

BIBLE LIFE MESSAGES

How You Can Prevent Forest Fires

James 3:1-12

1 How you can prevent forest fires. How do you get that out of a biblical message? It is related to the Bible passage we will be looking at today. 2

You've seen posters of Smokey the Bear warning you not to cause sparks that could burn down our forests. The California fires we get each year nearly destroy our cities and valuable rural areas. They are usually caused by sparks! 3

James, chapter 3, verse 5 ¹ says your tongue can be like those sparks! Sparks that cause forest fires and tongues are wide ranging, fast spreading and uncontrolled.

Have you ever caught yourself saying things that you are ashamed of immediately after it comes out of your mouth? You couldn't take it back even if you tried! 4
Curbing your tongue means thinking about what you are going to say before you say it. 5

Here are some recommendations from God's word. 6

¹ James 3:5 - Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

Proverbs, chapter 17, verses 27 and 28, A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even tempered. Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue. ⁷

Lord Jesus said, Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. ^{2 8}

Colossians, chapter 4, verse 6, Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. ⁹

You know how you can prevent forest fires? Curb your tongue! ¹⁰

James, chapter 3, verses 1 through 12 tells you why you should think about what you say before you say it. ¹¹

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be

² Matthew 5:37.

judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.³ 12

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.⁴ 13

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 his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been

³ James 3:1-2.

⁴ James 3:3-5.

tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.⁵ 14

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and saltwater flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.⁶ 15

The first thing you need to know about curbing your tongue is . . .

⁵ James 3:6-8.

⁶ James 3:9-12.

I. Teachers are Judged More Harshly - v1-2

Teachers are judged more harshly. ¹⁶

Notice verse 1, **Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.** **Teacher** ⁷ probably here refers to anyone quick to give advise or to tell someone what to do.

Teachers in the Bible are usually given more trust, honor and respect than other people. A popular phrase in the Army I heard a lot was, “If you can’t trust the chaplain, who can you trust?” There’s an aspect of expected integrity. It is the expectation that the preacher will exhibit more Christian virtues than the normal person. ¹⁷

So, what happens when the local pastor runs off with the church secretary? Shock!

This is why it’s even more tragic when a Christian leader stumbles into sin and public ridicule like the

⁷ διδάσκαλος.

falls of the great TV evangelists several years ago. These men had become idols of truth for many people. I think that because there is more damage done for the cause of Christ, Christian teachers who stumble will be judged more strictly. ¹⁸

Lord Jesus said, **But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.**" ⁸ ¹⁹

This is why verse 2 becomes comforting, **We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. You are going to stumble because you are not perfect!** ²⁰

The second thing you need to know about curbing your tongue is . . .

⁸ Matthew 12:36-37.

II. Words Spoken are More Influential Than You Think - v3-5

Words spoken are more influential than you think.

I had a man look me sternly in the eye one time and say, “Do me a favor and leave the ministry!”

The background behind that comment was that, early in my ministry as a pastor, I helped a man financially for awhile. As he began making it a habit of asking me for more it became apparent, he was out to mooch off of me as much as he could. I began to make myself more scarce and, eventually, told him “No”! Even though I knew what kind of character he was, those words stung!

Notice the power of words in this scripture! ²¹

Verse 3 says, **When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Words are like bits that control a whole horse!**

When I was in middle school our family lived in Morocco. There was a stable on the Navy Base where we lived and a few of us went horseback riding.

What an experience! I had ridden horses before but not like this! These were Arabian Stallions! I learned very quickly how important a bit was in a horse's mouth! ²²

Verse 4 says, Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Words are like rudders that control a whole ship!

I had a conversation once with the chaplain who was stationed on the Kitty Hawk. This ship was an 85,000-ton aircraft carrier! In comparison with the size of the ship, the rudders are small. But they are sufficient enough to turn the whole ship. ²³

Verse 5 says, Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a

great forest is set on fire by a small spark. Words are like a small spark that starts a fire that burns down a whole forest! Hence, the title of our message today. ²⁴

The power of words has encouraged young men and women to become ministers and missionaries. ²⁵ The power of words has also ordered the execution of millions of innocent people! ²⁶

The third thing you need to know about curbing your tongue is . . .

III. Words Can Determine the Orientation of Your Whole Life - v6

Words can determine the orientation of your whole life! ²⁷

Notice verse 6, **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 his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. **The tongue is an organ of evil within the body.** ²⁸

The word **world** here ⁹ refers to the physical world, the universe; but also the organized secular society. We get our English word “cosmetics” from it. Here, it probably means the structured system which produces speech. ²⁹

More harm can be done by words than just about any other method. **A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.** ¹⁰ ³⁰ It can be safely said, “If you have a corrupt mouth, you’re corrupt!” ³¹

Your speech can determine your whole future! If your tongue gets you in trouble a lot, it can keep you from many opportunities. How many people have been fired from jobs because they couldn’t control their temper! Would you confide in someone you knew was prone to blab? ³²

The fourth thing you need to know about curbing your tongue is . . .

⁹ κόσμος.

¹⁰ Proverbs 15:1.

IV. You Can't Control Your Speech

Like You Think You Can - v7-8

You can't control your speech like you think you can.

Verse 7 says, **All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man . . .** ³³ **Your tongue isn't like other things you can control.** ³⁴

How about animals? Have you ever been to a circus where elephants have been trained to do incredible things? ³⁵

How about birds? My maternal grandmother had a parrot when I was a kid. She taught that parrot to talk! In fact, the parrot got my grandfather in trouble once. When she returned home from work one day, the parrot squawked, "Bert didn't cover me!" ³⁶

How about reptiles? Have you ever seen a movie depicting snake charmers in India? ³⁷

How about creatures of the sea? I've seen trained killer whales perform at Sea World in California. ³⁸

Verse 8 tells us something else, . . . **but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.**

The tongue is **restless**. ¹¹ It's unstable. Nitroglycerin is an unstable compound. Shake it and it could blow off your hand! ³⁹

The tongue is **poison**. ¹² This is the word for rust. It corrodes whatever it touches. ⁴⁰ The next word defining the poison means **death producing**. ¹³ ⁴¹

The final thing you need to know about curbing your tongue is . . .

¹¹ ἀκατάστατος.

¹² ἴός.

¹³ θανατηφόρος.

V. Your Speech is Inconsistent - v9-12

Your speech is inconsistent. ⁴²

Most things were created for one purpose and fulfill that purpose. ⁴³ Fresh water springs spew out fresh water ¹⁴ suitable for drinking. You will not get salt water out of it. ⁴⁴

Verse 12 tells us that, even through grafting, you can't get a completely different fruit from a tree. ¹⁵ You will always get a hybrid graft. ⁴⁵

Your tongue was created for blessing and praise! But an uncontrolled tongue can also utter curses and other foul words. ⁴⁶

How can you prevent forest fires?

Curb your tongue!

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¹⁴ James 3:11 - Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?

¹⁵ James 3:12 - My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.