

Oh, Be Careful Little Tongue

E.T.S.: James warns the church not to engage in teaching lightly, which leads him to address the challenge of controlling the tongue.

E.S.S.: James leads us to examine our tongues honestly.

Christ Follower: Yield your tongue to the Holy Spirit. Quickly confess to God and others when you sin.

Christ Seeker: Recognize this component of your fallen nature, your need for a Savior, and believe.

Introduction

Growing up in church, we sang children's songs throughout the children's programs. Catchy tunes with lyrics intended to teach biblical truth. One of these songs I remember was called *Oh, Be Careful*.

Oh, be careful little eyes what you see;

Oh, be careful little ears what you hear;

Oh, be careful little tongue what you say;

Oh, be careful little hands what you do;

Oh, be careful little feet where you go.

As we open our Bibles to James three, the message is titled *Oh, Be Careful Little Tongue*.

Illustration

This passage became a focus in my life following an event in high school. In response to the actions of a younger student, I angrily used words and called names that were unkind and offensive. Though I was spoken to by school authorities and my dad about it, it wasn't what they had to say, but the conviction of the Holy Spirit that influenced my heart the most. When I went home from school, I took my Bible, opened to James chapter three, and copied this passage into a notebook over and over until I could recite it from memory.

Introduction

Perhaps at that point, more than any other in my life, I recognized how a moment, a word, an angry outburst could damage and destroy.

Listen to James' description of this in James three.

Bible

(1) My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. (2) For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the

same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. (3) Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. (4) Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. (5) Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! (6) And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. (7) For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: (8) But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. (9) Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. (10) Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. (11) Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? (12) Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

James 3:1-12 - KJV

Explanation

Would you notice the context of James three?

He speaks to believers (*my brethren*) with a warning to not engage in teaching lightly (*be not*

many masters).

Why does he warn against this?

Those who speak the Word also have great(er) responsibility to live the Word in word and life.

Thus, those who speak the Word are more accountable.

This truth does not mean that those who speak the Word are more insulated from temptation or have more strength than others, "For in many things we offend all." That does not mean that people are always causing offense to others. The statement means that everyone has common weaknesses. The word, *offend*, means fail. It identifies, not a fatal flaw, but a misstep that hinders spiritual progress.

I will be the first to admit that I have weaknesses. I have made mistakes. I have sinned. Even after the experience I told you about earlier when I reacted with angry, unkind words, experienced conviction, and spent time in James three, I have failed again and again with my tongue.

James continues to reveal that spiritual maturity can be measured by whether or not one sins by his or her words. We like to define the measure of spiritual maturity and, often, identify ourselves as mature. However, the New Testament provides measures for us. This is one of those measures.

How well do you manage your tongue?

Before you answer, think about what the tongue is and what the tongue does:

1...What the Tongue is:

Explanation

James reveals that the tongue:

- is a little member (v. 5), but not insignificant (see the illustrations of vv. 3-4)
- is a fire (v. 6) - damaging, destructive, deadly
- is a world of iniquity (v. 6) - “It as is though all the wickedness in the whole world were wrapped up in that little piece of flesh” (Burdick; as cited in Guzik).
- is set on fire of hell (v. 6) - the evil of the tongue is absolutely devilish
- is an unruly evil (v. 8) - unrestrainable because it is untamable (earlier in v. 8); consider this in light of the illustrations (Who/What has control? A bit does not direct the horse, just as the helm does not guide the ship. The one holding the reins of the horse and the one holding the helm of the ship directs and guides. So, who/what has control?)
- is full of deadly poison (v. 8) - all the more dangerous because it is untamable
- is inconsistent (vv. 9-12) - on one hand we bless (to speak well of, to bless) God and, on the other hand, we curse (to execrate, doom) men who are made in God's image; by the way, this reveals the Bible doctrine that should guide our interaction with and treatment of others; there's an old story that the Jewish rabbis tell. As the story goes, one day a rabbi asked his servant to go and buy some good food for him in the market. When the servant returned home, he presented the rabbi with a tongue. The next day, the rabbi told the servant to go the market and buy some bad food. Again, the servant returned with a

tongue. The rabbi then asked the servant why he returned with a tongue on both occasions. The servant answered and said, "Good comes from it and bad comes from it. When the tongue is good there is nothing better, and when it is bad there is nothing worse." (From a sermon by T. Scott Womble, Careless Speech Sins, 7/27/2010)

Think about these Bible truths:

Bible

(19) In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise. (20) The tongue of the just is as choice silver: the heart of the wicked is little worth. (21) The lips of the righteous feed many: but fools die for want of wisdom.

Proverbs 10:19-21 - KJV

(25) Heaviness in the heart of man maketh it stoop: but a good word maketh it glad.

Proverbs 12:25 - KJV

(24) Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones.

Proverbs 16:24 - KJV

(21) Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.

Proverbs 18:21 - KJV

This is what the tongue is. Let's talk about:

2...What the Tongue does:

Explanation

Along with showing what the tongue is, James explains what the tongue does.

- it boasts (v. 5) - to talk big or grand; arrogant; egotistical
- it burns (v. 5) - in August, 2004, the Bear Fire in California burned 11,000 acres, destroyed 86 residences, and cause almost \$26 million in damages and it started from a spark from a riding lawn mower
- defiles the whole body (v. 6) - it corrupts and pollutes everything
- sets the course of nature on fire (v. 6) - deals with a cycle, almost like a wheel with spokes coming to a central point

Bible

(18) As a mad man who casteth firebrands, arrows, and death, (19) So is the man that deceiveth his neighbour, and saith, Am not I in sport?

Proverbs 26:18-19 - KJV

How well do you manage your tongue?

Let me suggest these questions you should consider related to the use of your tongue:

- Who is in control?
- Is it truth (Ephesians 4:25)?

- Is it loving (Ephesians 4:15; 1 Corinthians 13)?
- Is it constructive (Ephesians 4:29)?
- Is it gracious (Colossians 4:6)?
- Is it life-giving (Proverbs 10:11)?

Conclusion

Christ Follower: Yield your tongue to the Holy Spirit. Quickly confess to God and others when you sin.

Christ Seeker: Recognize this component of your fallen nature, your need for a Savior, and believe.