

James 12 – Taming the Tongue
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We are in a sermon series on James called Wisdom for Everyday Life. The book of James was written 2000 years ago - yet it is amazingly relevant today. Throughout this book – James shows how to put faith to work because as he said in James 2:26 *Faith without works is dead.*

James shows us what a mature Christian looks like and he spends a lot of time talking about how we should control what we say. The first half of James 3 teaches us about taming our tongues. That’s what I’m preaching on today.

This chapter starts out with a verse that seems out of place, but it’s not. James 3:1 says:

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

I know that standing here teaching you is a holy privilege. And I know I will be strictly judged for the content of my sermon. I cannot just stand up and give my opinions or speculations. I must rightly divide the word of truth!

People judge teachers more strictly and so does God. Why will teachers receive stricter judgment? Because we have the potential of leading you to truth or leading you astray. That’s why God will judge the words we say!

When you say something, it impacts the person you are talking to or the people who read it on social media. When we say something, it impacts hundreds of people. We will be judged by the words we say. That’s why we include as much Scripture as possible we when preach!

And that’s why this verse connects with the rest of this section: it’s all about the words that we speak. James 3:2 goes on to say:

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.

When James says a perfect man, he does not mean sinless perfection. We know that because he also said we all stumble in many ways. None of us are perfect – we all sin.

Also, remember that in the New Testament, when you see the word “perfect” applied to people, it means mature. So, if you think you are a mature believer, it does not just mean that you know the word – it means you do the word and you control your tongue. Then James 3:3 compares taming the tongue to taming animals.

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.

James 3:7-8 says:

People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, but no one can tame the tongue.

This does not mean that taming the tongue is hopeless. It means that we cannot do it in our own strength, But with God's help, we can tame the tongue.

As with all things, we are co-laborers with the Lord. We need to do what the Bible says in Proverbs 21:23 –

If you want to stay out of trouble, be careful what you say.

But to do that we must ask for God's help! We must pray Psalm 141:3

Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.

Then James 3:4-5 says:

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.

Notice in these verses James compares the tongue to a rudder on a ship. The largest ship in the US Navy is the USS Gerald Ford. It is 1,092 feet long and weighs one hundred thousand tons. As immense as this ship is, it is turned by one person controlling rudders that are $\frac{1}{1000\text{th}}$ the size of the ship. A tiny rudder controls the course of huge ships.

So it is with our mouths. That little thing inside your mouth called your tongue can determine your entire destiny.

By the way - You don't solve the problem of an unruly horse by keeping it in the barn. You don't solve the problem of a hard-to-steer ship by keeping it tied to the dock. In the same way, a vow of silence is not the ultimate answer for the misuse of our tongue. Instead, we need to control our tongues.

What we say to each other can have lasting effects, for good or for evil. A critical remark can inflict a lasting injury on another person. On the other hand, a well-timed encouragement or compliment can inspire someone for the rest of their life.

But, rather than controlling our tongues, our tongues usually control us. And the results are disastrous!

James 3:5-6 says:

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 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.

Wow! We hear sermons about eternal hellfire, but James tells us we can bring the fires of hell into our lives now! How? Through the words we speak! Those words can be motivated by heaven when we speak God's word, or by hell, when we speak the enemy's words!

Satan's main tool is words. God's main tool is also words. When we open our mouths we either speak for God or for Satan.

When our speech is motivated by God it contains life.

When our speech is motivated by Satan it contains death.

James 3:7-8 says:

...no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison.

The tongue is restless, always looking to speak. That word in the Bible also means unstable. And the tongue is evil and full of deadly poison.

That sounds familiar. Proverbs 18:21 says:

The tongue has the power of life and death...

Words can heal or words can kill. Words can bless or words can curse. Words can build up or words can tear down. Words can glorify God or words can glorify Satan. James addresses that in verses 9-11.

Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth.

There are believers whose tongues are out of control and they bless God with one breath and in the next breath they cuss somebody out. James says:

Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty spring.

James gives us a huge key to taming the tongue in these verses. He is saying that the words we speak come from a deeper source than our tongues. Notice that James compares olive trees and fig trees. You can call a fig tree an olive tree, but that won't make it an olive tree. You can trim a fig tree to look like an olive tree, and that will not make it an olive tree. You can surround a fig tree with many olive trees, and that will not make it an olive tree.

You can transplant that fig tree to the Mount of Olives, and that would not make it an olive tree. By their fruit you will know them! And by the fruit of your words, your true heart will be known. Jesus said in Matthew 12:34-35

For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.

I'm not saying we shouldn't be careful what we say. We should. But that is only part of the solution. God is concerned with both our words and our heart. Psalm 19:14 says:

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight.

I think the point that James is making is that we must first guard our hearts before we can guard our lips. If I change what I say - but my heart doesn't change - I haven't really changed. That's why Proverbs 4:23 tells us

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

The New Living Translation says it determines the course of your life. The Complete Jewish Bible says it is the source of life's consequences.

One of the reasons guarding your heart is so important is because it is the source of your words which minister either life or death! So, we must guard our heart and watch our words. But how do we do this? This is easier said than done.

And the truth that James tells us is that ultimately, we cannot control our tongues on our own.

There was a time in my life when I struggled with the way I talked to my daughter because of some choices she had made. Anytime I had a conversation with her, no matter how hard I tried, I always ended up saying something hurtful that I always regretted. I would feel really bad and resolve never to do it again. However - I could not control my mouth.

One evening - Kristen and I had a phone conversation and I said some very hurtful things. We both hung up the phone crying. So, she called her dad. He listened to Kristen and was able to feel the pain I had caused her.

Then he came into my room where I was still crying and said, "You know what, Kristen's right - She may have made some bad choices, but you need to forgive her and you need a heart change."

That moment, for the first time in years - I was able to see the pain my words were causing my daughter.

My heart was broken and the Holy Spirit changed my heart. We don't struggle to control our mouth when our hearts are changed. You see – the real issue was not just my mouth. The real issue was my heart. My mouth was just reflecting what was buried deep in my heart.

All of us know the phrase “sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me. This is a complete lie!

All it takes is one unkind word to demolish beliefs and harden a heart.

All it takes is one kind word to inspire hope and build dreams.

There is power in our words!

Here's a sobering thought - We will have to answer to God for every word we've ever spoken. Words will impact our entire destiny. In Matthew 12:36-37 Jesus tells us-

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.

Our words will impact us in eternity and our words impact everyday life here and now. Did you know that you can know God's will for your life and never accomplish it because of the words of your mouth?

Our words can frame our future and blueprint our destiny for good or bad.

Our tongues can either further God's purpose or hinder it.

Our tongues can either build people up or tear them down.

Everything that God is trying to accomplish in and through us can be established or destroyed by what comes out of our mouths! Some people believe God for good things but never see them. Maybe the reason is that they are believing but not speaking. 2 Corinthians 4:13 says:

It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak.

Believing God's word isn't enough! We must speak it! You won't see many positive results by speaking negative things. However, there are times when by His mercy and grace God blesses us in spite of our foolish words. But the Bible is very clear that our words are powerful. Proverbs 18:20 says:

From the fruit of his mouth a man's stomach is filled; with the harvest from his lips he is satisfied.

The Amplified Version says:

A man's shall be filled with the fruit of his mouth; and with the consequence of his words he must be satisfied [whether good or evil].

In other words, don't complain about the harvest from the words you speak. Some of us are praying for harvest but our mouth is causing a crop failure. We pray "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Then we confess "I can't do this." We pray "God, I put my trust in you." Then we confess "How am I ever going to pay these bills." We pray "God, change my heart." Then we confess "Nothings ever going to change." We pray one thing and confess another. James 3:10 says:

Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

With our mouth we praise God and we curse ourselves and other people.

You must stop cursing yourself and start speaking words of blessing over yourself. This may seem strange to you at first, but Isaiah 65:16 says

He who blesses himself in the earth shall bless himself by saying, May the God of truth bless me...

It's biblical to speak blessings over yourself! Some people have no problems putting themselves down but they can't seem to build themselves up! They can curse themselves but not bless themselves. If I asked you this: would you curse something God wants to bless? You would say, "Of course not." Yet we curse ourselves while God wants to bless us. My brothers and sisters – these things ought not to be!

Our words become self-fulfilling prophecies and we wonder why things are falling apart in our life. Proverbs 13:3 says:

He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.

Joshua 1:8-9 tells us to do the opposite of that!

Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

In other words, do not stop speaking the word of God. The way we guard our heart and watch our words is to get into the word and get the word into us. Do not stop believing and doing and speaking the word of God.

I'm not saying today that you can get anything you confess. But as believers, created in God's image, our words spoken in faith, according to the will of God, do have power! You've heard it said, If you don't have anything good to say, say nothing. But you always have something good to say! You have God's Word!

Whatever situation you are in – find a Bible verse to believe and speak!
 Believe it, speak it, pray it and do warfare with it!
 We overcome the enemy the same way Jesus did – by speaking the Word!
 Our words can defeat the enemy and win the victory.
 There is power when our words line up with God’s word!

Do your words agree with God or do they agree with Satan? Hebrews 10:23 says:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.

The Greek word for confession is homologeo. It means to assent to or agree with. Confession literally means “to speak the same as another.” To say the same thing as whom? That’s where you choose. Your words either agree with God or they agree with Satan.

To tame our tongues, we must use the sword of the spirit – which is speaking the truth of God’s word.

I want to close by confessing the word together.

Instead of confessing “I can’t” we must confess God’s word that says
 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Instead of confessing lack, we must confess God’s word that says
 My God shall supply all of my needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

Instead of confessing fear, we must confess God’s word that says
 God has not given me the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

Instead of confessing weakness, we must confess God’s word that says The Lord is the strength of my life.

Instead of confessing defeat, we must confess God’s word that says
 God always causes me to triumph in Christ Jesus.

Instead of confessing sickness we must confess God’s word that says
 By His stripes I am healed.

Instead of confessing condemnation, we must confess God’s word that says There is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.

Instead of confessing worry, we must confess God’s word that says
 He will keep you in perfect peace, when your mind is stayed on Him.

Instead of confessing failure, we must confess God's word that says,
In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

Instead of confessing fear about the future, we must confess God's word that says
God has plans for us that are good not evil.

There is power in speaking the word of God!
So, if you want to tame your tongue – start speaking the word of God!