

Controlling the Tongue

James 3:1-12

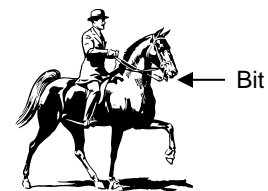


- In his letter, James talks about the tongue¹ and the things we say. Read James 3:1-12.
- James begins by noting that teachers will be judged more strictly (*v. 1*). Because they teach others, they have a special responsibility in the use of their tongues.²
 1. In verse 2, James says, “we *all* stumble (go wrong, or sin) in many ways.” In what ways do we “stumble” in what we say?³ What are examples?

Personal Application: Identify the specific ways *you* tend to “stumble” in what you say.

Power of the Tongue

- In verses 3-6, James talks about the power of the tongue. He uses three illustrations that were widespread in the ancient world.
 2. How is the tongue like a horse’s bit and a ship’s rudder?⁴



3. How is the tongue like a “small fire?”⁵ What are examples?⁶

- Read James 3:6. The tongue reveals an opposition to God’s truth and ways, which corrupts our whole lives. The tongue reveals the worldliness in us, including pride, selfish ambition, and other forms of self-centeredness. The ultimate source of this unrighteousness is “hell,” with Satan as chief. Like a fire, the tongue has great potential to do damage.
- The tongue also has great potential to do good.

¹ ‘tongue’ (*glōssa*) – organ or instrument of speech

² Perhaps James is addressing people who aspire to be teachers but have trouble controlling their tongues. But James’ warning also applies to existing teachers (including Jay). See Matthew 12:36-37 and Luke 12:48.

³ Hasty speech and angry words (see James 1:19); gossip (talking about others, rumors – reports without a discernable source or basis for truthfulness); lies or deceitful speech; prideful boasting; insulting, destructive or critical speech; ridicule; insensitive or brash speech; profanity; sharing confidential information; taunting; sarcasm; quarreling; complaining; grumbling; course joking; disrespectful speech; immoral speech; others?

⁴ Both are very small but are used to *direct* something large. Of course, a person is needed to control the bridle and bit of the horse, and the rudder of the ship. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it is very powerful. If a person can control the tongue, he or she will move in the proper direction, even when faced with ‘fierce winds.’

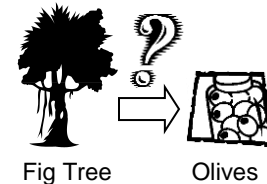
⁵ The tongue is small, but the impact of wrong words can spread quickly and cause great harm. Once it spreads, it’s almost impossible to control. As someone said, ‘Man is the master of the unspoken word, which once spoken is the master of him.’ Most of us know well how the words of others affect us, but it’s more difficult to detect how our words affect others. We say things hastily, without much thought, or with righteous indignation or defensiveness. Some fires are started with malicious intent (arson). Other fires are started because of carelessness. Both destroy.

⁶ There are many examples. One example is gossip. Another example involves reacting in anger. When someone attacks us with angry words, we can let the winds of anger take us in the wrong direction resulting in greater anger and harm, or we can control our tongues and go in the right direction. See Proverbs 15:1 on page 3.

Personal Application: What words have *you* said that caused problems? What were the consequences of your words? Why did you say them? Were your motivations good or bad?

Outflow of the Tongue

- ❑ In verses 9-12, James talks about what comes out of the mouth and what it reveals.
 4. What problem does James talk about in verses 9-10? Why is it wrong?
- 📖 *Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-38, HCSB)*
- 📖 *Jesus said, “Love your enemies, do what is good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” (Luke 6:27-28, HCSB; cp. Rom.12:9-10, 14)*
- ❑ In verses 11-12, James uses illustrations from nature to explain why both praising and cursing should not come from the same mouth.
 5. What is the point of these illustrations, and how does it apply to us?⁷ (See Matthew 15:11, 18 & Luke 6:44a, 45 on page 3.)



Taming the Tongue

- ❑ Humans can tame all kinds of animals but no human being can tame the tongue (v. 8).
 6. Why is it so hard to control the tongue? (vv. 7-8) If no human being can tame the tongue, how can it be brought under control?⁸ What specific actions do we need to take?
- ❑ Since “the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart” (*Matthew 15:18*), we need “new hearts” filled with God’s love, indwelt by Christ, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit (*Ezekiel 36:26; Romans 5:5; Ephesians 3:16-17*).

Reflection/Application

- Read and consider the verses on the following page. This week, examine the things you say in light of God’s word. What do *your* words reveal about *you*? Do you need to trust in Jesus?
- Controlling the tongue is a very important part of the Christian life, but effective control begins in the heart. Truly submit your heart to God, and commit to use your tongue for good rather than bad. Reflect on Colossians 3:15-17.

⁷ These illustrations show that our words reveal what’s in our hearts. The believer should have a pure heart (James 4:8), but how can bad things come from a pure heart? This should not be (James 3:10).

⁸ The tongue is hard to control because of our tendency to sin. The believer has been set free from the controlling power of sin, but still battles the tendency to sin. We cannot tame the tongue on our own, but the tongue can be controlled by God’s grace realized in Christ. Thus the first step is to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We must continually submit ourselves to God, acknowledging our constant need of Him. We must exercise self-control in our speech, but remember that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatian 5:22-23). We must spend time in God’s word and prayer, seeking transformation of the heart and renewal of the mind. We must encourage one another.



God's Word Concerning Our Words



- 📖 *Jesus said*, “But I tell you that everyone 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.” (*Matthew 12:36-37, NIV*)
- 📖 *Jesus said*, “What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them... the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.” (*Matthew 15:11, 18, NIV; read 15:16-20*)
- 📖 *Jesus said*, “Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. ... A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” (*Luke 6:44a, 45, NIV*)
- 📖 The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool. When there are many words, sin is unavoidable, but the one who controls his lips is wise. (*Proverbs 10:18-19, HCSB*)
- 📖 The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment. (*Proverbs 12:18-19, NIV*)
- 📖 A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. (*Proverbs 15:1, NIV*)
- 📖 A worthless man digs up evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. A contrary man spreads conflict, and a gossip separates close friends. (*Proverbs 16:27-28, HCSB*)
- 📖 A fool’s lips lead to strife, and his mouth provokes a beating. A fool’s mouth is his devastation, and his lips are a trap for his life. (*Proverbs 18:6-7, HCSB*)
- 📖 Without wood, fire goes out; without a gossip, conflict dies down. As charcoal for embers and wood for fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife. (*Proverbs 26:20-21, HCSB*)
- 📖 A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin. (*Proverbs 26:28, NIV*)
- 📖 *David prayed*, “Set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.” (*Psalms 141:3, NIV*)
- 📖 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (*Ephesians 4:29, NIV*)