerate numbers at meetings. I have been at meetings where 800 people are present and the sponsors announce that 2,000 attended! Sometimes preachers – we have all done it – exaggerate because we want to convince someone of a point we are making. But God hates a false witness⁴. Back behind all lying is: self- concern, self-centredness. God wants simplicity of speech. Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No'.

We must mention **angry** words. The tongue is like a fire in its anger, like a wild animal, like poison. Think of the story of 2 Samuel 19:40–20:26. David had a son called Absalom. Absalom rebelled and David was driven from Jerusalem. Then the rebellion was put down and David was brought back to Jerusalem mainly by the tribe of Judah. But then an argument breaks out. The ten tribes of north Israel said 'Why did Judah bring the king back?' Judah said, 'Because David is in our tribe.' The ten tribes said, 'But we are ten tribes and you are only one. It was our idea first.' Judah responded even more harshly. Then another rebellion starts¹. War starts just because of angry, careless words. The quarrel is a foolish one. Both sides speak with harshness. There is harshness of content and harshness of manner. 'Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out'².

1 3:6

1 3:7
2 3:8

1 Proverbs 12:22
2 Matthew 26:69–75
3 Matthew 26:60

4 Proverbs 6:16, 19

1 2 Samuel 20:1

2 Proverbs 17:14

• *Despairing words*

Then there are **despairing** words. In the story I have quoted David speaks in despair: 'Sheba ... will do us more harm than Absalom.' He has been through one rebellion and now he thinks there is going to be another one. But David's despair was needless.

• *Fearful and unbelieving words*

There are **fearful** words (think of Judges 13:22, 23) and **unbelieving** words (think of Numbers 14), and **excessive** talking. 'When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise'¹. 'A person of knowledge uses words with restraint ...' Then there are **careless** words. 'He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin'². There are **complaining** words. How often the Israelites in the wilderness grumbled against God. Grumbling can make us lose what God wants to do through us. God wants to take us to 'a land of milk and honey', but we can lose what He wants to give us through grumbling words.

1 Proverbs 10:19
2 Proverbs 13:3

• *Excessive talking and careless words*

• *Complaints*

• *Bitter words*

There are **bitter** words. When Jesus let Lazarus die His disciples were resentful. 'If you had been here my brother would not have died...', said one of them. These were also **mistaken** words, for Jesus was planning to raise Lazarus from the dead. **Slander** also displeases God. The Mosaic law forbade it¹. 'He who spreads slander is a fool', says Proverbs 10:18b. 'With his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbour', says another proverb². There is slander that arises from misunderstanding. Eli was the most notable example³. We could continue with a long list! There are mistakes of judgement because of tribal or cultural differences. There is flattery, causing dissension, boasting, hastiness of speech, hot-temper, twisting the facts, sharing confidences, sharing a criticism publicly before you have obeyed Matthew 18:15, there is silence, sullenness, judging without hearing both sides, making false promises, failing to keep promises, defensiveness, gossip.

1 Leviticus 19:16
2 Proverbs 11:9
3 1 Samuel 1:12-14

• *Mistaken words*

• *Slander*

And many many more...

Learning to turn our tongues into means of blessing

We need to learn how to encourage people. Talk has an impact for good. People need help to feel forgiven, to feel useful, to feel optimistic. We must know how to build other people up in the Lord, and how to make another person feel secure, fearless, much-loved. We must learn how to create friendliness.

All of James' illustrations suggest to us that the tongue has to be turned into a means of blessing. It has to become a domestic horse, taking us where we want to go, not a wild animal galloping off in all directions. It has to be a quietly burning fire to bring warmth and not a raging inferno with destructive power. It has to be medicine not poison. It has to be a rudder bringing us safely into the harbour, not a wild wind blowing us out to sea.



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