

**Genuine Christian Faith: A Study of the Book of James**  
**Message 6 – Genuine Faith Wisely Uses the Tongue. 3:1-18**  
Pastor Roger Ridley, Gretna Baptist Church, July 20, 2008

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I was watching a cable news segment this week which I found kind of interesting. They showed all the gaffes or blunders made by the presidential candidates and their supporters, and then the back-peddling they did to overcome them. It doesn't surprise me at this point they have misspoken several times. The campaign seems like it has been going forever, and every thing they say is recorded.

How would you like that? To have all your words recorded!

If you could hear a recording of everything you said last week, would you want to edit or take anything back? We often joke about the trouble our tongue gets us into, but really it is no laughing matter, and to show genuineness in our faith to others, it is an area where we need control.

It is such a problem James, in his short practical book, deals with it in every chapter. Open your Bibles to James and look at what he says: 1:26; 2:12; 4:11; 5:12...

Each of these statements provides us with some valuable insights regarding what we say, but chapter 3 is

exceptional in its instruction to believers about the use of our tongue. In it we learn *genuine faith wisely uses the tongue*. To help us get this message, James uses a series of illustrations concerning the power and danger of the tongue. Let me quickly give you the outline then we will consider each of them:

The Horse and the Bridle in verses 2-3

The Ship and the Rudder in verses 4-5

The Fire and the Spark in verses 5-6

The Animal and the Trainer in verses 7-8

The Fountain and the Water in verses 9-12

Before using any of these illustrations, James gives us a concise warning. Look at verses 1-2...

This is not referring to an official position. Whenever we open our mouth to give another advice, a piece of our mind, or whatever we want to call it, we are stepping into the role of a teacher. And James says that is a dangerous place. Because the more we talk, the greater chance we have of making a mistake, offending someone, and being held accountable.

We've all been there, right! Who among us can't say, "Been there, done that!"? How many times I have thought, "If only I would have shut up a minute sooner!"

The more we talk, the greater our chance of offending people, and displaying our immaturity rather than maturity.

The use of our tongue will tell people whether our faith is genuine or not.

### The Horse and the Bridle

The first illustration is the horse and the bridle. Look at verses 2-3...

Let me say this right away. I know very little about horses and bridles! I know horses are bigger than I am so they scare me. And I know bridles are to help you control them but I don't know how to use them. One of the few times I was on a horse, he was going as fast as he could, and I was doing everything I could to hang on to the reins. He decided to take a sharp right turn. My body decided to keep going straight, at least for a little while.

A bridle is a piece of equipment that fits over a horse's head. It holds a bit in the horse's mouth, with reins attached to it. The bit is a piece of metal which rests on the gums of the mouth in an area where there are no teeth and allows the rider to control the horse.

Here's what James says...

If we know how to use that little piece of metal, we can control that great big horse.

His point is simple, so let's not make it more complicated than it is. Just like with that bit, if we know how to use the tongue then we can control our whole body. It is that important! Remember what James said in 1:26...

The use of our tongue will tell people whether our faith is genuine or not.

### The Ship and the Rudder

To make the very same point, James uses a second illustration, a ship and its rudder. Look at verses 4-5...

I have another disclaimer. I have never been on a *sailing ship*! I was in a row boat once with my brother fishing. He pulled in a large snapping turtle, and we both jumped out of the boat!

I know; you are beginning to think my experience is a little limited. But I have seen pictures of ships and their rudders. The kind of ship James has in mind is a large wind-powered vessel. Think of the kind of ship our forefathers came over on, like the Mayflower.

James points out two problems such ships faced with sailing: their size, and fierce winds. Fierce winds could blow a ship off course or cause shipwreck. In such winds the size of the ship made them difficult to manage. But despite these problems, a good steersman could maintain control of the whole ship in the worst of circumstances by his wise use of the helm, the steering mechanism.

Again, the point James wants us to get is very simple. Just as the use of a rudder has a tremendous influence over a big ship in a fierce storm, the use of our tongue has a tremendous influence in our lives. Its wise use will keep us upright in the worst of storms, but its poor use will bring shipwreck to our lives.

### The Fire and the Spark

James next illustration is of a forest fire and the spark that often starts it. Look at verses 5-6...

*Guess what! I have been in a forest fire!* While attending college, I had the privilege of being a volunteer forest fire fighter. It was one of the most exciting things that I have ever done in my life. It helped me to understand how dangerous and destructive a very small fire can be. Most fires we fought were started by carelessness, like the tossing of a lit cigarette.

Here, James uses some of the strongest language possible concerning the tongue. Look again at verse 6...

The tongue is like a fire. It spreads rapidly and destroys. It is a world of iniquity, it has a corrupting influence. It defiles the whole body, making the whole person dirty, and destroying a person's whole life. And James says it is a fire that comes right out of hell.

Like I said; **strong language!** This is why the use of our tongue will tell people whether our faith is genuine or not. It will tell people whether our tongue has been touched by heaven or hell.

The problem is most of us has been guilty of its poor use, but that can be changed. Look with me at Isaiah 6:5-7...

Like us, Isaiah was surrounded by people who didn't use their tongues the way they should, and he fell under their influence too. Standing before God he knew he was guilty, but God touched his mouth, purged it, and made it clean. He will do the same for us if we ask Him.

Are you satisfied with a mouth set on fire by hell, or do you want a mouth made clean by heaven's touch? Ultimately only you and I can make that decision, but we do need heaven's touch to make a difference.

## The Animal and the Trainer

We see this in the next illustration of James using a wild animal and a trainer. Look at verses 7-8...

Recently my granddaughters got a pet dog. I am amazed at the tricks they have taught her in a very short time. Genesis 1:26 teaches man was created to rule over the animal kingdom. Throughout the history of mankind we have demonstrated the ability to do so.

But James says there is something we have not shown the ability to tame, our own tongue. He says it is an unruly evil and full of deadly poison. I have some missionary friends in Africa. In one of their letters they wrote about opening the front door of their home to have a cobra stand up and spit at them! That's what James says our tongue is like.

It is interesting that the only other place this word for **tame** is found in the New Testament is in Mark 5:1-4...

Although they tried everything they could think of, no one could tame this man with the legion of demons. But as this story continues guess who did? Jesus! If we want our tongues to be tamed, eventually we are going to have to stop trying to do it ourselves and go to Jesus. He has the ability to do what you and I can't.

## The Fountain and the Water

In his final illustration, with a fountain and its water, James helps us to understand why this is so important. Look at verses 9-12...

James says we use our tongues in a contradictory way for both blessing and cursing. He wants to make a simple point; such a contradiction goes against nature.

For years after my family moved from Tennessee to Illinois, whenever we traveled back to Tennessee for a visit, we would stop in the mountains where there was a natural fountain of water coming out of the rock. We always filled a jug and took it home with us. To us it was the sweetest water to be found. Through all the years we did that it never changed. Just like James says, it wasn't sweet one time and bitter the next, or it wasn't fresh one time and salty the next.

We knew what kind of fountain it was by its water. James is saying people can tell what kind of faith you and I have by what comes out of our fountain, our mouth. He goes on to explain this in verses 13-18 that our use of the tongue will show wisdom from above or from below. We can lie to ourselves (1:26), but everyone else will know.

This passage was written by James as a warning. He wants us to know the use of our tongue provides evidence concerning our profession of faith. It proves whether it is genuine or not.

Having received his warning we are to examine ourselves. What does my use and your use of the tongue say about our faith?

Let's be honest, like Isaiah, all of us would have to say, "I am a man, a woman, a young person of unclean lips. We all need to bring our tongues to God for His touch.

Psalm 141: 3-4 provides a good prayer,

Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips. Incline not my heart to any evil thing.

Will you pray that? Will you ask God to watch your mouth, keep your lips, and purify your heart with the touch of heaven?