

## The Power of the Tongue

*“Death and Life are in the power of the tongue: they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.” (Proverbs 18:21)*

A Greek Philosopher asked his servant to provide the best dish possible. The servant prepared a dish of tongue, saying, *“It is the best of all the dishes, because with it we may bless and communicate happiness, dispel sorrow, remove despair, cheer the faint hearted, inspire the discouraged, and say a hundred other things to uplift mankind.”* Later the philosopher asked his servant to provide the worst dish of which he could think. A dish of tongue appeared on the table. The servant said, *“It is the worst, because with it we may curse and break human hearts; destroy reputations; promote discord and strife; and set families, communities and nations at war with each other.”* This was a very wise servant!

We often say that a man will eat his words. In fact, this is a spiritual truth! You are what you eat, and with regards your words, you will eat the fruit thereof. If your words have been good words, they will yield good fruit and bring satisfaction to you. However, if your words are bad, they will yield bad fruit and become toxic to you. Remember, you are always rewarded according to the nature of your speech. Your words have the **power** to produce life or death. They are a creative force! Furthermore, you can even cloak others with your words.

The average person uses about 30,000 words per day. That’s a lot of words! All of us speak enough words each day to fill a book. If you multiply that by the days in your lifetime, then you would be able to fill a good-sized library with countless volumes of books written just by your words.

Do you know that all of your words, day in day out, are recorded? And do you know who does that recording? Well, the Lord does. He keeps a record of each word that you speak. He “bugs” your conversations every day. He is always listening in; and He holds you accountable for every word you utter. The Lord Jesus Himself made that very clear when He said, in **Matthew 12:36**, *“But I tell you that all men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.”* Therefore, I suggest you speak and act as though you already have to give an account. That is how important it is!

Your words have the power to:

- (1) **Direct the course of life.**
- (2) **Destroy the circle of life.**
- (3) **Heal the source of life.**

Turn with me to **James 3** and let’s read **verses 1 to 12**. James says that we all stumble in many ways. He includes himself in this. He says that no one is perfect in that regard. We all are prone to slips of the tongue. Don’t think that James is saying this because he wants to give us a way out... *“Well, we can’t really help ourselves because that’s the way we all are.”* No, that’s not what he means! What he means is that, when we speak to others, we have to keep in mind that fundamentally we are all alike. With the same human frailties!

So don’t come to others with a superior attitude - as if you are better than they are. No, you’re a “stumbler” like everyone else. Therefore, choose your words carefully. James says that, *“If anyone is never at fault in*

*what he says, then he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check*" (verse 2). When he uses that word "perfect", he is referring to maturity. And that's the theme that he develops throughout this epistle. He urges us to be mature in our faith.

James uses some very good illustrations in order to make his point. He compares the tongue to a bit in the mouth of a horse and to the rudder of a ship. These two items are quite small, yet exercise great power. With a bit you can control a powerful horse, and with a rudder you can steer a huge ship. Horses are often used as an example of power. That is why, even today, we speak about the horsepower of a motor. But a horse needs to be controlled. And the way you do that is by putting a bit into his mouth so that you can overcome the wild nature of the horse.

Likewise, a rudder of a ship is only a small part of that ship, but you use it to control that large ship - to fight the winds and the currents that otherwise drive the ship off course. There are also all kinds of things that threaten to drive us off course. Our old nature wants to control us and make us perform sinful acts. So that sinful/carnal nature needs to be controlled. Therefore, we must learn to use the tongue in the right way. We must learn to use our speech to steer ourselves in the right direction. To keep ourselves on track! To direct the **course of life**.

Never underestimate how you can direct the course of your life, and the lives of others, by the use of well-chosen and timely words. *"The Lord God has given Me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary"* (**Isaiah 50:4**). Think, for example, of the way the Lord Jesus used His words, and how He directed lives. He spoke words of healing to those who were in need, and it changes their lives forever. Think of the Samaritan woman at the well.

You too have the power to influence the lives of those around you. **Proverbs 15:23** says, *"How good is a word spoken at the right time!"* You have great power at your disposal. But it must be used correctly. Do you want to direct the lives of your loved ones? Do you want to be a positive influence on them so that they can fulfil their destiny? Then use your tongue wisely. Use it the way the Lord Jesus used it, by being kind and compassionate and forgiving. Don't ever use your tongue in a destructive and vindictive way.

In *verse 6*, James compares the tongue to a fire and states that the tongue sets the whole course of your life on fire. When he speaks here about the **course of life** he uses an expression which means *"the circle of life."* James suggests that the various aspects of our lives are connected like spokes in a wheel. He is referring here to all aspects of human existence, from beginning to end. So the point James is making is that, with your tongue, you can destroy the **circle of life**. If a child grows up with nothing but criticism and harsh words, then he or she will have a very difficult time throughout his or her life. But if a child grows up with kind and encouraging words then the opposite will happen. Kind words are the building blocks of life. Your praise is extremely powerful. Compliments build, while criticism tears down!

How many of you can remember seeing images on TV of the fires that raged across Australia and California, destroying everything in their path. These uncontrollable infernos were probably started by a thoughtless person. After that, there was little anyone else could do! No matter how much they tried! Note, James says, the same thing is true of the tongue. One thoughtless remark can destroy the **"circle of life."** By making a

thoughtless, hurtful remark to another person, you can interrupt or disrupt his or her well-being for a lifetime. You can greatly alter another person's ability to function. And that is especially true if you are in a position of power or influence: a parent, a teacher, an elder or a minister, a boss, or a good friend.

Unkind words spoken behind a person's back are especially damaging. And let's face it, most people are very good at gossip. They like to talk about other people. That is one of their favourite pastimes. The book of Proverbs reminds us that when we gossip we add wood to the fire. For it says in **Proverbs 26:20**, "*Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down.*"

My name is Gossip: "*I am more deadly than the screaming shell of the cannon. I win without killing. I tear down homes, break hearts, wreck lives. I travel on the wings of the wind. No innocence is strong enough to intimidate me, no purity pure enough to daunt me. I have no regard for truth, no respect for justice, no mercy for the defenceless. My victims are as numerous as the sands of the sea and often as innocent. I never forget and seldom forgive.*"

The tongue has great potential for good or evil. Those who love to use it cause strife must be prepared to take the consequences. When used properly however the tongue can mend rifts, heal broken hearts and encourage those who are in need of support. Think about what you are saying and you will be surprised with the outcome!

General Robert E. Lee was once asked what he thought of a fellow officer in the Confederate Army - an officer who had made some mean-spirited remarks about him. Lee thought for a moment, then rated him as being very satisfactory. The person who had asked the question seemed troubled. "*But general, I guess you don't know what he's been saying about you.*" "*Oh yes,*" answered Lee. "*I know. However, I was asked my opinion of him, and not his opinion of me.*" **Proverbs 15:4** declares, "*A wholesome tongue is a tree of life.*" Proverbs 10:20 says, "*The tongue of the just is as choice silver; the heart of the wicked is little worth.*"

The tongue is remarkably versatile. With the tongue we can praise our Lord, and with it we can curse the very men who have been made in the image of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. The Life Application Bible records these statistics:

- When your speech is motivated by the devil, it is full of - *jealousy, envy, selfishness, lustful desires, disorder and evil.*
- When your speech is motivated by God, and His wisdom, it is full of - *mercy, love, peace, courtesy, sincerity, gentleness and goodness.*

James compares the mouth to a spring of water. He says it is impossible that both freshwater and saltwater come out of the same spring. The spring that produces fresh and wholesome water gives water that brings forth life. It gives life to vegetation, to animals and to man. This world cannot exist without fresh water. In other words, water is the "soul" of all life. It is the life-giving source. The same thing is true of the "soul of a man." If the soul of a man is good and wholesome, then so is the life of that man. As the spring is the source of life, so the **soul** is the source of life. **Proverbs 18:4** says, "*The words of a man's mouth are deep waters, but the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.*"

Cool water is very refreshing. So are well-chosen words. It was Paul's prayer to the Romans that, "*He might come to them with joy and together with them be refreshed*" (**Romans 15:32**). He also speaks about those fellow believers who have 'refreshed' him with their words. Kind, uplifting and encouraging words can be so refreshing! They are good and wholesome. They heal the **source of life** - the **soul of man**.

When the Lord Jesus spoke His words, it was always with the aim to bring others closer to our Father in heaven. And that is always what our aim should be as well.

All our words must be especially chosen to direct others to the main "source of life," which is God the Father. The tongue can be such a delightful instrument. And that is why James compares the tongue to a tree. Trees are essential for the life of the planet. They produce clean air. They hold down the soil. They provide beauty and shade. And, they bear fruit. In **Proverbs 10:21** it says, "*The tongue of the righteous nourish many.*"

Let me challenge all of you today. Let your tongues be instruments of nourishment - of healing. "*We all stumble in many ways*" James says. Indeed! We are like a bunch of stumbling toddlers. But it's due to this human frailty that our words can be so healing (life giving). When we do wrong, as we do a lot of the time, then an apology goes a long way. Many are very quick to criticise, yet they are very slow to apologise. If they apologise at all! Wrong words leave festering wounds. However, kind and tender words are like ointment on those wounds.

So remember, God has given you a wonderful tool. It's very powerful. Use it in the way that he intended for you to use it. It's not something you can do by your own strength. You need God's help. So pray every day that you may use your tongue for healing rather than wounding. As Paul says in **Colossians 4:6**, "*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*" He preceded that advice in verse 2 by saying, "*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful.*" It is only through prayer that the power of the Holy Spirit is available to you. Pray for a tongue set on fire by the Holy Spirit and nothing else. And then God will bless you and make you a great blessing to others. "*May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer*" (**Psalms 19:14**).

It is your choice – to build or to destroy, to hurt or to heal, to make peace or war, to kill or to give life. **Job 12:11** states, "*Does not the ear test words, and the mouth taste its food?*" When the Holy Spirit is in control of your tongue the result is, your words taste good; they are edifying, encouraging, uplifting. Think ahead! Think of the day when the Lord is going to play back every careless word you've spoken. How long is it going to take? How will you feel when you're having to give a detailed account of your speech. Did your words cover others in light or cloaked them in darkness? **Psalms 64:8** gives us a stark warning, "*He will turn their own tongues against them and bring them to ruin.*" Implying that the evil they have spoken will be returned to them, bringing about their demise.

In contrast **Proverbs 12:25** says, "*Anxiety weighs down the heart, but an encouraging word cheers it up.*" **Proverbs 25:11** declares, "*A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.*" This image of a correctly spoken word is beautiful. Something we should all take to heart!

Don't ever forget.... Your words have the power to:

- (1) Direct the course of life.
- (2) Destroy the circle of life.
- (3) Heal the source of life.

.....It's your life, it's your choice!