

THE TELLTALE TONGUE

James 3:-12

(NIV) "We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. ³ When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ 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. 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. ⁶ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be."

INTRODUCTION

On June 18, 2002, Leonard Gregg, of Arizona's Fort Apache Indian Reservation, a seasonal firefighter, set an arson blaze near the rodeo grounds of his home in Cibecue. By helping to suppress this "wildfire," Gregg hoped to land a job with the Bureau of Indian Affairs on a quick response fire crew. But the Rodeo Fire quickly grew beyond his control. In less than 24 hours, 8,000 acres were ablaze. He was convicted of setting a timber fire, sentenced to 10 years in prison, and fined \$27 million in restitution.

Also on June 18, Mesa resident Valinda Jo Elliott traveled with her boss to service vending machines in Young, AZ, east of Payson. When the Rodeo Fire caused the main roads to be closed, they ignored signs stating back roads through the Sitgreaves National Forest were closed due to extreme fire danger. They got lost and ran out of gas near Chediski Peak, about 20 miles from Cibecue. After waiting through the night for help, her boss set out in the morning on foot on the road. He was soon picked up, taken to get gas, and returned to his truck. Elliott was nowhere to be found. Dressed in shorts, a tank top, flip flops, and carrying just a lighter and two cigarettes, she tried climbing the nearest peak seeking cell phone reception. She soon got lost and spent the night in the wilderness. Next morning, she spied a news helicopter en route to cover the Rodeo fire. She ignited brush as a signal fire. When the helicopter crew landed to rescue her, she took their word she needn't worry about extinguishing her smoldering fire. This was the morning of June 20. By the following morning, her "signal fire" had spread to 14,000 acres. It merged with the Rodeo Fire on June 23. The Rodeo-Chediski Fire consumed 469,000 acres of forest, destroyed 491 buildings, including most of the towns of Heber and Overgaard, and forced Show Low to be evacuated. Valinda Jo Elliott later pleaded guilty to starting the Chediski fire but escaped prosecution. She deeply regrets the destruction her signal fire unleashed but insists she had the right to save her life. The White Mountain Apaches unsuccessfully sought restitution from her in various courts for massive timber losses and other damages.

Fire *provides* many blessings when used within strict safety guidelines. Fire *destroys* many blessings when strict safety guidelines are ignored. Two Outline Points: A Hellish Tongue & A Heavenly Tongue.

I. A HELLISH TONGUE

James warns us alarmingly in **vss. 5b-6**, "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." This reveals our "tongue" can damage and corrupt our entire life by the destructive path it cuts across every aspect of who and what we are. This is no accident, according to James. We usually think of the fallen "world" that is hostile to God as existing *outside* and *around* us, as in **I John 2:15-16** (NLT): "Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. ¹⁶ For the world offers only a

craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world." James wants us to realize our "tongue," which includes the entire process by which our words are formed and expressed, including our thoughts, may expose the ungodly "world" *within* us. As **Jesus** declared in **Luke 6:45** (NLT), "Whatever is in your heart determines what you say." We must realize our tongue can become a pathway for Hell's godlessness to influence us and a conduit by which Hell spews its "restless evil, full of deadly poison" (**3:8**) upon others through us. Yikes! "The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (**3:6**).

A young man once served as youth pastor in a small Pennsylvania town. Many members in this church had been deeply hurt by the former pastor to whom they'd given cult-like devotion. They felt betrayed, embittered, and disillusioned when his scandalous behavior came to light and he left in great disgrace. This young man became a healing agent who helped restore many of the members to a healthy walk with the Lord. But after the former pastor had left, it came out he'd once been accused of molesting boys in a youth camp. One of the members now started the rumor that this youth pastor "had the look of a child molester" (whatever that is). Though totally untrue and few truly believed it, this rumor stirred such a climate of suspicion and even outright accusations about the intent of the youth pastor's actions that it undermined his ministry, sapped his enthusiasm for helping those who were hurting, and led to his early departure.

Of course, the person starting this rumor meant well. She wasn't like Leonard Gregg who ignited a fire to gain him attention and a job. She wasn't that self-serving or destructively Hellish! She was more like Valinda Jo Elliott, claiming she had every right to protect her church from another "child molester." She thought it was too much effort or too confrontational to confide in her pastor, who could have investigated her concerns and mediated, if need be, a private meeting between the woman and this young man. Her fears would have been relieved and the youth pastor's healing ministry could have continued. She chose, instead, to voice her concern "privately" to a few other longtime members. No harm in that, was there? Was it her fault if they spread her rumor, wrongly damaged his reputation, and cost her church his healing care? Yes; it was! Who among us has not suffered greatly due to the caustic effects of a Hellish Tongue?

II. A HEAVENLY TONGUE

But James' main goal is not to *instruct* us on the perils of a tongue under control of Hellish influences. He wants to *inspire* us about the powers of a tongue under control of Heavenly influences. He illustrates his main point of **vs. 2** (NLT): "if we could control our tongues, we . . . could also control ourselves in every other way," by **vss. 3-4**: "When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or 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." Horses are larger and faster than humans. Yet, a small bit in their mouth allows the entire horse to be controlled by the rider; not just its head. Ships, among the largest structures known to early Christians, were often propelled powerfully by forces of nature. Yet, despite their size and power, a pilot changes their course at will by a relatively small rudder. "Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body," James says in **vs. 5**, "but it makes great boasts." James is emphasizing how our relatively small tongue often has the power to direct the course of our lives. "The human tongue is physically small, but what tremendous effects it can boast of!" (Phillips).

Our tongue has the potential to fill our lives or those around us with Heaven's *presence*, instead of Hell's *poison*. **James 3:7-8** advises we cannot achieve such godly control ourselves: "All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." James follows the animal kingdom's fourfold classification in **Genesis 1:26**, over which God gave us "dominion" (KJV) or "rule." Killer whales performing at Sea World testify to our ability to bring nearly every creature on earth under control. But our tongue is "a restless evil" as "uncontrollable" (GNT) or "always liable to break out" (Phillips) as an untamed beast. On

a windswept hill in an English country churchyard stands a drab, gray tombstone. The simple epitaph, now faint from the weathering of centuries, reveals a lot about the deceased in a few words: "Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, / lies Arabella Young, / Who on the twenty-fourth of May, / began to hold her tongue."

Arabella Young did not gain true release from a Hellish Tongue until death. Augustine (A.D. 354-430), an early Christian theologian, writes that when James declares, "no human being can tame the tongue," he is spurring us on to call out upon "the pity, the help, the grace of God" for the mastery over our tongues we cannot otherwise achieve. Wouldn't you rather gain a Heavenly Tongue while you're still alive in an evil world to achieve much good? You could become known for a tongue displaying Heavenly virtues God celebrates, including *Restraint*: **Proverbs 10:19** (CEV), "You will say the wrong thing if you talk too much—so be sensible and watch what you say"; **Psalms 141: 3** (NASB), "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips"; *Righteousness*: **Psalms 37:30** (NLV): "The mouth of the man who is right with God speaks wisdom. And his tongue speaks what is fair and right"; *Restoration*: **Proverbs 15:4** (CJB): "A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but when it twists things, it breaks the spirit"; *Rewards*: **Proverbs 18:20-21** (NCV): "People will be rewarded for what they say; they will be rewarded by how they speak. ²¹ What you say can mean life or death. Those who speak with care will be rewarded."

Pastor Chuck Swindoll comments, "The tongue is as volatile as it is vital. It was Washington Irving [1783-1859, author of *Rip Van Winkle*, & *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*] who first said, 'A sharp tongue is the only edge tool that grows keener with constant use.' It was James, the half brother of Jesus, who first warned: 'The tongue is a fire, . . . a restless evil and full of deadly poison' (**James 3:6,8**). [In other words, the tongue is] Verbal cyanide. A lethal, relentless flaming missile which assaults with hellish power, blistering & destroying at will. And yet it doesn't look anything like the brutal beast it is. Neatly hidden behind ivory palace gates, its movements are an intriguing study of coordination. It can curl itself either into a cheery whistle or manipulate a lazy, afternoon yawn. With no difficulty it can flick a husk of popcorn from between two jaw teeth or hold a thermometer just so. It can help you enjoy the flavor of a stick of peppermint as it switches from side to side without once getting nipped. Moments later it can follow the directions of a trumpeter, allowing him to play *Flight of the Bumblebee* without a single miscue. But watch out! Let your thumb get smashed with a hammer or your toe get clobbered on a chair and that slippery creature in your mouth will suddenly play the flip side of its nature." This reminds me of a joke. A man bought a lawn mower from a boy at a yard sale and took it home. After many tries he couldn't get it to start and went back to the boy. "I thought you said it ran great," he told the boy. The boy said, "It does, but you have to cuss at it first!" The man replied, "I can't cuss. I'm an elder in my church and gave that up years ago." The boy said, "Mister you take that back home and keep jerking on that rope and it will come back to you!"

Acts 2:1-11 records the Church's official birth. On Pentecost, a Jewish feast 50 days after the Passover of our Lord's crucifixion, God's Holy Spirit came to permanently indwell and energize all who commit themselves to **Jesus Christ** as Lord and Savior (**John 7:37-40; John 14:15-18; Acts 1:4-5; Acts 2:32-33**). The first evidence of being "filled with the Holy Spirit" was their purified "speech." **Acts 2:1-4**: "When the day of Pentecost had arrived, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like that of a violent rushing wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were staying. ³ And tongues, like flames of fire that were divided, appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ Then they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different languages, as the Spirit gave them ability for speech." The international crowd in Jerusalem for Pentecost testified to the content of the disciples' Spirit-fired "speech" in **vs. 11**: "'we hear them speaking the magnificent acts of God in our own languages.'" Unlike "fire" that ascends from unholy "hell" and "corrupts" every aspect of our lives through our mouths (**3:6**), the Holy Spirit's "fire" descends upon us to kindle new powers within us, including a Heavenly Tongue.

CONCLUSION

Loretta and I were blessed to attend a statewide Pastors & Wives Retreat July 26-28 at Loews Ventana Canyon Resort. The Arizona Southern Baptist Convention underwrote most of the expenses in an effort to help pastors and their wives "Relax, Refresh, and Recharge" (the Retreat theme). SBC churches across Arizona are closing almost as fast as new ones are being started, in part to due to pastor discouragement and resignations (nationwide: 1-in-5 pastors are now resigning in a typical year). Our Retreat provided an excellent mixture of fun, speakers, meals, free time, and opportunities to make meaningful new friendships with our Savior's precious disciples! But I had serious issues with one part that I believed undermined our experience of God's Presence, nullified some of the Retreat's positive impact, and misguidedly violated core convictions of many who were there. I could have shared my discontent on multiple occasions during this Retreat with the people closest at hand during our various activities, or with the many pastors I've come to know during my eight years serving at Corona de Tucson. This would have made me feel better immediately by venting my criticisms and frustrations; especially when others agreed with me. But this would not have been what God wanted. This would have displayed a Hellish Tongue. It could have stirred up unrest and disunity. It could have undermined respect for our Arizona Southern Baptist Convention leadership. It would not have achieved any helpful changes nor done anything to advance God's work.

Instead of passing along my criticisms to others who were neither part of the problem nor the solution, which would have been gossiping, I directed my concerns to the event and Convention leadership. Despite negative thoughts and feelings about *what* certain people had done, I made it a point to seek them out and express positive affirmation for their *willingness* to serve our Savior and for the *beauty* of their devotion to Him. I believe we forfeit the right to criticize people in ministry positions or any follower of **Jesus** unless we express genuine appreciation to them for their desires to know and to serve our Master. Our Arizona Southern Baptist Convention has four main leaders. I addressed my concerns to two of them on Saturday morning, just before leaving the Retreat, telling them of my intention to write a letter to our Convention President. They advised me to direct the letter to the person in our Convention most responsible for the Retreat. Monday, July 30, I spent 2 ½ hours carefully composing it. It opens with the words, "I hope that this letter, added to the other feedback you receive, will lead you to conclude this year's Arizona Pastors & Wives Retreat is a resounding success!" Over half the letter gives specific details on why key parts of the Retreat were appreciated. I then respectfully detailed my concerns, along with an alternate suggestion for future retreats. But I'm also a team player. Should the part of this Retreat I found highly objectionable be repeated without change in future retreats, I'll drop my objections and continue to support our Convention leadership. I do not exalt my ability to know what's best for our Arizona Southern Baptist events above that of our leaders. This attitude and these actions demonstrate a Heavenly, rather than a Hellish, Tongue!

On a church level, our leadership encourages you to direct concerns about anything in our Church to us, rather than to each other. If your concerns are about me as Pastor, please share them privately with one or more of our three deacons: Mark Crissman, Lonnie Terrill, and Bob Sowers. I submit to their collective wisdom on anything they believe should be changed. Even legitimate concerns, if shared as gossip outside of the leadership circle who alone have the responsibility and God's authority to make needed changes, can become tools of a Hellish tongue and cripple this Church family. Paul gives voice to the qualities of a Heavenly inspired tongue in **Colossians 4:1-3** (NASB): "I . . . implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love,³ being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

We often neglect the routine maintenance inspection of our words provided by God's checklists found in the Bible. If we read **James** and **Proverbs** regularly and adjusted our word choice according to God's instructions, this could save ourselves and others around us from much needless harm and damage control. **Proverbs 18:20-21** (NCV): "People will be rewarded for what they say; they will be rewarded by how they speak.²¹ What you say can mean life or death. Those who speak with care will be rewarded."