

“Wise Speakers: Wise Servants”

Lesson Text: James 3:1-10, 13-18.

Devotional Reading: Proverbs 15:1-4; 16:21-24.

Background Scripture: James 3.

Place: from Jerusalem **Time:** about A.D. 45

James 3:1-10

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ² 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.

James 3:13-18

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

LESSON AIMS

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

1. Restate some of James's illustrations of an untamed tongue.
2. Distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome use of the tongue.
3. Make a plan to improve his or her use of the tongue in one specific way.

INTRODUCTION

A WORLD FULL OF WORDS

Talk fills our lives. Family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, salespeople, teachers, politicians, and preachers knit together the fabric of life with talk. Talk has tremendous impact that often goes unnoticed. We sometimes forget that words still have a lot of power.

Most of us utter harmful, dangerous words every day. Our desire to be right, to get ahead, to gain control, to be heard, or to defend ourselves can motivate us to say all kinds of things at the expense of others. Fortunately, with sincere words we can also apologize. However, catching ourselves before we sin with our speech is tough. Still, we can do better, as this lesson will teach.

LESSON BACKGROUND

The epistle of James sits on the shoulders of a large body of literature that both collects and develops wise sayings to help people succeed. Bible readers will be most familiar with this type of literature, called wisdom literature, from reading Proverbs or Ecclesiastes. This style of literature was very popular in the ancient world.

Personal speech habits are one of the most predominant themes of these collections of wisdom. Proverbs 18:21 says, “*The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.*” Jesus said, “³⁶ *But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.*”³⁷ *For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*” (Matthew 12:36, 37). Such is the importance of this issue!

After offering a brief warning to be “*slow to speak*” in James 1:19 and then reinforcing this with the advice in 1:26, James unleashes in chapter 3 his entire arsenal of reasons why the tongue must be controlled. Though it begins as a mandate to teachers in the church, it applies to everyone.

Power of the Tongue (James 3:1–5a)

James began this paragraph with a warning to aspiring teachers. Teachers are highly respected in the ancient world. Given the large number of people entering into the first-century church as new disciples, the importance of having good teachers to guide them in faith, understanding, and behavior is crucial.

Teachers in the first-century church share leadership at the local level with the prophets and apostles (see 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11). Then as now, however, people sometimes desire to be teachers for the prestige of it without fully recognizing the enormous responsibility involved. James discourages unqualified people from seeking to be teachers with the warning that teachers are under a special scrutiny by Christ. James includes himself as a teacher, indicated by *we*, and accepts this greater risk of judgment he places over all teachers in the church.

The responsibility of nurturing Christian disciples is immense. Through words teachers wield great influence over others, shaping lives toward good or evil. Thus, they are accountable for measuring their words and controlling their tongues.

This warning is necessary because of human fallibility, for we all stumble in many ways. James included himself in this vulnerability to mistakes. So no one should be overly zealous to teach, for the mistakes of a teacher will affect many.

1. Why did James discourage aspiring teachers? (James 3:1-2a)

The primary tool of teachers is the tongue. They talk in order to instruct people. This puts them at risk, because the tongue, or speech, cannot be controlled 100 percent of the time.

“*We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect...*” The word *order* in Greek places emphasis on “*in what they say.*” It establishes the principle that someone who can control his speech has reached the pinnacle of maturity and therefore can control his other actions as well (“*the whole body*”). In other words, the sins of the tongue are the last to be conquered. One who does so is “*perfect,*” or mature and complete.

How often do we see persons who are blameless in every other aspect but whose testimonies are ruined because of their tongues! They are not yet complete. Again, controlling the tongue is a sign of maturity.

2. Why is controlling the tongue a sign of maturity? (v. 2b)

Though small, the tongue is potent. James illustrated this with two examples. First, he spoke of the bits we put in horses' mouths to control their movements. This bit is small; the horse is big. Yet the horse is guided by the bit.

The second example of this principle is the ship's rudder. It is an exact parallel to the bit in the horse's mouth. Ships, though very large, are driven by fierce winds that threaten to drive them off course and wreck them. But they are kept under control and turned around by a very small rudder, and oar-like mechanism at the stern. Through this the pilot is able to steer the ship wherever he wishes.

Next James gives the point of the two illustrations: "*Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.*" (3:5). Just as the bit and the rudder exert an influence out of proportion to their size, so also does the tongue. "*Makes great boasts*" does not mean here that a person uses his tongue to boast but that the tongue enjoys much power and influence. It has many exploits and achievements of which it can justly boast.

Further illustration by James discusses the tongue's power, likening it to fire. People in the western United States know this power firsthand. In hot, dry seasons a tiny spark can ignite a blaze that ends up burning hundreds of square miles before it is finally brought under control. So the tongue can start great fires out of proportion to its size.

3. What examples show something small controlling something big? (vs. 3- 5)

Danger of the Tongue (James 3:5b–12)

Verse 6 sketches four dimensions of just how corrupt the human tongue is. The first dimension is that the tongue is a world of iniquity within a person. This description looks at the tongue as the most evil part of the body—more evil than the hand that steals, for instance. The tongue is the point from which more evil comes forth than anywhere else. It is the "command center" for those despicable sins that are so harmful.

The second dimension of the tongue's destructiveness is its corruption of the rest of the parts (members) of the human body. The tongue that offers someone smooth flattery may be "setting up" the hand to commit theft.

The third dimension of the tongue's destructiveness is the damage it inflicts on society. This is expressed by the use of the phrase course of nature, or literally, "wheel of birth." This is a well-known phrase among ancient philosophers for the concept of fate: those external social and cultural forces that affect our lives and over which we have no control. When the sins of speech enter this sphere, then those sins can have devastating results on the lives of people we don't even know.

The fourth dimension of the tongue's destructiveness is its source. This is called hell. "Hell" is "Gehenna," a valley used for human sacrifice and later the garbage dump of Jerusalem where fires were kept burning continually. Jesus used it as a picture of the place of eternal torment (Mark 9:48), where Satan and his minions will be punished (Rev. 20:10). James saw the sins of the tongue as satanically incited.

4. How does the tongue's destruction resemble that of a fire? (vs. 5b, 6)

James's blistering indictment of the tongue continues. He asserted that it cannot be tamed by mankind. By contrast, all kinds of animals have been tamed by humans. According to personal observation ("is tamed") and historical record ("has been tamed"), no category of animal life is excluded.

Ironically, however, there is something within the controllers that they cannot control: "*but no human being can tame the tongue.*" It is "*a restless evil,*" like a wild animal constantly pacing and never satisfied. It is also "*full of deadly poison,*" like the poison-bearing fangs of a snake.

5. *How can the tongue be tamed? (vs. 7, 8)*

Galatians 5:22, 23 says that a fruit of the Spirit is temperance (meaning self-control). As we let God's Holy Spirit control and transform our lives, our speech will be seasoned by the other fruit in that passage.

Before the speech can change, the heart must change (Matthew 15:17–19). Don't let the difficulty of the task discourage you from striving to keep your speech in check. Remember, we have heavenly help: "*with God all things are possible*" (Mark 10:27). Share a Scripture, an anecdote, or an experience that has given you hope that you can improve your speech problem.

6. *Since no one can tame the tongue, what hope do we have?*

To all the previous faults of the tongue another is added – hypocrisy. "Double-tongued" fits the situation being described here. With the same tongue we both bless God and curse people. It is a sin that especially tempts those who have a public Christian ministry, but any of us can fall into it. We use the tongue to bless God. We speak well of Him and praise His name as "God, even the Father." This is a title that emphasizes both His sovereignty and His love. To exalt our Lord in this way is commendable.

But this external show of devotion is negated when, with the same tongue, we curse men. This need not involve the use of profanity or even the invocation of curses. We can do it by speaking abusively to others or by slandering their reputation before others. The enormity of this sin is heightened by the fact that those we curse are created in the likeness of God.

Human beings, despite our fall into sin, still bear God's image. It is what distinguishes us from all other creatures. How, then, can we speak evil of one who bears His image without slandering Him also? This use of the tongue is the grossest hypocrisy and stands condemned.

James 3:10 sums up the inconsistency: "*Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing.*" It is a monstrous contradiction that is not even found in nature, where the product is consistent with its source (vs. 11, 12). Is our soul so divided that it produces conflicting words? More likely it is bound by sin, and the "worship" it professes is a sham (cf. Matt. 12:34–37).

7. *How did James illustrate the inconsistency of the tongue? (vs. 9, 10)*

Sadly, it is all too common for Christians to find themselves leaving Sunday service with a song on their lips only for it to change to words of displeasure toward a fellow driver, a restaurant server, or a family member. Our witness for Christ, our effectiveness for the kingdom, and our peaceful coexistence with the Holy Spirit and with each other are seriously damaged when we forget to season our speech with graciousness (Ephesians 4:29–32; Colossians 4:6). When we think of how we view inconsistencies in other people, we can see the importance of living and speaking consistently ourselves.

8. *What helps you maintain gracious speech under stressful circumstances?*

Thoughts on Wisdom (James 3:13–18)

After thinking so much about the tongue with its follies and failures, it is fitting to turn our thoughts to wisdom. Wisdom is what every tongue needs to restrain and guide it.

If anyone presents himself as “*wise and understanding*,” he needs to make good on his claims. “*Wise*” describes one who has the discernment to make good decisions in life. “*Understanding*” describes an expert in a given field.

James said to let this person prove his wisdom by good conduct, or way of life. This good life is marked by deeds performed in the gentleness of wisdom. A truly wise man is meek. He is gentle in dealing with others and not compelled to call attention to himself.

9. What are the credentials necessary for being a wise teacher? (v. 13)

There is, to be sure, a “wisdom” that produces an opposite attitude. It produces “*bitter envy (zeal)*.” Even a commendable zeal for God can easily become bitter toward those who disagree with us. A second characteristic is “*selfish ambition*,” or factiousness.

A third characteristic of false wisdom is arrogance. Proud, factious teachers live a lie. They claim to be upholding God’s truth but deny its reality by their attitudes.

What is the source of this false wisdom? It comes from the earthly realm, with its fallen minds. Thus, it is at variance with the mind of God (cf. Isa. 55:8-9; 1 Cor. 1:20). It is also “*sensual*” (Jas. 3:15). It arises out of what is natural in humanity and is incapable of discerning spiritual truth (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14).

Finally, this wisdom is demonic. It comes from satanic agencies. Its demonic origin may not be readily apparent, since Satan can use poets, professors, and even preachers. But its effects are deadly, nonetheless (cf. 2 Cor. 11:13-15).

The results of counterfeit wisdom are predictable: “*disorder and every evil practice*” (Jas. 3:16). Since it is marked by envy and strife, it can bring only disorder and division among God’s people.

10. What are the source and characteristics of false wisdom? (vs. 14—16)

Counterfeit wisdom is contrasted with “*wisdom that comes from heaven*” (v. 17), a gift of God (1:17) bestowed by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:4-10, 16). He enumerated seven characteristics of this wisdom.

It is, first of all, pure. Purity stands first in importance and is essential to all that follows. God’s wisdom is pure in itself and inspires purity in the one who embraces it.

Heavenly wisdom is also peace-loving, promoting peace between God and people and among people. It is also considerate, treating others with forbearance. “*Submissive*” in James 3:17 signifies being open to persuasion and willing to be guided. The wise person is also “*full of mercy and good fruit*” rather than bitter jealously and vile deeds.

True wisdom also lacks some characteristics. It is *impartial and sincere*. It does not quarrel over positions or show favoritism, and it does not try to impress through a mask of pretense.

11. What are the characteristics of heavenly wisdom? (v. 17)

James pictured the wise sowing seed that will produce righteousness. On the contrary, envying and strife provide the soil where confusion grows along with “*every evil practice*” (v. 16). But wise people who

make peace find in that peace the soil where they can plant the seeds that grow into the fruit of righteousness, their own and that of others. (See also 2 Corinthians 9:10; Philippians 1:11.)

Thus, the divine wisdom displayed at the end of our lesson text is the solution to the sins of the tongue portrayed at the beginning.

12. What harvest is promised to those who exhibit God's wisdom? (v. 18)

CONCLUSION

The gift of speech that God has given us is wonderful beyond description. We can use this gift to do great good. Regrettably, this same gift can be misused to do great evil. In this week's lesson, James has warned against the misuse of the tongue. He has also provided a character profile for those who would use their gift wisely.

Challenge your students to allow Christ to reveal Himself to the world through the way that they communicate. Stress the importance of living the kind of godly life that backs up the good things that they have to say. Lead the class in praying that the Lord will help us represent Him well in word and in deed.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Teaching God's Word is a solemn task that should not be taken on hastily (Jas. 3:1-2).
2. We must remember that words have tremendous power either to do harm or to do good (Jas. 3:3-5; cf. Prov. 18:21).
3. Thoughtless words can cause irreparable damage that remains even after they are forgiven (Jas. 3:6-8).
4. Words about people reflect our relationship with God (vs. 9-10).
5. Like faith, wisdom is proved by works (vs. 13-16; c.f. Jas. 2:14-19).
6. If we seek God's wisdom, we will have harmonious relationships (vs. 17-18).

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"For he that will love life, ... let him refrain his tongue from evil"

PRAYER

O Lord, who gives us life and breath and the power of speech, help us harness this power to benefit others. In Jesus' name, amen.