

TAMING THE TONGUE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 50:4–11

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 3:1–12



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JAMES 3:1–12

¹Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ²We 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.

³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or 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. ⁵Likewise, 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. ⁶The 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.

⁷All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹²My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

KEY VERSE

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.

—James 3:5

p 434 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

p 435 HOW TO SAY IT

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

p 434 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.

^{p 435} One easy example is the phrase "Joseph is a fruitful vine" (Genesis 49:22).

This does not mean that this particular 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 righteous is choice silver,
but the heart of the wicked is of little value.

—Proverbs 10:20

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest in hope.

—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. Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers,

James opens this portion of his letter with a warning to those who want to become *teachers*. 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 importance 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. because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

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 could stem from a desire for the honor that the teaching role brings at the expense of the content of what is taught. *Being judged more strictly* calls to mind the words of Jesus:

Everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will 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 [p 436](#) 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](#))?

B. Present Reality (v. 2)

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.

The word translated *stumble* begins a word picture of careless uses of the tongue (*what they say*). 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 keep their whole body in check*. Older versions of the Bible use the translation *bridle* instead of *check*. In that sense, James is using a word picture of a horse that is under control. This is reinforced in [James 1:26](#) where the same word is translated "keep a tight rein."

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

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

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. 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.

^{p 437} 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) *strong winds* on the ship as a whole and (2) the ship's *pilot* 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. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

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

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 *small*—a dropped match or a campfire

not adequately snuffed out. The second half of verse 5 leads into verse 6.

6a. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.

Similar phrasing is found in [Proverbs 16:27](#) and [Isaiah 30:27](#).

6b. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

Though the tongue is only one piece of *the whole body*, it has an outsized effect.

Three results of an unchecked tongue are noted. The first (*corrupts the whole body*) is that a person is made unholy. The second (*sets the whole course of one’s life on fire*) 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 (*is itself set on fire by 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. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind,

James now begins a comparison from another setting: that of humanity's taming of various 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 "rule over" all creatures. There is no creature that humans have not been able to dominate. Humans have the proven ability to exercise [p 438](#) dominion over all earthly creatures, whether for good or bad.

8. but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless 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](#): "[The violent] make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's; the poison of vipers is on 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. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness.

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 *who have been made in God's likeness* ([Genesis 1:26, 27](#)).

Divided speech is shaped by the attitude of the speaker. As the speaker bad-mouths those who are created in God's image, something negative is revealed about the speaker's attitude toward God.

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 practices were condemned by God: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are 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 come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

A modern illustration of this problem is inconsistent use of social media. Think of a hypothetical [p 439](#) 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. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?

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 *spring* cannot produce both *fresh water and salt water*.

The application 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. My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

The products mentioned are common to the agricultural economy of the day. James draws on this fact to craft another rhetorical question, reinforcing the point just made (see [Matthew 7:16](#)).

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.



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

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.

p 440 INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible](#)

Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the *NIV 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 “air-headed” 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—*An 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 help in controlling the tongue.

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(August 23—Taming the Tongue\)](#)

TAMING THE TONGUE

Lesson 12, James 3:1-12, NIV

POSITIVE POINTERS

Today's text suggests many dangers not just for teachers but for the Christian in everyday conversations. But this is not the only place in James's letter where he talks about the tongue. The following passages suggest further positive instruction. What help do we get for our use of the tongue from each of the following? Under each one, make a list of positive pointers.

James 1:19, 20

James 5:12-16

SITUATIONAL SUGGESTIONS

James indicates that everyone has had tongue troubles (James 3:2). From the list below, circle the situations in which you're most likely to have trouble controlling your tongue. Then jot down some positive, practical steps you can take in those settings to keep your tongue in check.

Dealing with advice from my peers.

Reacting to criticism of my work.

Encountering aggressive drivers on the road.

Hearing gossip.

Listening to criticism of the church.

Hearing criticism of a family member.

Listening to criticism from a family member.

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