

“The Fiery Tongue”  
James 3:1-12

James has identified various tests for his readers. There are the tests of trials, blame, response to the word, faith, works, etc. He now speaks of the test of the tongue. He begins by warning those who become teachers (John 3:10; 1Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11) to remember that they will be held to a higher standard. They will give an account on judgment day (Heb. 13:17).

A common Jewish literary device was the use of a part of the anatomy to assign blame for sin (Prov. 6:17-19; Mark 9:43-47). Jesus identifies the *root cause* of sin as the *inner man*, that which is in his *heart* (Matt. 15:17-20). Yet the tongue (Greek *glossa*, the physical member or spoken language; Mark 7:33; Luke 1:64; Acts 2:4, 8; Phil. 2:11) has immense power to convey the sinful thoughts and evil of the heart; to bless or to curse. Scripture has much to say of the tongue and the words uttered by it (Psalm 5:9, 15:3, 34:13, 39:1, 51:14, 71:24, 119:172, 120:2, 126:1-2, 139:4; Prov. 6:17-19, 24, 10:20, 31, 12:18-19, 15:1-2, 4, 17:4, 20, 18:21, 21:6, 23, 25:23, 28:23, 31:26; Isa. 3:8, 45:23; James 1:26; 1John 3:18).

The tongue is small in relation to the whole body yet has the power to control and influence everything in one's life. James uses the analogies of the bit in the mouth of the horse and the rudder on a ship to illustrate the power of something small controlling that which is so much greater. Further, the tongue is a *fire*, defiles the whole body, and sets the fire of *hell* (Greek *Gehenna*; Matt. 5:22, 29-30, 10:28, 23:15; Luke 12:5).

James addresses the inconsistency of the believer who blesses God the Father and also curses men who are made in His image. *Blessings* and *cursings* from the *same source* are contrary to nature as illustrated by a fountain bringing forth sweet and bitter water and fruit bearing plants.

Since the tongue *cannot* be tamed, what hope is there for the Christian? Our only hope is in Christ (Col. 1:27)! We must *obey* the command to be *filled* (controlled) by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18; Col. 3:16). The result is control of the tongue. Instead of gossip, lying, backbiting, dissension, contentions, etc. (2Cor. 12:20) we can speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) and edify and impart grace to our hearers (Eph. 4:29). We can speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19). We can speak as Jesus commanded and reconcile (Matt. 18:15-17; 2Cor. 5:18).