

# Northeast Church of Christ

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## From the Pen of Paul: *The Tongue*

THE LITTLE EPISTLE OF JAMES contains some of the most practical teaching found in the New Testament. One of the subjects that he deals with is the tongue. “The tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things” (James 3:5). For a recent class, I listed 43 sins committed by use of the tongue. There are probably more; but 43 is enough to cause us to pause and consider just how destructive to our Christian life the tongue can be.

James tells us, “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (James 1:19). Please note that the verb “let” is imperative; thus, these words of James are not suggestions; they are commandments. Many of the problems we face in life come from not heeding these words. I'm afraid a great many of us do just the opposite. We are slow to hear and swift to speak. Xenocrates, who met approaches of others with a profound silence, was asked by some why he remained silent. His reply: “I have sometimes had occasion to regret that I have spoken, never that I was silent.” Solomon said, “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the sun...a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Ecc. 3:1, 7). And in agreement with James, Solomon also wrote, “Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God” (Ecc. 5:2).

The word “swift,” in this verse comes from a word which means “fleet of foot, quick, speedy.” James is urging us to have a fast and attentive mind and be ready to listen. One should consider carefully his words and be

“slow to speak”. Far too many of us speak first and “let the chips fall where they may.” Sometimes this may be because we do not heed the third part of James' admonition to be “slow to wrath.” How many times have you spoken in anger or said things in haste that you sincerely regretted almost immediately? Solomon also wrote, “Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin” (Ecc. 5:6). Wrath is violent emotion coming from uncontrolled anger and improper indignation. Wrath causes an individual to be completely incapable of receiving instruction from God or anyone else. It is probable that James had in mind hearing the word of truth, but these instructions are applicable, in a secondary sense, to what we hear from others.

The disposition to speak quickly and rashly without considering one's words is a sin of many people. Paul wrote in Colossians 4:6, “Let your speech be always with grace seasoned with salt, that ye may *know how to answer* every man.” It is not enough to have the answer; it is also vitally important that we know *how* to reply. Perhaps many a person has been turned away from Christ by sharp, caustic, insensitive remarks.

Some try to excuse what they say by claiming that man cannot control his tongue. James said, “The tongue can no man *tame*; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8). But this does not mean, and did not say, that man cannot *control* his tongue. If man were incapable of exercising control over his tongue, he would not be responsible for its actions. However this is certainly not true. Jesus said, “But I say unto

***“I go to church with some people who will not speak to each other. Some will not speak to me. Will we all be in heaven like this?”***

People who act like this cannot be right. It has been puzzling to me as to how they think they could be doing right. Surely, they know better than this. The Bible teaches that one cannot hate his brother and be a Christian. One who so acts and so does must be pretty shallow, or his religion is surface. Either of these is bad.

Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and to do good to them (Matt. 5:43-45). He teaches his followers to speak to those who will not speak to them (Matt. 5:47). If we are Christians we will respect what Christ has to say along this line. How could anyone miss what Jesus is teaching in the above passages? Surely, these things are not so deep that one cannot understand them. How much plainer could they be stated? One has to have some help to miss this and I know where that help comes from, as well as you do. The devil has entered the hearts of those who conduct themselves in such a fashion.

There is a good lesson about this and it took place the night Jesus was betrayed. Judas came with an unruly mob after Christ. The Lord had been praying in the garden of Gethsemane. When Judas came to Him he said, “Hail, Master” and kissed him. It is noteworthy that Jesus let Judas kiss him. There are those in the church today that will not speak to the righteous, much less the wicked. When they act like this, they are not

doing as the Master did, not only on this occasion, but throughout His life.

When Jesus was hanging on a cruel and unjust cross, He prayed for those who had placed Him there. There were those who spit in His face and laughed at Him, while on that cross; but He still loved them. This is the example for Christians to follow.

When the people stoned Stephen to death, he prayed for those who were unjustly killing him (Acts 7:51-60). Now, how can anyone think he or she is a Christian and do right the opposite. One has to be down the road of “don’t-care” a long way to act in any other fashion. If we cannot live together in peace, and love, and unity, and friendliness on earth, it is not going to be possible to live in heaven together. For us to think otherwise is to kid ourselves.

When people will not speak to others, in most cases, it is due to a guilt complex. They have done others wrong and have tried to justify themselves in it. Sometimes the people you help the most will do you the dirtiest. But, Christians cannot get down on this low level of life. Sinners might, but the righteous cannot.

Hold your head up and be nice to others, regardless as to their response. You will be a winner by do doing! God will be pleased with you.

—*Malcolm L. Hill*

you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned” (Matt. 12:36-37). Paul, also, spoke of the use of the tongue when he said, “And whatsoever ye do *in word* or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him” (Col. 3:17). It is quite evident from these Scriptures that not only *can* man *control* his tongue, but he *must* do so. James had earlier in his epistle shown its necessity when he said, “If any man among you seem to be religious, and *bridleth not his tongue*, but deceiveth his own

heart, this man's religion is vain” (James 1:26).

The tongue is a little member. It boasteth great things. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. But the tongue, when controlled and used properly, becomes an instrument of God in spreading the truth. The command to “Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15) cannot be accomplished easily without the tongue. So, let all of us be “swift to hear, slow to speak” and at the same time let us choose our words wisely and use our tongue in God's service.

—Paul M. Wilmoth