

# Wicked Little Things

James 3:5 (and context)

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**FOCAL Read Together James 3:5** Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

NASCAR fans remember February 18, 2001 as the day that Dale Earnhardt died. Dale was in third place as he came through the last turn of the last lap of the Daytona 500 when another car touched the fender of his car. That touch caused Earnhardt's car to veer right and hit the retaining wall. A wicked little thing – just a touch - led to Earnhardt's death.

On June 17, 1972 a group of men with ties to the Nixon Administration broke into the offices of the Democratic Party in the Watergate Building, Washington D.C. As the men went through the building they placed a strip of tape over the latch of a stairway door so it would stay unlocked. The only problem was the burglars didn't put the tape in line with the door jam, but put the tape on the latch *horizontally* so it could be seen by anyone passing by. A night watchman making his rounds saw the tape and removed it. When the burglars came past the door and found the tape was removed they *put more tape on the door in exactly the same way as they did the first time*. The next time the night watchman came by and saw the tape he called the police. The men were arrested. The arrest led to criminal charges, a congressional inquiry, and the eventual resignation of then President Richard Nixon. A wicked little thing – a piece of tape – brought down an American President.

On a personal note, one of the worst "whippings" I ever got when I was a boy was when I set the wooded area behind our house on fire. My brother and I had found a

book of matches and decided to “build a campfire”. Being children and not understanding that fire is no “respector of persons or things” we let the fire get out of hand. It rapidly caught on the pine straw which – by the way – burns like gasoline when ignited. As we busily ran around trying to stomp out the flames I looked up to see my worst nightmare. There was Daddy, and he wasn't pleased. After the fire was out Daddy lit a similar fire in my and my brother's pants. A wicked little thing – a match carelessly used – brought down two little boys.

In our message today we're going to look at another wicked little thing called “the tongue”. Job says that **“the tongue is a whip braided with sharp things, a scourge” (Job 5:21)**. A “scourge” - an awful tool used to torture prisoners - was used to beat our Lord before He was crucified on Calvary (**Luke 18:33**). Wise King Solomon warned against the **“flattering tongue of the strange woman” (Proverbs 6:24)** who trapped her prey as a spider traps a fly. **“Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21)**. In the tongue is the power to heal or the power to kill.

**FOCAL James 3:5** Even so the tongue is a little member ....

The **tongue is a little member** located – like your eyes - in your head. The eyes are the windows of your soul, the tongue is the wellspring of your soul. If you are born again by faith in Christ then your tongue *should* speak things which benefit others. The Psalmist said:

**Psalms 37:30** The mouth of the righteous speaketh

**wisdom, and his tongue talketh of judgment.**

Too many people talk about “not being able to help myself” when it comes to the tongue. The average tongue is around 3 inches long, and resides less than three inches from the brain. The tongue has no power of its own. It doesn't work by itself, but reflects the fragrance of a person's soul. The **tongue of the righteous speaketh wisdom**. The tongue of the unrighteous speaks foolishness. God's people are called to righteousness!

**When You Control The Mouth,  
You Control The Body**

**CONTEXT James 3:2** .... If any man offend not in word, the same *is* a perfect man, *and* able also to bridle the whole body.

The word “perfect” in our text above is the Greek (τελειος pronounced *tel'-i-os*), which means “**complete, mature, or of a full age**”. We see the same word used by our Lord in:

**Matthew 5:48** Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

Jesus said **“be mature or complete, just as your Father in Heaven is mature or complete”**. How does a believer demonstrate his or her maturity? Jesus said in that same context:

**Matthew 5:43-47** Ye have heard that it hath been

said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. 44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; 45 That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? 47 And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more *than others*? do not even the publicans so?

The unbeliever only speaks well of those who can monetarily benefit them. The **publican** – that is, the **tax collectors** – spoke well to those who paid their taxes. Why? Because their pockets were being lined with cash by those who paid their taxes. Jesus said “**your Heavenly Father does good to all, whether they are good or evil. He makes His sun and His rain fall on both the righteous and the unrighteous. In the same way those of you who are His Children by faith are to BLESS them that curse you. *Speak well of them. Say kind words to them.* And PRAY for them that have abused you.**

The mature believer controls his or her tongue knowing that how we operate our tongue effects others around us. This is the next point the Bible makes.

**CONTEXT James 3:3** Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.

This is a very vivid picture. If a rider wants to ride a horse safely he must be able to control the head of the horse. In order to control its head he puts a “**bit in the horse's mouth**”. The mouth of the horse is controlled, and this controls the head which in turn controls the whole body. Now I want you to think for a moment not about the *horse*, but about the *purpose of the horse*. In the day in which this text was written horses were extensively used for not only transportation but also for industry. **A farmer could not plow his field unless he first put the bit in the horse's mouth. The logger could not haul his wood to the market unless he first put the bit in the horse's mouth. The rider could not safely use the horse to get to his destination without first putting the bit in the horse's mouth.** That's the point of the text.

If you do not control your mouth, at the least *you will not benefit yourself*. At the most you can *harm yourself*. A horse is bigger than you are – you had better control the mouth!

### **The Unholy Tongue Effects Myself And Others**

**CONTEXT James 3:4** Behold also the ships, which though *they be* so great, and *are* driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

This is the second “**Behold**” statement made in this text. The “**Behold**” that begins verses 3 & 4 is the Greek

(ιδου pronounced *id-oo'*) an Aorist Active Imperative that could be translated “**you look right now!**”.

If you don't control the mouth of the horse **you hurt yourself**. Now the Scripture says “**if you don't control the tiller or helm of the ship then you harm not only yourself *but others***”.

Great ships were used to transport groups of people across the seas. These ships did their job by harnessing the wind in sheets of cloth called “sails”. The sails were very important, but one of the most important parts of the ship was the small **helm tiller** that was located at the bottom rear of the ship. Though you never saw the tiller (called in our text “**a very small helm – a governor**”) if that relatively small member was turned the wrong way then those who rode on the ship would not reach their intended destination. If the tiller somehow *broke off* then the mighty sails at that point were useless. An unsteerable ship is an unstable ship and an unusable ship.

**FOCAL James 3:5** Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

Misusing the tongue can hurt you. Misusing the tongue can hurt those around you. Misusing the tongue can keep you and the other members of the Church from reaching your destination. It is the desire of any local Church to reach as many people as possible with the glorious Gospel of salvation in Christ. We know that in

Jesus is life, and every true believer wants to share that life with others. The Evangelist **Leonard Ravenhill** said:

**“Jesus did not die to make bad people do good things. He died to make dead people live.”**

We have the **words of life (John 6:68)**. We know that life is in Jesus Christ. We want people to use their tongues to:

**Romans 10:9-11** .... confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. **10** For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. **11** For the Scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.

We want to see our world changed by the life giving Gospel of Christ. Therefore we must ever be mindful of our tongues.

**The Ability Of The Local Church To Evangelize Is Hindered By The Unguarded Tongue Of Its Members**

Churches are destroyed by the unguarded tongues of its members. The Bible says:

**CONTEXT James 3:6** And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity; **so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body**, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of

hell.

James spoke from experience. He said “**the tongue is a fire .... so is the tongue among our members that it defileth the whole Body**”. The word translated “**defileth**” is a Greek word (Present Active Participle of σπιλωω pronounced *spee-lo'-o*) that means “**to keep on staining, keep on soiling**”. The misused tongue doesn't stain the Church with a *temporary stain*, but the blemish that many wagging tongues cause bring a *continuing stain* on the Church.

Let a Church do good and the world will scarcely notice it. Let a Church's members wag their tongues over some alleged bad, and the world will take up their instruments and play along with the choir as Satan directs the discordant music.

What damages and soils a local Churches reputation in the eyes of the community is the **wagging tongue set on fire of hell**.

### **The Tongue Cannot Be Controlled By Our Own Power**

**CONTEXT James 3:7-8** For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: **8 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.**

The Bible now gives us a beautiful illustration using the

wild animals that have been tamed by *human efforts*. He says “**every kind of beasts and of birds and of serpents and of things in the sea is tamed and hath been tamed of mankind**”. Humanity has – within its power – the ability to tame all types of wild animals. When God made Adam and Eve He told them:

**Genesis 1:28 ... Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.**

God gave man dominance over the animals of this earth. When Noah got off of the Ark with his family the Lord once more said:

**Genesis 9:1-2** And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. **2 And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered.**

God has given to mankind the power to tame the wild beasts of His creation. “**But the tongue NO MAN CAN TAME**” (verse 8). The word for “**man**” here is the Greek (ανθρωπος pronounced *anth'-ro-pos*) which refers to **man** or **mankind**.

Every person on the face of this earth has the power to

control and tame wild animals. However, *only born again believers in the Lord Jesus Christ have the power to tame their own tongues!*

The worldling – those who are not **born again of the Spirit of God (John 3:3)** has a tongue that “**is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison**”. But we who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are to be different. The Bible says:

**1 Peter 1:22-23** Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, *see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently:* **23** Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever.

You who are saved are to **love one another with a pure heart fervently** or *passionately*. Our love for one another is born from Him Who saved us. He gave His all for us on Calvary. He **bore our transgressions, was bruised for our iniquities, chastised and beaten so that we could have peace with God, and beaten with many stripes so we could be healed (Isaiah 53:5)**. Born again people will spend an eternity with Heaven with the Lord Who loved them and with others who are equally redeemed.

The world cannot understand the love that purchased us from damnation, and we can scarcely understand such love ourselves. But we are all of the same family,

of the same Blood, of the same Body, on the same Course, headed toward the same Place in glory, and all worshiping the Same Risen Savior. We should all possess the same Vision for our world, and use our lips to tell others of Christ. God forbid that we use redeemed lip to speak worldly words against fellow brothers and sisters!

**CONTEXT** **James 3:9-10** {with this tongue} bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. **10** **Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.**

**ILLUSTRATE** Every Thanksgiving and Christmas we cook and eat turkey. I suppose that's the only time of the year we eat these unfortunate birds. Sherry usually puts the turkey on late at night, and the next morning its fragrance goes through the whole house. We used to test whether the turkey was done or not by using a meat thermometer, but modern technology has made it easier to turn that gobbler into a Thanksgiving feast. Every turkey we buy has a little *indicator* that tells us when we can enjoy our turkey. If the indicator is popped *out* the turkey is done.

What *pops out of your mouth* lets everyone know what your spiritual status is. Though the Pharisees were faithful Church goers who knew their Bibles and who tithed regularly, Jesus condemned them as **vipers or poisonous snakes in the grass**. Why? Read His words:

**Matthew 12:34-37** O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. **35** A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. **36** But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. **37** For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.

You may claim to be a Christian, but if your tongue is a wild dog *then you may not be saved*. We who are saved are called to *let God control our tongues*.

**Proverbs 15:4** A wholesome tongue is a tree of life: but perverseness therein is a breach in the spirit.

Your tongue - more than anything about you - displays your level of "doneness" in the Lord. If you are in a right walk with God then your tongue will be **wholesome - a tree of life**. Your lips will encourage others. When you rebuke, you will rebuke for the good. When you praise, you will not praise sin. A saint in a right walk with God has a *sanctified tongue*. If there is **perverseness** (כִּלְכִּיל pronounced *seh'-lef*) in your tongue, **distortion of the truth** and **viciousness**, then you need to grow in the Lord. The *New American Standard* puts it this way:

**Proverbs 15:4** A soothing tongue is a tree of life, But perversion in it crushes the spirit.

## Knowing These Things, What Shall I Do?

**CONTEXT** James 3:11-12 Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet *water* and bitter? **12** Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so *can* no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

What does God call each and every one of us to do? First of all, realize that God's people are a changed people. We are no longer as we were, but are now **new creatures**. The Bible says:

**2 Corinthians 5:17** Therefore if any man *be* in Christ, *he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new*.

If you are born again by faith in Christ then your tongue should have changed when you changed. If not, then seriously assess whether or not you are *truly saved*. If you are saved, then **repent** and turn fully to the Lord. Turn away from the wisdom of this world and the ways of this world and turn toward the Lord Who loves you. There was a time when you were **children of wrath, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind** (**Ephesians 2:3**). As children of wrath *bitter water* came from the fountain of your soul. This is no longer your state.

**ILLUSTRATE** I remember once going to the nursery to purchase some tomato plants. As I looked through what was available I saw what appeared to be *squash* plants, but the placard said that they were *tomato* plants. When I

questioned the manager he admitted that a mistake was made - the wrong sign was placed on the wrong plants. **Your words declare to the world whether you are Christian or non-Christian. They are the sign above your display. The fig tree cannot bear the olive berry,** even the most fallen of men know this. Do not confuse yourself as to who you are, and do not confuse the world as to your allegiance. If you are of Satan then let him control your tongue, but if you're of God, let God have His way!

Now that you are born again by faith in Christ **out of your belly shall flow rivers of living water (John 7:38-39).** You are no longer dead things, but creatures alive - quickened by God the Holy Spirit. Let God the Holy Spirit show through your actions. If you are a **maturing believer in Christ** then you are told:

**CONTEXT James 3:13** Who *is* a wise man and **endued with knowledge among you? let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.**

Realize that it is the little man who must stand on the shoulders of another man to be seen. Stand on your own two feet. Do not use your tongue to denigrate others so that you will seem a greater believer than you are.

**Show out of a good conversation {way of life} your works with humility of wisdom.** What wisdom should the believer display? The Bible says:

**CONTEXT James 3:17-18** **But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. [18] And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.**

**The wisdom that is from above - from God - is PURE, PEACABLE, GENTLE, EASY TO BE ENTREATED, FULL OF MERCY and GOOD FRUITS.** The tongue of the maturing and faithful believer will lift up and exalt *God and the people of God.* Ask God to control your tongue. As you study and feed on His Word *daily* ask God to mature you from the inside out.

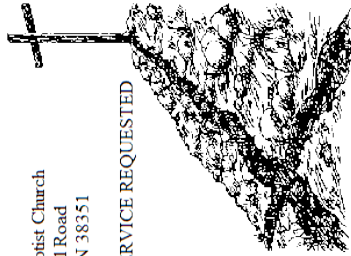
As a baby grows his speech turns from gibberish to faltering to flowing. As you grow in the Lord your tongue should also mature from bitter fountain to sweet water.

Study His Word daily. Seek His wisdom. Control what you input into your mind. Turn off television shows that use worldly language and cursings. Ask that God control your tongue. Look upward, for your Redeemer will one day return. Live so as to be pleasing to Him.

May God touch your hearts with His Word.

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**FOCAL Read Together** James 3:5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

Job 5:21; Luke 18:33; Proverbs 6:24; Proverbs 18:21; James 3:5; Psalms 37:30 \_\_\_\_\_  
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**When You Control The Mouth,  
You Control The Body**

James 3:2 .... “perfect” (τελειος pronounced *tel'-i-os*), which means \_\_\_\_\_  
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Matthew 5:48; Matthew 5:43-47; James 3:3 \_\_\_\_\_  
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**The Unholy Tongue Effects Myself And Others**

James 3:4 Behold .... (ιδου pronounced *id-oo'*) meaning \_\_\_\_\_  
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James 3:5; John 6:68; Romans 10:9-11 \_\_\_\_\_  
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**The Ability Of The Local Church To Evangelize Is Hindered By The Unguarded Tongue Of Its Members**

James 3:6 .... defileth (σπιλωω pronounced *spee-lo'-o*) that means \_\_\_\_\_

**The Tongue Cannot Be Controlled  
By Our Own Power**

James 3:7-8; Genesis 1:28; Genesis 9:1-2; John 3:3; 1 Peter 1:22-23; Isaiah 53:5; James 3:9-10; Matthew 12:34-37; Proverbs 15:4 .... perverseness (פְּלִיטָה pronounced *seh'-lef*) in your tongue, distortion of the truth and viciousness

Proverbs 15:4 A soothing tongue is a tree of life, But perversion in it crushes the spirit. <sup>NAS</sup>

**Knowing These Things, What Shall I Do?**

James 3:11-12; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:3; John 7:38-39; James 3:13; James 3:17-18  
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