

The Body Part from Hell

James 3:1-12

James 3:1-12 Introduction

- Winston Churchill was reportedly a master at insults and had famously difficult interactions with the equally sharp-tongued Nancy Astor, the first woman MP.
- Lady Astor quipped, “If I were your wife, I’d put arsenic in your tea.”
- Sir Winston jabbed back, “If I were your husband, I’d surely drink it.”

- On another occasion, she found the Prime Minister drunk in a hotel elevator.
- Condescendingly she remarked, “Sir Winston, you are drunk!” to which Churchill replied, “M’Lady, you are *ugly*. Tomorrow, I will be sober.”

- Perhaps the only thing I have in common with a great statesman like Winston Churchill is that I enjoy his style of biting, abusive wit.
- This is probably not a Christian virtue.
 - See James 1:26.
- In our passage today, James elaborates on the dangers of the tongue, which we might call the body part from hell.

A faith that fails to control the tongue is a useless form of religion.

James 3:1-12 Outline

- | | | |
|------|-----------------------------------|--------|
| I. | Beware of becoming a teacher. | 3:1-2 |
| II. | Beware of the fire of the tongue. | 3:3-6 |
| III. | Beware of your own inconsistency. | 3:7-12 |

A faith that fails to control the tongue is a useless form of religion.

Beware of becoming a teacher. 3:1-2

- The rabbi, or teacher, holds a prominent place in Jewish social and religious life – and in James’s day this was truer than it is today.
- While the position comes with great dangers, the work involved in spiritual leadership is to be desired. See 1 Timothy 3:1.
- The constant use of the tongue – and the stricter judgment that comes with it – may be the biggest danger of all.

- Teachers of God’s Word have a responsibility that makes them uniquely accountable.
- What “we” say (James includes himself and so will I) has the ability to influence the spiritual well-being of others.
- This makes our inconsistencies, sins, faults and errors the means by which others will also stumble.

- James points out that the tongue is the hardest part of the body for us to control.
- If we could only do it, we would have at our disposal the means by which we might completely control ourselves.
- It’s the one part of us that most consistently and accurately can express who we really are.

- *“The control of the tongue is more than an evidence of spiritual maturity; it is the means to it.”*
 - J. Alec Motyer, *The Message of James: The Tests of Faith*

A faith that fails to control the tongue is a useless form of religion.

Beware of the fire of the tongue. 3:3-6

- The tongue wields influence way out of proportion to its size.
- 3:3 Consider the size of a horse’s bit:
- 3:4 Consider the size of a ship’s rudder:
- 3:5 Consider how easily a forest fire starts.
- 3:6 Now consider what James says about the tongue.
 - It is as difficult to control as a fire.
 - It is an entire *kosmos* of iniquity. The huge variety and sheer quantity of damage the tongue can accomplish are both simply mind-boggling.
 - And its effect comes back around. The tongue has the ability to defile the entire person who uses it.
 - It has the ability to impact every aspect of life.
 - Unlike other youthful passions, it does not succumb to any natural process of maturity.
 - Age may only enhance our ability to do damage with our words, because we grow in our insight into people and, therefore, how to hurt them. (Winston Churchill and Nancy Astor were not young when they publicly jabbed at each other.)
 - Hell has easy access to the tongue. We can sin more quickly and with greater force with the tongue than with any other part of our body.
 - It is the body part from hell.
- 3:6 Again, Pastor Chuck Smith:
 - *“The tongue has the power to destroy people. How many people have had their reputations destroyed or their lives made miserable because of someone’s tongue? And many times what’s being said isn’t true.”*
 - *“We need to realize the power of life and death is in the tongue. We can use our tongues to build up or to destroy. May God help us to use our tongues in constructive ways: to encourage, to teach, to strengthen, to comfort, and to give hope!”*

A faith that fails to control the tongue is a useless form of religion.

Beware of your own inconsistency. 3:7-12

- 3:7-8 Here James shows just how uncontrollable the tongue is.
- Circuses are full of trained animals.
- Snake charmers can somehow control snakes.
- Dolphins and even killer whales regularly perform at zoos and recreational parks.
- But the fall renders our tongues more difficult to tame than any of these.
- 3:9 James is no doubt thinking of the Genesis creation account.
- One of the things we forget is that even our worst human enemy is a person who is made in God’s image.
- That alone makes every person worthy of a certain respect.
 - See Genesis 1:26-28.

- 3:10-12 We know all too well exactly what James is talking about.
- How many times do believers worship God with glorious high-sounding praises and then leave the sanctuary with malice in their hearts and abrasive criticism of others on their lips?
- How can both of these things come out of the same person?
- 3:10-12 The following is from Warren Wiersbe in *Be Mature*:
 - *“If the tongue is inconsistent, there is something radically wrong with the heart. I heard about a professing Christian who got angry on the job and let loose with some oaths. Embarrassed, he turned to his partner and said, “I don’t know why I said that. It really isn’t in me.” His partner wisely replied, “It had to be in you or it couldn’t have come out of you.”*
- 3:12 Suppose two separate sources of water flowed together into the same outlet.
- If one was clear and fresh and the other bitter and not fit for drinking, we would never know that there were two sources flowing into one.
- The bad water would overcome the good.
- Even if we sometimes display God’s work within us by our words, the bitter taste of the things we say in the flesh is likely to prevail.
- 3:12 The tongue can also give evidence of our fallenness at those times when we truly mean well.
- Peter one day took the Lord aside to give him the absolute best advice he could think of, with intentions that were nothing but the most loving and concerned.
 - See Matthew 16:21-23.

A faith that fails to control the tongue is a useless form of religion.

James 3:1-12 Conclusions

- James has certainly given us plenty to think about. We can pinpoint at least four ways.
- There is danger in becoming a teacher.
- There is positive potential in our words.
- There is negative potential in our words.
- There is danger in inconsistency.

There is danger in becoming a teacher.

- James is not placing an absolute prohibition on becoming a teacher within the church.
- He says, “Let not many of you become teachers,” not “Let not any ...”
- The danger becomes real when the church has too many teachers or teachers of the wrong kind. In such cases error is inevitable.
- The church should always be able to use another Bible teacher, for there should always be new believers who need to be taught.
- Our teachers, however, need to be of the highest quality – and that means completely faithful in teaching God’s Word.
- No one has expressed the duty of the pastor-teacher better in this regard than our beloved Pastor Chuck in his *Word for Today Bible*.

- *“As a teacher of the Word of God, I have a tremendous responsibility before God to teach as accurately as I can what the Scriptures say. I’m not called to offer my own opinions. I’m called to teach what God’s Word says. Where the Bible is silent, it’s important that I am silent. Where the Bible speaks it’s important that I speak.”*
 - *Chuck Smith, senior pastor of the Calvary Chapel movement*

There is positive potential in our words.

- If we think back to James’s illustrations of the horse’s bit or the ship’s rudder, we find that we have the ability to steer or lead or influence others by what we say.
- This can be a very positive thing.
- Here are a few verses from Proverbs that emphasize this truth:
 - Proverbs 15:31
 - Proverbs 16:24
 - Proverbs 19:20
 - Proverbs 25:11

There is negative potential in our words.

- This is also well documented in Proverbs.
- Here are a few examples from the beginning of Proverbs 15.

There is danger in inconsistency.

- In 3:9 James reminded us of the truth that we are all made in the image and likeness of God.
- There has been an ocean of ink spilled by theologians who have theorized about what that exactly means.
- Some of it has been very productive.
- James, however, is not much interested in theory at this point.
- He is more interested that the truth of whatever being made “in God’s image” means, it should have a serious effect on how we speak to and speak about others.
- Consider for a moment that all these people around you right now are made in the image of God.
- Consider that all your family members, neighbors, co-workers and your boss are also made in the image of God.
- Now let that influence all of your dealings with them.
- Finally, James sounds a lot like Jesus.
- Let’s close with Matthew 12:33-37.

A faith that fails to control the tongue is a useless form of religion.