

Taming the Tongue

A Present-Day Illustration

Rozina heard the shower water cut off, as she lay in bed going over the day's events in her mind. Her husband Roscoe was wrong, wrong, wrong!

Roscoe had not listened to her first cousin before jumping down his throat at the family reunion. Being on disability was a sensitive subject for some people. Why would Roscoe immediately form the opinion that Colby did not want to work?

Then when Rozina had come to Colby's defense, Roscoe lost his temper in front of everyone.

"Why keep giving people the impression that black people don't want to work?" Roscoe had said. "I work two jobs, and I've worked all my life."

"I know you have, Roscoe, but sometimes it seems like you force your beliefs on everyone!" said Rozina on the drive home. She had waited to say her piece for the drive home.

Now Rozina thought more about her husband. He grew up without a father. He put himself through college and landed a good job as an architect. From time to time, Roscoe still financially helped his mother and three sisters. He was a proud black man, and Rozina respected him for his work ethic and forgave his criticism of Colby.

Rozina soon felt calm as Roscoe opened the bathroom door. He looked to his wife, "Do you have any more to say tonight?"

"Yes," said Rozina, with a slow smile crossing her face. "Please give me a kiss good night."

1. *Finish this sentence: "Words can _____ or _____."*

2. *What does the phrase, "Be sure to taste your words before you spit them out" tell us about how we should speak to others?*

3. *Why are words so powerful in shaping a person's character?*

LESSON FOCUS: Your words demonstrate your wisdom (or lack thereof).

Judging the Teacher's Tongue

James 3:1-4, KJV

1 My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

2 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

3 Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.

4 Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

James 3:1-4, NIV

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.

It is important to understand that controlling the tongue means more than just watching what one says in certain company. There was a time when, generally, cursing and foul language were not acceptable in most social circles. Sadly, that way of thinking has long gone by the wayside in much of today's society. Scripture's admonishment to control the tongue holds God's people to a much higher standard than just not cursing or swearing in certain situations because the first step in effectively controlling the tongue is having a new heart. This comes by faith in Christ, so people become new creations with new hearts (see 2 Cor. 5:17). Therefore, in Christ, we have the ability to control what we say because we have the love of the Lord in our hearts and want to glorify Him in all we say and do. This is not something that comes naturally; we need to cultivate it by time with the Lord in prayer, Bible study, corporate worship, etc.

Since controlling the tongue does not come naturally, James helped his readers see the importance of taking care in what they say. He began by addressing the teachers in the church.

Churches need to be mindful when selecting teachers of God's Word. The ability to teach biblical truth effectively is a special calling and gift of the Spirit (see Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:28-30). One reason God holds teachers to a higher standard is that what they say as they teach has such a powerful influence in the lives of others. James likened the tongue to a bit in a horse's mouth or the rudder of a ship. The bit and the rudder are relatively small things, but they hold great power over what they steer. And the same is true regarding the tongue of teachers over the hearts and minds of their students.

4. *Why should there not be too many Bible teachers within a congregation?*

5. *Why do teachers have such a powerful influence with their tongues over others?*

6. *What two earthly examples did James use to illustrate the power of the tongue?*

Taming the Prideful Tongue

James 3:5-8, KJV

5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

7 For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and

James 3:5-8, NIV

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

KJV

hath been tamed of mankind:
8 but the tongue can no man
tame; it is an unruly evil, full
of deadly poison.

NIV

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.

Here we see a shift from the specific need for teachers to take care to present God's truth to the general need for all Christians to take care what they say to others. True wisdom recognizes the power of the tongue and how damaging it can be to others if not properly controlled.

To that end, James pointed out to his readers just how boastful the tongue is, and as a result of boasting, how damaging it can be to others. Pride can truly be destructive in the lives of believers and those around them. To make oneself look good, one can all too easily surrender to the temptation of making others look bad or putting them down in some manner. In so doing, the tongue can become like a flaming fire of destruction. As a small spark can start a fire that burns down a whole forest, so can the tongue when it seeks to harm others. Here, James helped his readers understand just how destructive the boastful tongue is by describing it with such terms as evil, corruption, hell fire, and deadly poison.

Not only do these terms capture something that can be very harmful, but they also indicate a condition that can be outright fatal emotionally, relationally, and in some extreme cases, even physically. Indeed, James describes how people can tame and control all manner of animals—land, air, and sea—but we cannot seem to control what we say or how we say it.

Taking time to think before we speak will go a long way in controlling the tongue. A great first step in this regard is James's earlier admonition to be quick to hear and slow to speak (1:19).

7. *How did James describe the tongue in this part of our Scripture passage?*

8. *What seems more controllable than the tongue, according to this passage?*

9. *How is one's heart condition related to what one says?*

Taming the Hypocritical Tongue

James 3:9-12, KJV

9 Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

10 Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

11 Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?

12 Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

James 3:9-12, NIV

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.

Having addressed the teaching tongue and the boasting tongue, James turned his attention to the hypocritical tongue. When God's people praise Him but curse people, who are made in His image, then they are playing the role of a hypocrite. Hypocrisy and lying are unholy allies that seek to destroy our testimony for God, and we do well to stand firmly against them. If we do not, then our lives will be like springs of salt water, unpalatable to those who hear us. As a fig tree cannot produce olives and a grapevine cannot produce figs, neither can the tongue that curses people effectively point others to the Lord. As fresh water cannot flow from a salt water spring, neither does the one who curses others have any credibility when speaking of godly matters. Only when the heart is right, and the tongue blesses both God and those whom He created in His image, is there a credible testimony to His glory.

10. *What evidence did James give of a hypocritical tongue?*

11. *How did James use water as an example of hypocrisy?*

12. *How did he use fruit plants as examples of hypocrisy?*

Distribute with Care

Studies have shown that if children are consistently told they are loved or not loved it shows up in their behavior. Children who are told they are loved are more optimistic, happy, and secure. Accordingly, if children are verbally abused, that also shows up in their daily behavior. Verbally abused children may become depressed, unhappy, and lack confidence.

Without a doubt, as James tells us, words are commanding and influential. Words should be distributed with care; the tongue should be treated like a loaded gun and handled wisely. Even a word or two said in jest can be misunderstood and ruin a relationship.

Studies also reveal that women or men who are verbally abused fail to thrive in their environment. The victim's home life and work life are affected by the verbal abuse. They walk around bleeding unnoticeably from wounds to the soul.

There are many positive words and phrases that children and adults should hear, and hear regularly:

"I enjoy spending time with you."

"You're special to me."

"I trust you."

"I'm sure you can do it."

"Your opinion is important."

"I believe in you."

What you say and how you say it is very significant. Psalm 37:30 summarizes the principle best: "The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom, and their tongues speak what is just."

13. *Do you mostly say positive or negative things to other people?*

14. *What would you say to a person who says this about his or her speech: "I just tell people whatever I think and feel. I can't control how they respond"?*

15. *What are some of the best words you can say to an unbeliever you are trying to tell about Jesus?*

Heavenly Words

Heavenly words are uplifting, kind, edifying, and encouraging. Heavenly words are graced with wisdom and love. They build up, fortify, and anchor the soul. Ephesians 4:29 reads, “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.”

► *Think of some words you said to a person lately that you could have said better. Ask that person for forgiveness and replace those harsh words with heavenly words. Also, commit to sharing heavenly words with the people you meet this week even if it's just, “God bless you!”*

KEY VERSE

Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! —James 3:5, KJV

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. —James 3:5, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of August 24 through August 30

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. Matthew 24:3-14—Wisdom about End Time Signs.

Tues. Jeremiah 38:1-6—Wisdom for Speaking a Prophetic Message.

Wed. 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13—Wisdom in Knowing Hearts without Blame.

Thurs. Matthew 5:33-37—Wisdom in Not Swearing Oaths.

Fri. 1 Peter 4:7-11—Living Gracefully with One Another.

Sat. James 5:13-20—Wisdom in the Prayer of Faith.

Sun. James 3:13-18; 5:7-12—Acting Wisely with Patience and Love.