

James Chapter 5 the Practical Use of the Tongue

by A.B. Simpson

The tongue is a powerful tool that can be used for good or evil, and its use is a test of a person's character.

Topics: "The Power of Words", "Spiritual Maturity"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the profound impact of the tongue in his sermon on James Chapter 5, illustrating how our words reflect our character and can either uplift or destroy. He warns that an unbridled tongue reveals an unsanctified heart, while a controlled tongue signifies spiritual maturity. Simpson uses vivid metaphors, comparing the tongue to a bit in a horse's mouth and a rudder on a ship, to demonstrate its power to influence lives. He also highlights the destructive potential of the tongue, urging believers to seek God's guidance in their speech and to use their words for praise, kindness, and witnessing. Ultimately, he calls for a transformation of the tongue through the Holy Spirit, encouraging a commitment to speak life and truth.

Transcript

"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" (James 3:2).

Speech is one of the supreme distinctions between man and the lower animals. The power of expressing thought in articulate language, and written speech, and giving it an incarnate body and a tangible immortal life, is one of the high prerogatives of rational beings. Science through the phonograph is putting upon the tablets which shall endure through time the very tones of our voice, and God is emphasizing the power and importance of the tongue, and it may be that we shall find some day that every whisper that ever emanated from our life has been recorded on phonographic plates in yonder sky, and that the witnesses of the judgment will be the records that we ourselves have made, and we shall realize that by our words we shall be justified and by our words we shall be condemned, and "every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment." (Matt. 12:36.)

The apostle James considered it worth while to devote a whole chapter to the subject of the tongue, and the practical use of our little member of speech. He tells us:

I. IT IS THE TEST OF CHARACTER.

A man's conversation is the real test of his character, and a man that "bridleth not his tongue," "deceiveth his own heart and his religion is vain." An unbridled tongue is a sure sign of an unsanctified, undisciplined, and perhaps unsaved soul. On the other hand, "If a man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body." It is a sign that he is under the government of his conscience, his will and the Holy Spirit. This is a most heart-searching test. Let us take it home. Can we stand it? It was a foolish word, a hasty word, a word of doubt and irritation that lost Moses the Land of Promise. He would have taken it back if he could, but it was phonographed. It had gone upon the record, and it had to stand, and for that one little speech Moses lost the hope of a lifetime. While he was taken to heaven, he could not lead Israel into the land which was the type of a victorious life.

When Isaiah was called to his ministry, it was his lips that were first sanctified. The live coal was applied to these members, and the word spoken, "Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin is purged." (Is. 6:7). His tongue had to be purified before God could use him.

On the day of Pentecost, it was cloven tongues, tongues of fire that came, tongues possessed by the Holy Ghost. If you have received the baptism of the Spirit, your tongue has received the first touch. You will never talk as you used to talk, you will never have the same unlicensed freedom, but your language will be under the control of a watchful spirit. Our words are God's touch-tones by which He is showing us to ourselves and to the world.

We find even in common life, that if a man has sense enough to hold his peace, "though a fool, he will be counted wise." Quiet, self-contained people are often taken for more than they really are, while many a man of capacity and many a woman of beautiful qualities wreck their whole lives by an uncontrolled tongue. If it settles our influence and character here, then how much more in the sight of Him who has said, "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." (Matt. 12:37).

II. THE INFLUENCE AND POWER OF THE TONGUE.

The apostle next proceeds to illustrate the tremendous influence and power of the tongue. He uses a number of illustrations. He says "We put bits in the horses' mouths," because it is their mouths that determine their action. Just as a man's mouth is the test of character, so the horse's mouth is the place to control him. We put bits in their mouths, and by these turn about their whole body, so that a little bit of steel and a little thong of leather will hold a fiery steed, and turn him at the touch of a woman's hand. So the tongue is like a bridle, which can be put upon us. With a fiery horse you put a curb in his bit. The idea is to hurt him, if he pulls against the bit. So God has given to us checks upon our tongue, making it hurt us, if we speak unadvisedly. If you are a spiritual Christian and walking watchfully, you will find that He will curb you tremendously when you speak hastily. If you succeed in speaking unadvisedly, the curb will hurt you so much you will have to go and take it back. He wants it to hurt us, so we will not do it again. Don't try to get out of it easily, but let God's discipline be as hard as He pleases, and go honestly and manfully and have it out. Tell the injured person you are sorry, and ask his forgiveness. You will soon cease doing it, if you will be brave enough to let it hurt you. Speak against another, and God will hold you to it sooner or later. You may get over it easily now, but some day when health is gone, your brain weak, your nerves shattered, and the grave seems near, the devil will drive you to it, by an evil conscience or a sinking life, and you will wish you had gone and made restitution in better days, when God would have made it easy, and used it to save and sanctify you, and bless all concerned.

Again, he uses the figure of the helm. He says we put rudders in ships, and a very small helm turns about a very great ship. The tongue is as little as the helm, but as mighty. It turns round your life and the lives of others. How great the power of a single word spoken at the marriage altar! It changes two lives. A single word spoken in yonder criminal court brings judgment. The single word spoken by the foreman of the jury means death. A single word spoken as a false testimony consigns some poor fellow to an undeserved doom. The single word of a true witness saves a life. A reckless word stops some blessing that might have reached a soul. That slander that you fired, as a hunter would wing a bird in midair, has shot to the heart some messenger of God that could have brought blessing to countless souls, but for your fiery dart. A word has tremendous power for good or for evil.

Again, he speaks of the tongue as the forest fire. "Behold how great a matter [or forest] a little fire kindleth!" Sometimes a spark will set a whole county on fire, and sweep away homes, factories, towns and scores of lives. So the "tongue is a fire" in the "world of iniquity." It is an awful figure. If you were to go to a powder magazine, you would find the place guarded for miles around, and within the enclosure matches are not allowed, and each party is searched, for the least combustible thing in that world of combustibles would send thousands of lives into eternity and destroy millions of property. That is what James means here. We are going through a world of combustion. The air is full of destructive elements, and we must keep the fiery darts away.

On the Oriental steamers the passengers are not allowed to carry matches other than the patented safety ones which cannot be lighted without striking them upon the box. A passenger would be fined for carrying an ordinary match. God says "Don't carry anything but safety matches in this world of iniquity." All around is danger and destruction. You can set it off by a hasty word.

Going through the Alps sometimes a whisper will bring down an avalanche, and the guide cautions every one to silence. The air is so sensitive that the least vibration would loosen the rocks and glaciers and hurl destruction on the pathway. So as we go through life let us say, "I will keep my mouth even from good while the wicked is before me." "I was dumb with silence." "I said I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue." "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man" (Col. 4:6).

III. ITS POWER FOR EVIL.

There is a dark side to the picture. He likens it to poison, "full of deadly poison," the poison of a viper, a subtle poison that contaminates even the good, and mingles with our worship and all our Christian work. "The tongue is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison."

"Every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea," the whole inanimate creation, "hath been tamed of mankind; but the tongue can no man tame." It is more terrible than the lion; it is more wily than the serpent. It is incorrigible, and like the carnal mind, it must be crucified, given up to die, and we must get a new tongue from the Spirit of Pentecost.

Again it is a destructive and consuming element, "a fire." It is a contaminating element, for it contaminates the good as well as works in the bad. If it would only stick to its own livery, if it would only come in the garments of evil and the livery of Satan, we would know how to recognize it. It comes as an angel of light. "Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing" (Jas. 3 : 9-10). Praying and singing today, swearing, evil-speaking, gossiping tomorrow. "Doth a fountain send forth at the same place

sweet water and bitter?" But James tells us the tongue will be used one moment in the service of God and the next in the employ of the Wicked One. So it mingles with our best words and works, and coming in the disguise of good defiles and contaminates all our ways. If you want to find the practical side of a wholesome as well as an evil tongue, read the book of Proverbs. It was written by a man who had suffered much from its fiery shafts and subtle wiles, and he tells us there is nothing worse beneath the sky than to be the victim of a bitter and unwholesome tongue. There are four or five kinds of evil tongues.

1. The foolish tongue, vain and idle, the tongue that talks thoughtlessly, bores you to death and seems never to know its own weakness; a tongue that will go from the house of God and talk all day about worldly follies, and waste God's holy day and your precious life. "Yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead" (Rom. 6:13). Bring up your tongue and sentence it to death, and then hand it over to die, count it dead, and give it back to God as alive from the dead, and say, "Lord, henceforth my tongue is yours and yours alone." It is to speak only as the Holy Spirit wants to use it. It is to be under guard, and to recognize itself as a soldier that waits for orders. Then you will be watchful in your speech, and all this idle, vapid, empty talk will cease. It is "idle words" that are to be given account of in the day of judgment. Think perhaps that they are being recorded now on yonder heavenly tablets for the day of the great Assize, and ask God to hold your tongue, to so control it that you shall be glad to recognize it as the instrument of Christ.

2. The Profane Tongue. How easy it is to speak the words that are irreverent, flippant and profane without meaning to be profane. The worst kind of profanity is that which uses slang, jest, and innuendo, other than coarse blasphemy, phrases that have gradually worn smooth like the pebbles, until the edges are taken off, and now seem innocent and harmless, but really are profanity in disguise. These are not the habits of the tongue that is under the control of the Holy Spirit. How easy it is to fall into the light jesting pun on the Scriptures, the criticism of the sermon, forgetting that these idle words may arrest the conviction of your companion, and the impression that may have been made upon some other heart, and so be the turning point of a soul's ruin! All these things will be brought to a sensitive conscience by the Holy Spirit, if you really have yielded your members to God.

3. Then comes the false tongue, whether it be the deliberate lie, the direct misrepresentation of the truth, or the milder form that you call "white," the suppression of the truth, the intentional deceiving of another, the innumerable forms of subtle and flattering deceit which men and women use in the business and society of today. You are not obliged to tell everybody about all your business, but if you are reserved, be reserved truthfully. You have the right of silence and the right of speech, but whether you recognize the one or the other, let it always be with the guard upon your lips, with the thought upon your heart, "I cannot do this thing and sin against the Lord."

4. Then we have the impure tongue, the unclean tongue, the salacious story, the spicy anecdote that men will tell to each other when ladies are not present, and the innumerable forms of double speech which may be capable of a right or a wrong interpretation, which evil men can use to such unworthy advantage, shielding themselves behind the better sense when they fail to reach the mark of their infamous purpose. Here is where woman's empire should be supreme, and where her severest judgment should refuse in any way to sanction it by her toleration. A lady is always justified in refusing the company of any gentleman, if she has to be compromised either by doubtful speech or profane expressions. She will be much more respected and honored, even by the one she is compelled to rebuke, for honoring her Savior, her conscience and her womanhood.

5. The malignant tongue, the unkind tongue is perhaps the worst of all; the tongue of slander, the back-biting tongue, the criticizing tongue, the fault-finding tongue, the sarcastic tongue, the thousand forms of evil speaking, which work such bitterness and misery in our home life, and worst of all in our own heart and character. Men have been driven to the saloon and the pit by unwise tongues and bitter speech, and by the lack of a tenderness and love that might have won and saved. There may be provocation, but love can triumph over this.

The worst of all is its dreadful influence on your own heart, the reflex action of unkindness, harshness, and the loss of gentleness and victory.

Ask God to save you from an evil tongue, an irreverent tongue, an impure tongue, a foolish tongue, a false tongue, and above all a bitter and malignant tongue.

How shall we speak of the malignant fruits of the tongue, the reputations it has ruined, the homes it has blasted, the hearts that it has torn asunder, the desolation and wreck that it has left behind, the servants of God that it has crippled in their work for Him, the wrongs that it has done in time and eternity, too late to recall even when we find our fatal mistake? God give us a wholesome tongue, and send us forth to watch our words, and to ask God to "keep the door of our lips."

I have heard of a man cruelly wronged by such a tongue, and called upon by the one who had injured him after the evil had done its cruel work. The poor man, a minister of God, who had been crippled and hindered in a noble work was broken down under the accumulated miseries that had come upon him and his family through slander and misrepresentation. Too late the guilty one found her mistake, and came to ask his pardon with bitter tears. "Yes, I will pardon, gladly pardon you. What else can I do as a servant of God? But you will not refuse me two simple requests." And she said, "No, I would do anything to undo my folly." "Take this pillow, then," he said, and wrapped up a pillow in a parcel. "Take it to yonder church tower where we have been used to worship together, and just open it and scatter the feathers to the winds." She took the pillow, mounted the stairs of the church tower, opened the pillow and scattered the feathers. They went north, south, and in every direction. She came back and said, "I did as you asked me, what else?" "Now will you go," he said, "and pick up the feathers and bring them back to me." "Ah, that is more than I can do. They are gone." "Yes, my friend," replied the man, "they have gone and you cannot take them back. And the words you have spoken have gone and you cannot undo them, the words, the looks, the evil speaking, the misrepresentation, the cruel wrong. You know them now, but you cannot undo them. They are irreparable. They have hurt me, but I am sorry that they will follow you forever."

Ah, yes, the tongue is a world of iniquity. It setteth on fire the whole wheel of nature, and it is set on fire of hell. (James 3: 6.)

IV. THE GOOD TONGUE.

For there are holy tongues, yielded to the Holy Spirit and under the control of the fire of Pentecost. The good tongue is often a silent tongue. We all talk too much. Hand your tongue over to God, ask Him to take it and help you to remember it is not your own. What shall we use our tongue for?

1. For praise and prayer. Praise God and pray to God. This shall be its eternal employ, the worship of our King. Accustom it to it now. Learn the notes of praise. When it is not praise, let it be prayer, "Lord Jesus, help," or "Lord Jesus, I take Thee for this." Let it become natural. You can form habits of your tongue. It is natural to the swearer to say his blasphemous word. It has grown upon his tongue. It is part of his physical

frame. It has entered into the tissues and nerves. You can learn God's praise so that it will be as natural as breathing.

2. Then our tongue is for the word of kindness, help and cheer to those around us, the kindly tongue in the home, the business and the social circle. As you go along the path of life, ask God to give you loving messages, not too high or strained "for human nature's daily food." But, to have a tongue always kind, always wise! How blessed is a wholesome tongue! When you come down in the morning, do not forget to say some kindly thing. As you meet people in business or on the street, have a kind and cheering word. Have it for the clerk in your employ, who is toiling hard and wondering if it will be noticed and appreciated. How it will oil the machinery just to speak a little word of encouragement and approval! As you go along the path of life, just lift the little burdens, take the little stumbling blocks out of the way, and scatter kindness as you go.

3. Finally, the tongue is for witnessing and seeking to bless and save your fellow men, the consecrated tongue, the tongue that bears the message of God, the tongue charged with the story of a Savior's love and watching for opportunities to "speak a word in season to him that is weary." It needs not the lofty pulpit or the learned degree. The simple, heart-felt message of a little child or humble laborer has often been more eloquent than the studied discourse. Meeting at a wayside pump Brainerd Taylor said a single word to a young countryman that led him to become a Christian and a missionary. It was not until years afterwards, when the missionary happened to read the life of this saintly man, and saw his portrait on the first page of the volume, that he recognized the man that had led him to Christ.

You have probably heard the story of the little drummer boy, whose simple message led to the conversion of an army surgeon, who was a bitter enemy of Christianity and a determined Jew. It is published by the American Tract Society, and the lad is said to have been a member of the Sands' Street Church, Brooklyn, converted in the Sunday school and known as the son of a Christian mother. Terribly wounded on the battle field, an arm and a leg had to be amputated. But he refused to take either chloroform or brandy, and told the surgeon that he would never break his promise to his mother on no account ever to taste intoxicating liquor. When the doctor began to saw off the bone, he took the pillow in his mouth, set his teeth, breathed out a low cry of prayer and did not utter a groan. The doctor greatly wondered, and when a few days later the chaplain told him that the lad was dying and wanted to speak to him, he bent over his bed while the boy said, "Doctor, when you were sawing off my leg, I was asking Jesus to convert your soul."

That message the proud Hebrew physician never could forget, and it led him at last to Christ, and one day in that church in Brooklyn he met the mother unexpectedly at a prayer meeting, and heard from her lips the story of her boy's last message, and gladly told her that his prayer had been fulfilled and that his soul was now a star in that little crown. So let us speak for Christ.

"Take my lips and let them be

Filled with messages for Thee.

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