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THE TONGUE A POWER FOR GOOD OR EVIL

– JAMES 3:1-12. – JUNE 6. –

Golden Text: – "Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue, keepeth his soul from troubles." – Prov. 21:23.

OUR lesson is generally acknowledged to be one of the most profound dissertations known in the world on the power of speech. St. James was evidently a very practical man. His remarks respecting the value of words as attestations of faith, noted in our last lesson, show this. To-day's lesson takes up the practical thought and applies it to the tongue in general, and especially to the power of speech in those recognized as Elders or Teachers in the Church. Thus our lesson opens with the exhortation, "Be not many of you teachers, my brethren, knowing that we (who are teachers) shall receive the heavier judgment," because in many things we all stumble. The thought is that whoever attempts to be a teacher, a "rabbi," takes a position which exposes him to more criticism than falls upon the ordinary member of the Ecclesia. And if he errs, he will be subjected to much more severe criticism and rebuke than if he made the same error in his own private judgment. More than this, from the Lord's standpoint, he assumes a great responsibility in becoming an ambassador of the Gospel and mouthpiece of the Lord. If faithfulness and care would bring him a great blessing and reward, unfaithfulness or carelessness would bring correspondingly heavy condemnation.

These words of the Apostle, in conjunction with our Lord's suggestion that if bidden to a feast we take not a high seat, but a low one, and that we seek not the title "rabbi," but be humble, as "little children" – these suggestions from so high authority in the Church, combined with St. Paul's exhortation, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that he may exalt you

in due time," should properly cause us to fear the responsibility of a teacher's position in the Church. If seemingly in the Lord's Providence we occupy such a position it should be held very humbly and with great fearfulness and continual watching and praying lest we enter into temptation and ensnare ourselves and others in error.

"PRIDE GOETH BEFORE A FALL"

Of course, there is a reason for this danger. It lies in ambition, which sometimes takes the direction of pride and sometimes the love of praise. The first of these, pride, is always reprehensible, never excusable, for surely no member of our race has any reasonable, just ground for pride, even though in comparison with the remainder of the race he might be forced to the conclusion that he was less fallen than many. The second danger to ambition, namely, *love of approbation* of others, is proper enough if rightly directed – Godward – but dangerous in proportion as it seeks human approbation, because those about us, likewise imperfect, might often approve and applaud things which our Lord would disapprove and reprobate. Hence, the only ambition allowable would be the desire to please God and to have his approval and ultimately his "Well done."

Of course, this would incidentally mean a desire and expectation of having the approval of such of the Lord's brethren as have the Spirit of the Lord – "The mind of Christ." It might properly also include an appreciation of the love and esteem of all men. But these must not become any part of our ambition, nor must we expect that mankind in general would be so impelled by righteousness and Truth and the spirit of these that they would approve and applaud the things most pleasing to the Lord. On the contrary, we must remember that if any man love the world and its approval and applause, the love of the Father is not in him. If he gets the approval of the world in general he should remember

the Lord's words, "Woe unto you when all men speak well of you." It should be a sign to him that in an important sense and degree he was out of harmony with the Lord and his message – otherwise the world would hate him, as it did Christ, and cry out, "Crucify him."

"ONE IS YOUR TEACHER, EVEN CHRIST"

St. James is not warning us against service, nor seeking to hinder us from all good works one for the other, as members of the Body of Christ. His caution is against our attempting to be (school) masters or teachers. There is but the one Teacher or Schoolmaster for the entire Church of Christ for all this age. He is the "Head of the Church, which is his Body" – the Director, Supervisor, Caretaker, Instructor of the "members."

True, the Apostle does intimate that the Lord "Hath set the various members in the Body as it hath pleased Him." He intimates that the qualities of eye and ear and tongue are head qualities in comparison with the hand, the foot, etc., which are body qualities. Our absent Lord or Head promised to be with every little gathering of his people. "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age," and thus with them he is pleased to exercise in some manner and through some agency the Chairmanship of such a meeting and to be the Teacher. But he will not force his Headship upon us. He waits to serve, to instruct, to guide so many as are in the right attitude of heart, desirous of knowing his will and doing it. Having instructed his people respecting his will, he expects them to follow his instructions, if they would have the blessing he is pleased to confer. If, therefore, when assembled in his name they follow the directions of his Word, hearken to his voice in the Scriptures and watch for the leadings of **[R4380 : page 125]** his Spirit, and approve it in each other where found, his blessing will be proportionate.

Thus a responsibility is upon each little group to approve as its leader none but the consecrated. No goat must be chosen as a leader of the sheep, nor any sheep whose outward conduct does not give evidence of his sincerity of heart and desire to walk in the footsteps of the Master. Pride, and self-seeking ambition to be a lord over the flock, should not be tolerated, because they would be injurious, not only to the Ecclesia of believers, but also to the heady ones seeking to lead them. Nevertheless, where need to be restrained from taking the highest seats in the spiritual feast presents itself, the restraint should be exercised in a kindly, loving manner, with the remembrance that some have greater trials and temptations along these lines than have others, and, as the Apostle says, "Remembering thyself, lest thou also be tempted."

St. James declares, "In many things we all stumble." He does not mean that we all fall into sin or grievous error, but he does mean that, so long as we are in the flesh and the Spirit of the Lord and his message are delivered through our imperfect powers, no one is infallible. Hence, those who do not aspire to leadership in the meetings of the "saints" should not be hypercritical [R4381 : page 125] of the brethren who seem to manifest humility of heart, and who endeavor to serve them, breaking to them the bread of life. They should be appreciated and loved for their work's sake, even if their every utterance cannot be accepted unqualifiedly. These sentiments attach not only to the oral teacher, but also to the printed page, by which another may be represented in the meeting.

"THE SAME IS A PERFECT MAN"

We are not to understand the Apostle to mean that any man is actually perfect, nor to mean that ability to bridle the tongue would indicate that perfection had been reached in every other channel of his life. His thought manifestly is that the tongue is the most difficult member of the human body to control and that

whoever could succeed in gaining such a control of that member as would preclude his ever stumbling in speech would prove his ability to control every avenue of his nature. Of course, in this respect, as in every respect, there is no man perfect. "There is none righteous (perfect), no, not one." The only perfect one since Adam's fall was he who came down from above, and who is above or superior to all, because in him was no sin, no hereditary taint, no blemish.

"Able also to bridle the whole body," gives us the thought of the restraint *necessary* to us in all of the affairs of life. "Let your moderation be known unto all men" – your self-restraint, the bridling of your entire body. The work of grace which the Lord proposes and admonishes is very thorough and leaves little time to be "killed" in foolish talking or jesting or games or frivolities or novel-reading. Some of the Lord's dear people have not gotten far enough developed to appreciate this – have not reached the quickened stage of activity in the service of righteousness and in the warfare against sin and selfishness in their own flesh.

BRIDLING HORSES AN ILLUSTRATION

St. James, to illustrate the power of the mind, the will, in the control of the body, and especially in control of the tongue, illustrates the matter by the bridling of a horse. The fiery steed, much stronger than a man, can be "broken" or tamed, bridled and made to do the will of the driver. But not so the tongue. It is most unruly. The new will takes hold with determination that the tongue shall go in the proper direction only, speaking forth words of justice and love, yet ere long the tongue runs away, breaks its bonds. Here we have a runaway accident with damage to some – perhaps to many. Similarly with ships; a rudder is so placed as to turn the ship about in the face of the most severe gales – not only little ships, but great ships are thus turned about by very small helms, which answer perfectly to the steering apparatus of the

helmsman. But the tongue, which should be tractable to the guidance of the New Creature and its most useful servant, is, on the contrary, perverse, uncontrollable. The tongue, therefore, one of the least of our members, is one of the most important of them. It can accomplish great things, either for good or for evil, just as the little fire of a match might be so used as to set on fire a forest.

"THE TONGUE IS A FIRE,

A world of iniquity among our members. It defileth the whole body and setteth on fire the course (wheel) of nature; and it is set on fire of Gehenna." (Jas. 3:6.) Here we have a series of word pictures. The tongue is a world of iniquity in the sense that every iniquity in the world can be introduced descriptively by the tongue. Of course, the organ itself is never meant, but speech, which the tongue represents. By the tongue, by our speech, oral or written, every form of evil may find its highest power. The tongue can paint pictures more quickly and more vividly than any painter's brush. Since the world about us is full of iniquity expressed in a thousand forms it is within the range of the powers of the tongue to picture these and, by the printing press, to distribute them to thousands of millions. It is indeed a whole world of iniquity, if improperly used. Alas! that even amongst Christians this is frequently the case. Careless words, insinuations, hints, are dropped into the minds of neighbors or friends and, because these are already predisposed to evil-thinking, evil-surmising, etc., these words are like lighted matches dropped in a hayloft – apt to start a conflagration which may do incalculable injury to the neighbor and from him the sparks may fly far and near, working moral and spiritual havoc.

The course of nature, more literally the wheel of life, or the human course from the cradle to the tomb, may easily be set on fire at any time. There are thousands of opportunities. The tongue is the match. Possibly St. James had specially in mind the course

of the New Creature and its dangers. What if it should be set on fire and the entire spiritual prospect blighted, destroyed! That this is his thought seems to be implied by the words, "And it is set on fire of Gehenna." The world in general have evil tongues, reprobate minds; but being unregenerate the world's children are not in danger of Gehenna, the Second Death. But the Church, having received the grace of God in Christ, having been "begotten again," has staked its all upon the attainment of the spiritual blessing which the Lord has promised to the faithful. In the Church, therefore, the power of the tongue is much more potent than elsewhere. It may set on fire the course of the New Nature for some – a fire which may burn into the Second Death, and a fire which may not be confined to the one in whose heart it is ignited, but which may spread to others with similar effect, blighting the sweetness, the happiness, the Christ-likeness in the present life and destroying all future prospects. No wonder that our dear Redeemer admonished us to

"TAKE HEED WHAT YE HEAR!"

While each should be on guard against communications **[R4381 : page 126]** and sparks that would be injurious, each one should also be on guard against allowing sparks to fall upon himself and to ignite in his heart. The fire-quenching apparatus, the water of Truth, should be continually at hand also, so that any spark alighting, its baneful influence may be quenched before irreparable injury be accomplished. "Keep your heart," then, would seem to imply the thought that we not only are not to give forth evil as injurious sparks to others, but that we are to watch, guard our hearts, that no evil either originate there or be received into them. Let us remember the adage that we cannot help the flying of crows over our heads, but we can keep them from nesting in our hair. We cannot rid the world, nor even the Church, of evil-minded people, but we can avoid fellowshiping such, as the Apostle directed, saying, "Mark them

which cause divisions amongst you and avoid them" (Rom. 16:17) – as you would avoid a pestilence or a vile odor or the sparks from a neighbor's burning barn.

WILD BEASTS AND BIRDS AND SERPENTS

St. James had evidently learned well and deeply his lesson respecting the ferocity of the human tongue. He compares it, roughly speaking, with beasts, reptiles, fish and fowl. He declares that any of these may be considered as tameable. Man's superiority and power to conquer these has been demonstrated. But power to conquer the tongue and to make it tame and obedient and thoroughly reliable has never yet been demonstrated. "The tongue can no man tame." It is an unruly (restless, ceaseless) evil. And no serpent bite contains so dangerous, so violent poison. The serpent's bite may cause pain and physical death, but the tongue can do more, in that it can produce moral ravage, which will bite, devour and cause madness to others, and its influence extends to death eternal.

If we could but get a proper conception of the mighty potentialities of the tongue, it would make us almost afraid to speak a word, lest we should speak amiss. Such a fear would be very helpful to us, as gradually, then, a desire to speak the words of justice and love and soberness, the good tidings, should burst the restraint and find utterance, while the dread of the evil would still guard every expression. The result would be greater Godlikeness.

THE TONGUE WHICH PRAISES GOD, CURSES MEN

Here again we see that St. James is not speaking of the tongue from the worldly standpoint, but as a member of the Church of Christ to fellow-members. We all use our tongues in praising God, in confessing his grace and mercy and love, and in speaking forth his praises. This is proper. How can we do

otherwise? But, alas, that it should be true that the same tongue which thus praises the Creator so often proves a curse, an injury, a world of iniquity to fellow-man! And especially to the fellow-members of the "household of faith!" – setting on fire the course of nature by slanders, evil-speaking and evil-surmising, hints, insinuations, etc. Oh, Lord, who is sufficient for these things! Truly, as St. Paul declares, "Our words are either a savor of life unto life or of death unto death."

"SWEET AND BITTER, BLESSING AND CURSING"

"My brethren, these things ought not so to be." We must see to it that we learn this great lesson in the School of Christ, that out of the mouth which praises God there shall not come forth that which would be injurious to the brethren – or anyone. Look at nature! Did anyone ever know of a fountain sending forth at the same opening sweet water and bitter? No! As the same fountain could not yield salt water and fresh, so we cannot be copies of God's dear Son, nor fit for the Kingdom, so long as we have such a disposition. We must be conquerors. We must be overcomers. And the battle of each of us is within himself. We may indeed do all in our power for others and for the general cause, yet our victory and our title to the Lord's words, "Good and faithful servant," "More than conquerors," will not be for us except as our hearts are allowed to dominate our tongues and gain such a victory over impurity and lovelessness as will not tolerate them in any sense or degree.

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