

*“Death and life are in the power of the tongue...”* Proverbs 18:21

The first thing we need to look at in this teaching is there is *power* in the tongue. Both *life* and *death* flow from the power of the tongue!

In the third chapter of James beginning with verse three the scripture says, *“Indeed we put bits in horses mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships; although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder where the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boast great things.”*

Just as a small bit in a horses mouth controls him or a small rudder guides a large ship so does our tongue have the power to guide us into places both good and bad.

The power of the atom is a good illustration of this power of the tongue. During the process of splitting atoms or fusing them energy is released. Neutrons are released causing a chain reaction of energy burst. An atomic explosion is the result of an uncontrolled chain reaction causing much death and destruction. But when the same energy is contained in a controlled reaction it can be used in nuclear power plants producing energy that helps people! And as atomic power can be used for both good and bad so does the tongue have the power of life or death.

We have all heard the expression, *“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”* But as we grow older we find that words can indeed be very harmful. Things are said that leave deep wounds that sometimes take years to heal. Children are often verbally assaulted and the pain of that abuse effects their behavior as adults. Family members and friends in the heat of an argument often say things that cause deep wounds. And gossip and rumor have destroyed many a life.

No wonder Proverbs says, *“We are snared by the words of our mouths.”* James continues in this third chapter in verse six, *“And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature.”*

Hitler’s flaming rhetoric spread across Germany leading the entire world into war! We so often underestimate the power of our words to do real harm to others. *“Whoso keeps his mouth and tongue, keeps his soul from trouble.”* Proverbs 6:2 The word “keeps” here speaks of control and discipline. The word of God is counseling us to give some thought and reflection to the power and effect of our speech to and about others.

You may have heard the old saying, *“It is better to be silent and be thought a fool, than to speak up and remove all doubt!”* But we often find our mouths running way ahead of our brains. And before you know it you have said something regrettable. We seem to have trouble controlling our tongues!

James goes on to say in verse eight, *“No man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.”* Here we see our problem. No *man* can tame the tongue. No wonder we continue to struggle with this problem. We can’t do it! This is something that will have to be surrendered to God. We need to surrender our tongues to God! But you will find this harder than you think! Everything in your sin nature will fight this.

*“Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren these things ought not to be so.”* James 3 :10 Look at this. Here we are as believers speaking life and death, out of the same mouth! We speak words of faith, life, peace and encouragement, then turn around and speak words of hurt, abuse, defeat, and gossip. No wonder James said this should not be! Look at the next verse in the chapter, *“Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?”* Of course not. It’s not natural. Something would be wrong if it did. And there is something wrong with us. It’s why we live a life of frustration with our tongues. I think there are many who regret their words of anger. I believe many would like to stop gossiping about others. But there is a power in them that is controlling their tongue.

As a born again believer you have a sin nature that wars against the Spirit of God operating in your life. The flesh wars against the Spirit! And one of these is going to rule the tongue! Why do they want to rule the tongue? Because there is power there! Power for good and evil.

But there is a root to this problem and we need to get at it. Let's look at verse thirteen through sixteen. *"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, and demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there."*

Now let us examine these verses closely beginning with verse thirteen. Remember that Jesus said, *"Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks."* What is found in your heart will control your tongue! If you are wise and have understanding wisdom will flow from your conduct first and then your words. Your works will be done in the *"meekness of wisdom."* Your conduct will speak for itself! But in verse fourteen we find that if you have *"envy and self-seeking"* in your heart you are prone to lie and boast against the truth. And this wisdom or this life pattern does not come from God but is demonic. It is a life pattern that is controlled by the sin nature! So where *"envy and self-seeking"* exist there is nothing but confusion and every evil thing! So the root of the problem is envy and self-seeking!

This all means that when death flows from our tongues it is the result of a root of envy and selfishness. All of the things we say that we shouldn't flows from this cause. And the more you ponder this the more clearly will this truth be to you. You will have found the source of the bitter waters that flow from your tongue.

But we need to remember that the power of life is also in our tongues! Let's look at the last two verses of this powerful chapter. *"But the wisdom that is from above is, first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."*

In these verses we find the secrets to speaking life with our tongues. First we must have a pure heart. He does not mean perfect but a heart of pure intent. Your motives will control your speech. Secondly to seek for peace. To avoid strife and contention. After all it really does take two to argue! Thirdly to be gentle and willing to yield. Do you really have to always have the last word? Must you win every argument? Next to be full of mercy and good fruit. A heart of mercy will always be governed by compassion. Compassion will cause you to see people through the eyes of Jesus. And when you see with His eye you will speak with His tongue! Doing all of this without partiality or favoritism and hypocrisy. The heart becomes linked to the tongue. You are truly speaking out of the abundance of a pure heart! And the fruit of righteousness will come from the seeds of peace!

God will put a "new song in your mouth" and life will flow from your tongue! And from your tongue will flow salvation, encouragement, peace, joy, righteousness, healing, praise, worship, strength, good fruit, edification, and life. And we could go on and on!

There is power in the tongue! The power of life and death! The choice is yours. And if you are going to change the way you talk to people or about people you will need a heart change. What comes out of your mouth defines who you are. So it does not begin with simply trying to stop saying this or that, it must begin in you heart!

And remember, whoever controls your heart controls your tongue. If your sin nature is in control there will be death in your tongue. If God is in control there will be more abundant life!

Here is a simple rule that will help guide you. Before you speak think "EDIFY"! The word means to "build up or strengthen". Does my speech edify myself? Does it edify the person I am speaking to? Does it edify the person I am talking about? And most important, does it edify and glorify the Lord? When I talk am I planting a seed of peace that will bring forth a harvest of righteousness?