

TONGUE IN CHECK

JAMES 3 v 3-8

We put a bit into the mouth of a horse to make it obey us, and we are able to make it go where we want. Or think of a ship; big as it is and driven by such strong winds, it can be steered by a very small rudder, and it goes wherever the pilot wants it to go. So it is with the tongue: small as it is, it can boast about great things. Just think how a large forest can be set on fire by a tiny flame! And the tongue is like a fire. It is a world of wrong, occupying its place in our bodies and spreading evil through our whole being. It sets on fire the entire course of our existence with the fire that comes to it from hell itself.

Each one of us has a tongue. If you didn't have a tongue, you couldn't speak any words. The tongue is a slab of membrane; it is a flexible muscular organ in the mouth used for tasting, swallowing and pronouncing words. The tongue is regarded as a test of the state of your health. The doctor asks you to put out your tongue to inspect it; so too does the dentist. The tongue can do more damage than any other organ in the human body.

James has something important to say about the tongue; James 3 v 5a, 6 & 8. Based on this James doesn't appear to regard the tongue very highly. Just as the tongue is an accurate guide to the state of our physical health, so too the tongue is an accurate guide to our spiritual health. The words we speak with our tongues reveal so much about our character. If I could hear all the words you have spoken during the past week, I could accurately tell what kind of a person you are. You could do the same with me. I sometimes meet people for the first time and after hearing them speak only a few words I can tell if they are Christians or not. Spoken words are a give-away. James says that we should be marked out by careful and controlled speech. This is not the first time James mentions the tongue. He refers to it earlier in his letter; 1 v 26.

Firstly, the tongue is a powerful force. The tongue holds a key place in living the Christian life. James makes the positive point that if we can control our tongues then we can control our lives. Tom Wright says; **“taming the tongue in general, for anyone, is so difficult as to be almost impossible. Get that right and you've obviously got your entire self under control. The tongue, it seems, is the last bit of a human being to learn its lesson”**. James uses two illustrations; v 3 & 4. In the case of a horse, a bit, controls and directs all its powerful and unruly forces. In the case of a ship a small rudder is the key to its control and direction. James sees the tongue in the light of these illustrations; v 5a. The tongue may be small, but like a horse's bit or a ship's rudder it can determine the way the whole person lives. If you let slip a wrong word at the wrong moment a precious relationship can be spoilt forever. A promise can be broken, a bad impression can be given which can never be repaired. No wonder the psalmist prayed that the Lord would place a sentry in front of his mouth to check on everything that was

coming out; Ps 141 v 3. Tom Wright says; **“any pretence of being devout that doesn’t result in a serious working-over of speech habits is a sham. This is a central and vital part of what it means to be truly human”**. If we are to control the powerful forces within us that cause us to sin, then according to James, we must learn to control our tongues. Control of the tongue leads to spiritual maturity. Proverbs 18 v 21 says; *“The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit”*. In Ireland there is an expression ‘Houl your tongue’; ‘houl’ is slang. It means hold’. We need to hold our tongues. Think before we speak.

Secondly, the tongue is an uncontrollable force; v 5b. Once a tiny spark is fanned into flame and the flame takes hold it will keep on spreading until the forest is ablaze. An example of this is the Australian bushfires. James declares that the tongue is a fire, ready to set things ablaze. We have examples of this from the way the media eagerly trips up politicians and other public figures in interviews. One word out of place can ruin a career or bring down a government. One unwise remark, reported and circulated in an email or on face-book or in a tweet, can cause enormous damage; it can even cause riots to break out on the other side of the world. When people begin to realise the serious consequences of their words, they often withdraw them, but it is too late. The damage is done and the fall-out continues.

The tongue does not exist in a private world. James makes the striking point that it gets its inspiration from hell. We use the expression ‘Tongue in cheek’. It describes a statement that the speaker does not mean literally but intends as humour or not to be taken seriously. Perhaps we would be wise to change the words to ‘Tongue in check’.