

The Forest Fire

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On November 19th, 1863, some 15,000 people had gathered to witness two speakers speak to dedicate a cemetery in Gettysburg, PA. A great battle had been fought there and some of the leading citizens had formed the cemetery in honor of those who were reburied in honor. The first speaker was Edward Everett who was known as a leading orator in America. Everett was the former president of Harvard College, a former U.S. senator, and a former secretary of state. The ceremony was to be held on October 23, but Everett stated he needed more time for his speech. On that November morning, Everett spoke for two hours from memory – he needed no notes. There was an orchestra that played as well and B.B. French wrote a poem for the ceremony, which was sung as a hymn. Then the next speaker spoke, which was President Lincoln. His speech lasted two minutes, not two hours and it contained about 275 words. This two minute speech became part of American History – famous words that won't be forgotten unless this Country forgets what the Civil War was fought for – an undivided nation. Good luck in trying to Google or find in a library a copy of Edward Everett's speech or B.B. French's poem. However, it's easy to find Lincoln's Gettysburg speech or Gettysburg Address. Lincoln had stated this in His address, "The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here." The world did note and still remembers those 275 words that came from a man who was trying to keep a nation from falling apart. How we could use Abraham Lincoln today! I think all of us have at some point in our lives have read what Lincoln spoke to those 15,000 people. The words Lincoln spoke still carry on today. It's amazing how Edward's two hour speech is totally forgotten, but Lincoln's two minute speech is still being read. The power of words. It's also amazing how a few words can shape a nation or a person. It's also amazing how a few words can destroy a nation or a person. Do we fully understand how powerful the tongue can be? Did you know your tongue can have between 2,000 and 10,000 taste buds? This is what we usually think about when we talk about our tongue – taste buds. We don't like to talk

about how destructive it can be and what great harm it can cause. It can be used for good, like Lincoln used it, but it can be used for evil as well and this is what we're going to look at today.

We've been looking into the Letter of James for the past month. For today, let's turn to James 3: 1 -12, where we read this, "Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged by God with greater strictness. We all make many mistakes, but those who control their tongues can also control themselves in every other way. We can make a large horse turn around and go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. And a tiny rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot wants it to go, even though the winds are strong. So also, the tongue is a small thing, but what enormous damage it can do. A tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is full of wickedness that can ruin your whole life. It can turn the entire course of your life into a blazing flame of destruction, for it is set on fire by hell itself. People can tame all kinds of animals and birds and reptiles and fish, but no one can tame the tongue. It is an uncontrollable evil, full of deadly poison. Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it breaks out into curses against those who have been made in the image of God. And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? Can you pick olives from a fig tree or figs from a grapevine? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty pool. (NLT, 1989)"

James starts off by giving us an illustration of the importance of teaching within the church. We shouldn't just pick anyone to be a teacher within the church. James tells us that those who teach within the church will be judged more strictly by God. The reason for this is that teachers can say things that can have great influence in someone's life. The human tongue is the main teaching tool of a teacher. It gives out instructions, guidance, words of wisdom or it can destroy someone's reputation. The problem during James leadership at the Church was false teaching. Some teachers were using their tongue to spew out false teaching to help people come to their side of an issue instead of allowing God's Word to

lead that person on the right path. They were going to be held accountable for what their tongue was producing. I can still remember most of the teachers I had while I was taking classes so I could go into the ministry. What I remember them by is not what type of clothes they wore or what hair style they had. What I remember from them is what came from their mouth. I had one teacher who gave out a lot of false teaching and they will be held at a higher standard when the Lord judges them. I also had many good teachers that spoke true wisdom from God.

James adds onto this in verse 2 where he tells us that if we can control what we say or control our tongue, then we can control our whole body. In other words, our tongue can be used as a dip stick to measure our relationship with God. If we can control our tongue and keep it in check, then we'll have an easier time controlling our whole body from sin. The human tongue is the hardest part of our body to control. James can see how important it is for us to realize how important it is to control this tongue of ours. James then gives the example of a horse with a bit in its mouth. I'm not sure if any of you ever went horseback riding, but if you didn't have a bit in the horse's mouth that you can control by leather straps, then that horse could do whatever it wanted. I remember going horseback riding, I believe it was at Codorus State Park, where I had a horse that wanted to stop and eat grass along the trail all the time. I had to pull on that bit to get that horse's head up. If not, we'd still be on that trail today. Controlling our tongue is hard, but is needed to keep ourselves afloat spiritually. James adds on with another example of a ship with a small rudder. The ships during James' day were smaller than our ships today and the rudder played an important part in keeping a ship under control. If we can't control our tongue, we can't control the rest of our body.

The reason we must learn to control our tongue is that the tongue can cause much damage. James uses the illustration of a forest fire. One small spark can cause much damage. We had a forest fire about three weeks ago where two acres was burned before it was put out by fire crew. We were down by the base of the trail where the fire was coming and the fire jumped over the trail because of wind and started to burn more area. Some sparks from that main fire blew

over about 100 yards away and started another forest fire. The tongue can start a juicy rumor that can spread and effect many people. The same goes with gossip. Verse six gives example of what gossip can do, "The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. (NLT)" Our culture loves the evil tongue. Our culture loves to put down people. If James was here today, he may have added our fingers as well. Sometimes we transport our words from our tongues to our fingers that then type out our words on social media. Social media is used to put down people all the time as well as God. There is no room for that as a true follower of Christ. Christians are not to call each other bad names or make fun of others in a mean way. We're supposed to build each other up. As we talked about before, James tells us our faith is a working faith. We must work to control our tongue.

Then James tells us in verse 7 that no one can control the tongue. It is an uncontrollable evil that is full of deadly poison. So, now James is stressing how deadly and evil the human tongue really is and it can't be controlled by us. Now, I find it interesting that James had told us back in verse 2 that the tongue can be controlled. Has James now changed his mind? I'm sure James knew the Old Testament very well. He knew Psalm 141 and King David makes an interesting statement where he states in verse 3, "Take control of what I say, O Lord, and keep my lips sealed. (NLT, 971)" James knows we can't control our own tongue. The only way our tongue can be controlled is through the Holy Spirit period. King David knew he needed help with his speech from God and David was filled with the Holy Spirit when God took the Holy Spirit away from King Saul and gave His Spirit to David. It's amazing how Christians hurt each other by what they say to each other. This can't be. We need the Holy Spirit's help in this.

Apostle Paul tells us this in 1 Corinthians 6: 19 – 20, "Or don't you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body. (NLT, 1810)" The tongue is part of our body. So, Christians who say that cursing is ok is wrong. Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and that includes the tongue. We should want no part of anything that

will dishonor that Spirit that is within us and that goes with our speech as well. In fact, Paul tells us that we don't belong to ourselves because Jesus paid just a high price for us. So, James is right about us not being able to control our tongue. However, it can be controlled through the Holy Spirit and we must realize how we really need the Holy Spirit's help on this. Everywhere you turn, foul language is being used, people are calling people names, people are telling lies about other people, and the list can go on and on. There is a saying about the tongue, "The tongue is the only tool that gets sharper with use". How true is that! So, let's keep an eye on our tongue. If we notice we're saying things that we wouldn't say before or we noticed we are using unkind words with people around us, we need the Lord to control what we say and to know when to keep our mouth shut. Who controls your tongue?

I leave you with this thought from Apostle Paul from Ephesians 3: 19, "And to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us. (ESV)" When we talk about holy living as God has called us to live, we are to allow Him to fill us to fullness and that includes what we say and what we type with our fingers. We are to live in the fullness of God! His Spirit will give us an abundant life filled with His presence and that will affect how we communicate with people around us. Let's be a Christ filled people.

NLT Application Study Bible. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.: Wheaton, 1996