

TAMING THE TONGUE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 50:4-11
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 3:1-12



JAMES 3:1-12

1 My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

2 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

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

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.

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

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.

7 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.

9 Therewith 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.

11 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.

KEY VERSE

The tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

—James 3:5

MANY FACES OF WISDOM

Unit 3: Faith and Wisdom in James

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List several consequences of speaking with an untamed tongue.
2. Explain the relationship between lack of wisdom and an untamed tongue.
3. Role-play modern situations in which the tongue is used for good or for evil.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

A. The Power of Words

B. Lesson Context

I. Warning to Teachers (JAMES 3:1, 2)

A. Future Consequences (v. 1)

B. Present Reality (v. 2)

II. Power of the Tongue (JAMES 3:3-8)

A. Like Horses (v. 3)

B. Like Ships (vv. 4, 5a)

It's a Learning Process

C. Like Fire (vv. 5b, 6)

D. Unlike Tamed Creatures (vv. 7, 8)

III. Image of God (JAMES 3:9-12)

A. Blessings and Curses (vv. 9, 10)

Speaking with a Forked Tongue?

B. Water and Fruit (vv. 11, 12)

Conclusion

A. Consider Your Words

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. The Power of Words

The longer we live, the more acutely we are aware of the power of the tongue to destroy. From the days when we hurled schoolyard taunts or insults (or were on the receiving end of those), we realized the power of words to hurt or damage.

Every generation seems to learn this lesson the hard way. Consider, for example, the impact of social media in the world in general and in the church in particular. With fingers typing as an extension of the tongue, Christians argue sharply with each other about faith, politics, etc., in publicly visible Facebook threads. Prominent ministers and authors quarrel with one another on Twitter; relationships are strained or broken on ill-considered tweets of 280 characters or fewer. What would the Bible writers say about such practices?

B. Lesson Context

As we saw in previous lessons, some practices of James's audience ran counter to what they voiced in speech. Up to the point of today's passage, James has written about negative modes of speech, such as the self-justifying claim that one is tempted by God (James 1:13), the flattering speech that reveals partiality toward the rich and shames the poor (2:3-6), the careless speech of those who wish the poor well but do not help them (2:16; see lesson 11), and the superficial speech of the one claiming to have faith but lacking deeds (2:18; see lesson 11).

Other examples of improper speech occurring later include those of judging and slandering (James 4:11), boasting (4:13-16), and grumbling (5:9; see lesson 13). Sandwiched in between is today's text.

Since today's lesson draws heavily on figures of speech, some background information in that regard is in order. Figurative language adds interest and excitement to writing; chief among figures of speech are metaphors. A metaphor takes an idea and imposes it on an unrelated but familiar idea to help explain the qualities of the original. One easy example is the phrase "Joseph is a fruitful bough" (Genesis 49:22). This does not mean that this par-

ticular son of Jacob was literally a grapevine or other vegetation. It means, rather, that he was productive in some way.

James's use of metaphor in speaking of the tongue reflects how other biblical writers use metaphor in speaking of the heart. Indeed, *heart* and *tongue* are used in poetic passages to stand parallel to one another.

The tongue of the just is as choice silver:
the heart of the wicked is little worth.
—Proverbs 10:20

Therefore did my heart rejoice,
and my tongue was glad. —Acts 2:26

Biblical writers use the imagery of the heart to speak of what defines and reveals our true, inner nature. In the same way, the tongue is more than just a part of the body. The tongue is equated with speech, of course. But James's insight extends beyond that. How one uses the tongue reveals the nature of the heart as motives are connected with speech and actions.

I. Warning to Teachers

(JAMES 3:1, 2)

A. Future Consequences (v. 1)

1a. My brethren, be not many masters.

James opens this portion of his letter with a warning to those who want to become masters. The Greek word being translated is equivalent to the Aramaic word *Rabbi* or *Rabboni*, referring to a respected teacher (see John 20:16; compare 3:2; the same word in the original language is translated “teachers” in Acts 13:1; 1 Corinthians 12:28; etc.). In some cases, people who are not teachers should become teachers (see Hebrews 5:12). In other cases, people who are or desire to be teachers should not be. The latter problem is the issue in the verse before us.

Part of the problem that James may be addressing here is that many desire to become teachers because of the status it gives them in the church. An unholy desire to be a teacher is likely grounded in a desire for status (Matthew 23:1-7). Rabbis are not necessarily better off financially than others, but they are accorded honor.

1b. Knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

James sounds a warning for those who are or desire to be teachers—and he writes as one who is a teacher himself. James has already discussed the problem of discrimination based on wealth and social standing (see James 2:1-13). So the warning against seeking to teach can be seen to continue to address the desire for standing while moving into the discussion of use of the tongue.

It may also be that some teachers are being careless with the words they speak. This may stem from a desire for the honor that the teaching role brings at the expense of the content of what is taught. *The greater condemnation* calls to mind the words of Jesus:

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 (Matthew 12:36, 37).

To teach carelessly, falsely, with flattering speech, etc., marks one who is not faithfully exerting self-control (compare Romans 16:17, 18; 1 Thessalonians 2:3-5; Jude 16).

There are two primary schools of thought about how James 3:1 relates to what follows. Some see it as introducing the general topic of speech by referring to a particular circumstance of speech. Others see the reverse, saying that this verse introduces material especially important for teachers themselves (see also lesson 13). This commentary will consider the text as instruction specifically for teachers and those who desire to be teachers. Even so, the analogies James uses and the direct points he makes are certainly applicable in an extended sense to all Christians.

What Do You Think?

How can our church help its non-teaching members evaluate whether they should become teachers?

Digging Deeper

What can be done to encourage current teachers to evaluate whether they have the spiritual gift of teaching (compare Romans 12:6, 7; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Ephesians 4:11, 12)?



Visual for Lesson 12. *While discussing verse 2, pose the question on this visual, then fall silent to allow time for thoughtful responses.*

B. Present Reality (v. 2)

2. For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

The word translated *offend* (translated “stumbled” in Romans 11:11) begins a word picture of careless use of the tongue (*in word*). The phrase *we offend all* does not mean “we offend everyone”; rather, it means that all of us are guilty of tripping up in various ways. To be wary of how one’s words are taken is particularly important for the teacher who is charged with communicating Christian doctrine to new believers. Teachers who fail in this area will speak in ways that are harmful to the church body. Habits of speech are, therefore, particularly important as the teacher gives direction to the community.

Even so, the person who is never guilty of verbal miscues does not exist. The hypothetical person who achieves perfection in speech would, by extension, be able to control every aspect of his or her life; that is, be able *to bridle the whole body*. James uses a word picture: a bridled horse is a controlled horse. The verb translated *to bridle* is translated similarly in James 1:26.

If the teacher can control the tongue in teaching, then the result will be to impart the truth of the faith. Consider all that teachers are responsible for: they must pass along biblical truth accurately and thoroughly. They are responsible for

interpretation and application. They guide Christian believers in many aspects of life—spiritually, intellectually, and morally.

What Do You Think?

Although perfection isn’t fully attainable in this life, what is the single most important thing you can do to keep the standard of James 3:2 before you in the week ahead?

Digging Deeper

Which of the following passages challenges you most to do so: Matthew 5:48; 19:21; James 1:25; 1 John 4:18? Why?

Chapter 3 is pivotal as James explicitly connects speech to control of the body. To control the tongue means that one can control one’s entire self. Teaching, then, is not limited to speech. It also comes about through the actions of the teacher. Truthful teaching does not simply mean that the teacher says the correct words to explain the Christian faith. Truthful teaching includes consistency: words spoken by the teacher are consistent with the teacher’s life. The walk matches the talk.

II. Power of the Tongue

(JAMES 3:3-8)

A. Like Horses (v. 3)

3. Behold, we put bits in the horses’ mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.

A bridle usually includes a bit, which is a metal device inserted into the mouth of a horse. The bit results in discomfort, causing the horse to respond to the pressure of the reins attached to the bridle. If the rider pulls back on both reins, the horse will slow until the pressure from the reins is released. If the rider pulls the right rein, the trained horse will turn right until the pressure from the bit is relieved. Just as the bit guides the horse, so the tongue of the teacher guides the church and has a similar large impact on its course.

B. Like Ships (vv. 4, 5a)

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.

With a second analogy, James extends his discussion of the impact of the teacher's words on the church. The analogy involves contrasting the size of a ship's steering mechanism with the size of the ship itself. Two forces are at work: (1) *fierce winds* on the ship as a whole and (2) the ship's *governor* at the helm. So much depends on the one steering the ship!

✧ *IT'S A LEARNING PROCESS* ✧

I learned to ride a bicycle when I was 7 years old. Thirty years later, I bought my first motorcycle. The transition was an easy one because the principles of balance and steering apply to both. At 82, I'm still occasionally asked, "Have you ever had an accident?" My answer is always, "Never a fatal one." I'm still learning as I become a better rider. Steering a boat is similar. Practice makes a skilled helmsman.

Controlling our tongues also takes practice. It can take a lifetime to learn how to use our tongues to help and not to hurt. How practiced are you in the steering of others by means of your tongue?

—C. R. B.

5a. Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things.

Before James moves to his third analogy, he pauses to ensure that his readers do not miss the point of the first two: *the tongue* has an outsized importance relative to its *little* size.

What Do You Think?

What are some safeguards Christians can adopt to prevent boasting?

Digging Deeper

How do passages such as Psalms 44:8; 94:4; Romans 3:25-27; 2 Corinthians 10:7-18; 11:10-21; and 2 Timothy 3:1-5 influence your conclusions?

C. Like Fire (vv. 5b, 6)

5b. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

Whether we have experienced a forest fire personally or not, all of us are aware of the devastating impact that an uncontrolled blaze can have. Often, these fires are caused by something very *little*—a dropped match or a campfire not adequately snuffed out. The second half of verse 5 leads into verse 6.

6a. And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity.

Similar phrasing is found in Proverbs 16:27 and Isaiah 30:27.

6b. 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.

The word *members* refers to parts of the body, terminology frequently found in Paul's writings as well (example: Romans 12:4, 5). Though the tongue is only one piece of the whole, it has an outsized effect.

Three results of an unchecked tongue are noted. The first (*defileth the whole body*) is that a person is made unholy. The second (*setteth on fire the course of nature*) involves a Greek word referring to birth or lineage (see also in Matthew 1:1, 18; Luke 1:14); the tongue can upset the natural cycle of life in very short order. The third (*it is set on fire of hell*) offers insight regarding the source of abuses inflicted by the tongue (compare Matthew 5:22).

What Do You Think?

What "emergency" tongue-control procedures would you propose for Christians when a conversation starts to shed more heat than light?

Digging Deeper

Under what circumstances, if any, should you merely walk away from such an occurrence rather than trying to help cool things down?

D. Unlike Tamed Creatures (vv. 7, 8)

7. 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.

James now begins a comparison from another setting: that of humanity's taming of various creatures. He divides these into four categories:

land animals, *birds*, *serpents* (or reptiles in general, translated “creeping things” in Acts 10:12; 11:6; Romans 1:23), and *sea* creatures.

By *tamed* James does not mean that humans have made pets or farm animals out of all these creatures (compare Job 41:1-5). The idea of taming is closer to the command of Genesis 1:28 for humankind to “have dominion over” all creatures. There is no creature that humans have not been able to dominate. Humans have the proven ability to exercise dominion over all earthly creatures, whether for good or bad.

8. But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

Animals can be tamed, but can *the tongue*? No one truly brings his or her tongue into full submission.

As we ponder this fact, we should be careful not to take this verse out of context. It would be wrong to conclude, “James says no one can tame the tongue, so why even try? It is a futile waste of time.” Those who accept that argument should read the previous verses again. Although no one is able to keep his or her tongue perfectly controlled, we must make the effort since uncontrolled speech destroys. James’s word picture of *deadly poison* brings to mind Psalm 140:3: “[Violent men] have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adders’ poison is under their lips” (compare Romans 3:13).

What Do You Think?

What is the single most important thing you can do this week to tame your tongue better?

Digging Deeper

What problems have you seen in this regard concerning words “spoken” on social media?

What Scripture passage can you keep near your keyboard to restrain your impulse?

III. Image of God

(JAMES 3:9-12)

A. Blessings and Curses (vv. 9, 10)

9. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

Throughout his letter, James is concerned with

the divided hearts of his audience (James 1:8; lesson 9). A divided heart most clearly reveals itself in divided speech (see Lesson Context). Divided speech is heard when the tongue speaks blessing in the worship of *God* and then curses those *made after the similitude of God* (Genesis 1:26, 27).

Divided speech is shaped by the attitude of the speaker. As the speaker badmouths those who are created in God’s image, something negative is revealed about the speaker’s attitude toward God himself.

This point is so important that it bears stressing again from a slightly different angle: if the tongue is blessing God in worship one minute only to turn around and curse those made in God’s image in the next, then corrective action is called for. A corrective action of keeping silent will be a start but only a start; the deeper problem to solve is one of heart attitude.

Some students detect echoes of this problem in Israel’s deficient practices of worship as those were condemned by God: “This people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me” (Isaiah 29:13).

✂ *SPEAKING WITH A FORKED TONGUE?* ✂

In 1855, the US government told the chief of the Nez Percé tribe that his people would be allowed to keep millions of acres of tribal lands in the Pacific Northwest. A treaty was signed. But a few years later, the government forced a new treaty on the tribe due to the discovery of gold on tribal land.

When the chief died, his son and successor fought to recover the land that had been promised earlier. Some of the Nez Percé were slaughtered; survivors were forced to live on a small fraction of their ancestral lands.

Historical events such as this provide the backdrop for movies of the “Old West” type, featuring Indians concluding that the white man “speaks with a forked tongue,” or variations of that phrase. Whether or not Native Americans ever actually said that, we speak with forked tongue when we say we revere God as our heavenly Father but then do harm in word or deed to our fellow humans,

who are made in His image. How does our speech bear witness to our God for good or for ill?

—C. R. B.

10. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

A modern illustration of this problem is inconsistent use of social media. Think of a hypothetical believer who posts positive messages of witness for Christ one minute, then turns around and posts personal attacks the next! (See the lesson Introduction.) The bottom line is that this double life is unacceptable to God. Words that flow from our hearts—whether uttered by *mouth* or typed by fingers—should be consistently holy.

B. Water and Fruit (vv. 11, 12)

11. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?

The questions that James asks here and in the next verse are meant to stir reflection in the hearts of teachers and potential teachers. The questions are rhetorical, with answers obvious as they concern clear incompatibilities. Of course *a fountain* cannot produce both *sweet water and bitter*.

The analogy is impossible to miss: teachers in the church are called to speak consistently in truth and love. Those whose hearts are right will find it impossible to mix blessing and cursing.

12. Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

The produce mentioned are common to the agricultural economy of the day. James draws on this fact to craft more rhetorical questions, reinforcing the point just made (see Matthew 7:16).

HOW TO SAY IT

Aramaic	<i>Air-uh-may-ik.</i>
Corinthians	<i>Ko-rin-thee-unz (th as in thin).</i>
Jude	<i>Jood.</i>
Nez Percé	<i>Nehz Purse.</i>
Rabbi	<i>Rab-eye.</i>
Rabboni	<i>Rab-o-nye.</i>
Thessalonians	<i>Thess-uh-lo-nee-unz (th as in thin).</i>

Conclusion

A. Consider Your Words

Today's lesson concerns the destructive power of the tongue. Specifically, it deals with the words spoken by those who were recognized as teachers in the first-century church (and perhaps those who aspired to that role). Their words were of special concern to James because they involved matters that have an eternal import. All of us can think of ways in which words spoken by teachers have had beneficial or damaging effects on the lives of their hearers. Words should be a source of spiritual growth and sustenance.

But how many of us have seen church splits that resulted from ill-advised words? How many of us have seen men and women leave the faith because of spiritually damaging utterances? These concerns lie at the heart of today's text.

James's description of the tongue may lead us to conclude that attempting to control it is hopeless. Admittedly, the tongue *is* extremely difficult to control, as we know all too well. All of us have said things that we came to regret.

What is more, the work of taming the tongue is a lifelong task. While today's text directly addressed teachers, it calls on all Christians to examine themselves. Are we faithfully using our powers of speech daily? Do we speak words of truth and grace consistently at home, on the job, and in church? Are our critiques healing or destructive?

These are questions for everyone, no matter what position or stage of life. In effect, we are all teachers on some level, by our tongues as well as the examples we set.

B. Prayer

Lord God, as we come to see more clearly the destructive power of the tongue, we pray for strength to bridle and to restrain our tongues from all forms of evil speech. Transform our words so that they bring glory to Your name. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The tongue must be controlled.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with KJV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the KJV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Distribute handouts (you prepare) on which are printed the three scenarios below, but just one scenario per handout. Form small groups or study pairs; give each a handout of one scenario. Allow a few minutes for each group or pair to answer this question: Given the facts of the scenario, what action should be taken (or should have been taken), if any?

- 1—*My third-grade teacher in the public elementary school once called me “airheaded” when I didn’t have the right response to a question.*
- 2—*When a math teacher at our college couldn’t get a quadratic equation to compute, a student had to point out that he was trying to take the square root of a negative number! Such incompetence!!*
- 3—*One professor at the local college really knows how to teach economics! The students hang on his every word. But from what I know of his life outside the college classroom, the man is a racist.*

After a few minutes, have groups present their conclusions for class discussion. Make a transition by putting learners back in their same groups and change the scenarios as follows: (1) instead of a public school teacher it was a Sunday school teacher, (2) instead of math course at college it is a church class in basic doctrine taught by an elder, (3) the professor in economics is also a deacon at your church, and he excels at teaching Bible.

After another round of group and whole-class discussion, say, “Let’s see if James has some thoughts that can help us with solutions.”

Into the Word

Recruit in advance one or more volunteers having artistic skills to come to class with very large sketches they have made of the images in today’s lesson text (figs, bit, etc.). Furnish large sections of poster board for the task. Put the sketches on display just before you read the lesson text aloud. Gesture toward them as visual reinforcements at appropriate times during the lesson.

After reading the lesson text aloud, pose the following questions for discussion. 1—Which comparison gives you the greatest insight into problems with the tongue? 2—Which comparison reminds you most of an issue you’ve seen but not experienced personally? 3—Which comparison illustrates most sharply a difficult situation you have had to face?

Option. For extended discussion, distribute copies of the “Positive Pointers” exercise on the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in study pairs to complete as indicated.

Into Life

Distribute four slips of paper on which you have printed the following situations, one per slip. Form learners into pairs and give a slip to each pair.

- 1—*You overhear a teacher at church talking at length about how upset he is with your minister.*
- 2—*A friend describes the terrible housekeeping habits of a mutual friend.*
- 3—*A snippy acquaintance asks you if you got your outfit at a thrift store.*
- 4—*A friend gripes about behavior of someone’s child.*

Ask pairs to develop and enact a role play before the class the situation on the pair’s slip of paper. Instruct that the role play should demonstrate a Christian response. Allow each pair two minutes to prepare and two minutes to role-play. After each, encourage reactions in open discussion.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Situational Suggestions” exercise from the activity page. Due to its personal nature and need for possibly lengthy reflection, it should be a take-home exercise. To encourage completion, promise to ask for volunteers to disclose results at the beginning of next week’s class.

Close with sentence prayers from learners. Wrap up with your own prayer that asks for God’s for help in controlling the tongue.