
Into Thy Word Bible Study in James

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James 3: 1-12: Taming the Tongue!

General idea: Here is where James is slapping our face to get our attention on discipline so we do not fall further into judgment. Why? Because; words can get us in so much trouble, and serve both for the good of the Kingdom and the detriment of the Church. Who has control of your words, God or man? Do your words reflect who you are in Christ, or does the sinful nature have it roots in you? Is wisdom guiding them, or the desire for the world's attention? This are James' questions to the early Church in their struggle with gossip, slander, and, a problem we all have at times—speaking before thinking (James 1: 26; 2:12; 4:1, 11-12). Words have the crucial role of communicating not only our ideas but how we are connecting with others. Thus, how we use our spoken language, as well as our body language, is of utmost importance and that we do so knowing we have been bought by Christ and we are His ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20). Our tongue must reflect our spiritual maturity and character! Our words, and the deeds that result from them, will convey to others who Christ is in us and how they should view Him. This may sound overwhelming, but it is also an honor and blessing to be called to convey His precepts, not in just preaching a sermon, but in how we live our daily life to God's honor, demonstrated in our connections with others.

Vs. 1-5a: James first mentions, in verses 1: 19 and 26, how Jesus calls us to be wise stewards of our words (Matt. 12:33-38; Mark 7:20-23). Now, he gives further reproof. Teaching is not just a job or call; it is a responsibility we must take very seriously! The office of the teacher is perhaps the most important role in the church, and the one with the greatest responsibility. James then gives us illustrations that the tongue is small but its wake and impact can be immeasurable. God calls us to tame our tongue, and acknowledges that we do not have the ability to do so alone; however, He gives those who are in Him the ability to do so!

- *Become teachers...stricter judgment.* A teacher has the responsibility of the trust of the susceptible student to teach with clarity and truth. Jewish sages, who were pious, warned that wrong teaching, leading others astray, and deliberately teaching error were heinous sins, as was promoting our own desires for personal glory and position. We are held accountable for our teachings; we are to teach God's wisdom not ours, His glory not ours (Matt. 5:19; 18:6; Rom. 14:10-12; James 3:13-18)!
- *We all stumble* means we all make mistakes that are not deliberate, premeditated sins. This is also a Jewish adage that we make mistakes and

sin. However, as God knows we are fallible, we still have the responsibility to do our best to be wise stewards of our words.

- The human tongue, to Jewish wisdom and Scripture, is a wild and evil force as well as an instrument for good. Our heart and spiritual formation will determine the impact and outcome of our words (Prov. 11:9; 12:18; 18:21).
- *Horse...bits.* This representation is that great results come from small means. In an agrarian culture, the domestication of animals was essential as a source of labor, substance, and wealth. Every family unit in biblical times, except a slave or a very poor person, would have animals. This is a rhetorical question that all could understand; we can control wild animals, why not our very own tongue? Thus, our words can determine the direction of our lives and shape us for what is ahead!
- *Little member.* James' point is that small devices can have great power. The tongue is neither friend or foe, yet it is a reflection of our mind and a mirror to our soul. Thus, it is a tool at our heart's and mind's disposal! It is the indication of how we are dealing with life, our spiritual growth, our character, and our maturity.

James is telling us that those who teach have a greater responsibility in communicating effectively and we will be judged in a stricter sense due to the fact we are conveying to others His precepts. If we do it with bad intentions, or use words to put others off/down instead of lifting them up, we will be judged for it! So, how can we make sure we are better at modeling Christ to others? The key thing James brings to our attention is the discipline to exercise self control in how we use words! This is paramount, because what comes out will either lift up or destroy. The power and responsibility are ours.

Vs. 5b-12: James was attacking gossip and equating it with a devastating forest fire in a time man could do nothing but watch and see everything destroyed. Some Christians, as well as radical Jewish groups, were leading people astray by teaching violence and not reconciliation. If we do not get under His discipline, as in Fruit of the Spirit, with our tongue, we may be under God's discipline as in Judgment. Are we aware of the consequences when we misbehave? God has grace for us, but we should never negate our responsibility (Matt. 7:16-21; 15:10-11, 17-19)!

- *Kindles.* The point is that a small force can ignite, become out of control, and then destroy a large area. Our words have awesome power and they can fervently destroy (Prov. 16:27-29)!
- *World of iniquity/evil* means the world's evil is from the tongue. Even though Satan can get control of our tongue, he is not need to do so, as our pride,

boasting, anger, bitterness, gossip, lust, slander... is just as powerful in its devastation as he!

- *Defiles* means evil speech such as lies, false vows, and slander as well as blasphemy and gossip. The Bible says they are all evil! A small tongue in our large body controls our direction, relationships, and all we experience in life from peace to violence; it is how we are perceived and how others react to us (Psalm 25:15, 23; 28:23; 39:1-3; 52:1-4; 57:4; 120:2-4; Prov. 16:27; 26:21).
- *Hell*, (Greek *Gehenna*) refers to the valley of Hinnom, the place where the heinous child sacrifices took place under Ahaz and Manasseh (2 Chron. 28; 33; Jer. 7:32). This was the wickedest place a Jewish mind could conceive of, and where the first century Jews burned their trash. It also refers to everlasting torment (Mark 9:43-48). It is the image of judgment. Our tongue is hurtful when it is boastful and condescending and thus will lead to the fate of those who are damned. James is not saying gossip causes a person to go to Hell, rather it is where its concept and veracity leads, the logical conclusion. Remember, we still have grace that saves and protects.
- *Tame*. The tongue is harder to tame than a wild beast! Animals are made to be to be subservient; we are made to be over the animals (Rom. 3:13-14). Can we have rule over the animals but not ourselves?
- *Deadly poison*, as in deadly cobra venom, the most powerful illustration that could be made in this time! James is using the image of Moses' snake, how the snakes killed and how the symbol which is the modern medical symbol today, heals (Nub. 21:6-9). This compares the uncontrolled tongue to the deadliest snake, and how our words can be of love or be a deadly toxin (Psalm 52:2; 58:1-6; 64:3; 140:3; Prov. 12:8, 18; 16:24; 18:21; 25:18)!
- *Similitude of God/ Made in God's image*. James' point is that we are made in God's image and to be in Christ; animals are made for our use and it is our responsibility to care for them. (Gen. 1:26-28; 9:2; Prov. 12:10). Thus, we should have control and care over our own mouths and words!
- *Bless...curse*, the context, meaning our sinful, human nature, is inconsistent; these ideas of blessing and cursing are incongruities to each other. Perverse words, rhetoric, a curse, a battle cry, or the pronouncement of a blessing and our worship of God totally contradict, but both can come from the same source—us!
- *Does a spring*. James illustrates these incongruities with examples of the most common crops that were necessary for life from nature (Gen. 1:11-12, 21, 24-25). The point is that we cannot worship God authentically if we use the same mouth to curse His children!

So then, do you fully understand the power of our words? Our tongues are two to six ounces of muscle and whether from the biggest bodybuilder to the frailest little child, they get more exercise and less control than any other muscle in our 50 lb to 350 lb body! Thus, we must be conscious of what comes out of our mouths before it comes out. Squeezing the toothpaste out is easy, but putting it back in the tube is nearly impossible. When our words come out, they are out for good! We must have them under control! How can we do this? By making sure our tongue is under a good helmsman, God (Psalm 19:14; 51:10; 141:1-4; Eccles. 3:7; Mark 12:34; Luke 6:45; 2 Cor. 6:3-10; 10:5; 11:3; Phil. 4:8; Eph. 4:8; 1 Pet. 1:13-14), and by making sure our spiritual formation is growing in Christ as Lord. When our spiritual life is growing, we will be disciplined as our unspoken words from our thoughts, and our motivations and attitudes are aligned up to His, then our spoken words and deeds will show authentic character and maturity.

Perhaps, you may think that James does not apply to you. *I do not gossip or lie*. But, the bottom line is to improve our relationships; thus, we have to start with how we honor and respond to our Lord and Savior! We are to respond to His precepts with our personal holiness! Because we received His grace that sanctified our heart and covered our sin, it should strike a cord within us to respond. Out of our gratitude for what He has done for us, we should be willing to strive to seek righteousness in all that we do including, and most importantly, our tongue. Our words can be the sweetness that spills unto others and be the honor and trustworthiness we earn in the hearts and minds of the people God brings into our life. Or, our words can also feverishly destroy!

We must be willing and able to check our words before they leave our lips, and to think in good terms before we speak. We have to see the destruction that can come by inflicting anger and frustration, resulting in low self-esteem, loneliness, and despair. Our words can create success or they can create failure. We all have been positively motivated by someone's words uttered purposefully, or negatively, as a slip of the tongue is made as a mistake. Thus, if you like to use words as weapons, consider this; words have a boomerang affect. That means, *what you throw out will come back to hit you*. If you think you can duck them, well you cannot, because once you release those hurtful words, you cannot put them back any more than you can put the toothpaste back into the tube. They are out, and out for good.

Having trouble? Take heart, He is the One who changes us and forms our character. All we do is adoringly respond by faith and commit to His precepts. We need to think before we speak, so we are careful not to say things that could hurt someone, or cause a fight or an argument. Commit to preventing your words or body language from discouraging others. This translates that we will not ever gossip or talk negatively about others at work, school, home, church, or anywhere in the universe—period—if we claim Christ as Lord!

Remember, your words will reflect your true character! Your words have the power to change someone else's life for the better. If you criticize others, then you will be criticized, too. If you lie to others, then you will be lied to, also. If you gossip about others, then others will gossip about you. If you cheat others, then others will cheat you. Do you see a pattern? It is a simple pattern; what you give out, you will soon get back. We have to realize deep down in our hearts and minds how powerful our words are as they shape and form both us and others around us. Words have power to destroy people's lives, just as a spark can destroy an entire forest.

The greatest gift you have is the ability to communicate; the greatest responsibility you have is using your ability to communicate with character and distinction within the parameters of God's call to you!

The Essential Inductive Questions (for more Inductive questions see [Inductive Bible Study](#)):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me? How am I encouraged and strengthened?
4. Is there a sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
5. How can I be changed so I can learn and grow?
6. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
7. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
8. What can I model and teach? What does God want me to share with someone?

Additional Questions:

1. What is the greatest slip of the tongue that you have experienced? What about from someone else (without naming names)? How did you feel?
2. How important is communication in your life? What happens when we communicate wrong or badly?
3. Who has control of your words, God or man? What does your tongue say about yourself to others?

4. Do you truly know the power your words have? How are the words from your mouth being used? How are your words guiding you? How are your words touching others?
5. How is *teaching* a responsibility we must take very seriously? What happens when a teacher is leading people astray?
6. We all make mistakes. So, what is the difference between a deliberate or premeditated sin and a mistake? How do you balance personal responsibility and the grace that God has for you?
7. Yes, gossip is fun and inviting, and it seems everyone is doing it. But, are you aware of the consequences when you misbehave with your words?
8. How and why do our words reflect our true character?
9. How is your tongue a reflection of your mind and a mirror to your soul? What would it take for you to fully realize that our words are a tool at our heart's and mind's disposal?
10. How are your words an indication of how you are dealing with life, your spiritual growth, character, and maturity?
11. How can you make sure you are better at modeling Christ to others with your words as well as the inflection of your words?
12. What would your life look like if you were completely under God's discipline, as in Fruit of the Spirit, with your tongue? We must have our words under control! How can we do this?

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