

BRENTWOOD BAPTIST

TRIALS AND MATURITY • THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAITH AND SPEECH •
JAMES 3:1-12 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

The tongue is a great indicator of our spiritual health.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Share with the group about a time when you spoke too soon and ended up saying something you regretted.

What are all the ways you can think of that people sin with their speech?

Everyone struggles with sin. Some sins may be more specific to certain people. Not everyone will deal with an addiction to alcohol or drugs. Though all lie, not everyone has a huge problem being dishonest. Yet, every one of us has gotten into trouble at some point for the things we have said. All of us have put our foot in our mouth. We all have gossiped, unhelpfully criticized, condescended, or said something crude. The tongue is a great indicator of our spiritual health. Because of this, James devoted a whole section of his practical letter to address the relationship between our faith and our words.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 3:1-2.

James first addressed people who teach. Whether or not you teach in a Bible study or a school classroom, we all teach others about ourselves through what we say. What have you been teaching through your words, even over this past week?

You might say that controlling our tongue leads to controlling our thumbs. That is, we speak not only through our words, but also through social media

presence. What does it look like to take James's advice to heart in your online presence?

Read Matthew 12:36. What type of speech did Jesus question here? Are there really such things as "idle" or "empty" words? Why do we tend to view what we post online or what we say to a customer service representative over the phone as less serious than words we speak elsewhere? What are we teaching our Facebook friends and the people on the other end of our conversations about ourselves?

What we teach is a good indicator of what we believe because the aim of teaching is to communicate our beliefs to someone else. Yet any time we open our mouths, we are teaching other people who we really are. Verse 2 takes a holistic look at what we say. Nothing we say is missed by God. Jesus said that we will be judged for everything we say. The word translated "empty" or "idle" means unproductive or without thought. The reason this is so closely connected with our spiritual health is because a good way to measure spiritual health is what you do without thinking. If the default setting of your heart leads you to say things that you wish you hadn't, it might be time for a heart check.

If you teach God's Word in any capacity in our church or somewhere, then how seriously do you take this task? What are some habits that help us make sure we are teaching His Word correctly?

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 3:3-8.

Our tongues have the power to direct and to destroy. What analogies did James use to describe this power? When do you first remember seeing the power your words could have?

Read Proverbs 18:21. Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived and thought that words had the power of life and death. Why do we make the things we say, good or bad, less important than the Bible makes them?

Read 1 Timothy 3:9-11; 5:13-11; and Titus 2:2-5. These are letters Paul wrote to young pastors. Why do you think he felt the need to mention and condemn gossip so strongly here? What is your relationship with gossip? Do you need to rethink anything based on James's and Paul's advice?

A small piece of stainless steel placed in the mouth controls the power of an enormous animal. A small mechanism on the back end of a ship guides the entire vessel through the

water. A small spark can ignite a flame that burns down a city. Such is the power our tongues have to give life or to bring death. Satan led Eve into sin through his words. The saying “sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is a good reply on a playground, but that saying is disproven every time a kid comes crying to his mom after someone has hurt his feelings. If anything, words are more painful than physical hurt because words reach us at our core, and they stay with us forever. With such power to direct and destroy, we need to be more careful in our speech.

Knowing that our words have such power, we should give more thought to them. Consider the T.H.I.N.K. principle: Is this True? Is this Helpful? Is this Inspiring? Is this Necessary? Is this Kind? How might taking time to answer these questions steer you away from sin?

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 3:9-12.

While most of our discussion has focused on the evil that words can do, we need to have a balanced approach. What power do our words have for delight?

When we come to church or a group like this one and fill ourselves with truth, what impact should that have on how we speak when we leave? If it doesn't, what have we missed?

Words have the power to give pleasure and delight to the one listening. It is a word from the Lord that saved us. Likely, you have words that have stuck with you because they continue to encourage you. The point of this section is that what we hear from the Lord should change and shape the way we speak. If Jesus is Lord of all, He is Lord of our words. We are called to use our words in a way that gratifies and brings honor to Him. We are to encourage and correct one another with gentleness, love, and respect. When our tongue is mastered by the Holy Spirit, our words become life-giving and delightful.

What are some helpful words you need to speak? To whom will you speak them? When will you speak them?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Has someone ever said something to you, whether good or bad, that stuck with you over the years? How does this demonstrate the unique power of words? Read 1 Thessalonians 5:11. How can we obey this command with our tongues?

Do we feel the freedom in this group to lovingly correct each other when we know someone's words have hurt someone else? Is there anyone you can ask to evaluate your speech? Why is this helpful?

What ability do our words have both to strengthen and harm our witness for Jesus with our friends, family, and coworkers?

PRAYER

Thank God for the gift of words, particularly His Word that points us to love and truth. Ask God to help us control and tame our words so that we can bless Him and build one another up.

COMMENTARY

| JAMES 3:1-12

3:1-2. Verse 1 warns us not to presume to be teachers because of the stricter accountability God demands in the office. We should be more concerned about our fitness for teaching than with the benefits we might receive from the office. Those who teach will be judged more strictly. A teacher receives added prominence from the position, but also falls under stricter scrutiny from God. Teachers provide instruction in the practical duties of life and help to ground their hearers in the teachings and commandments of Jesus.

God's Word does not discourage people from assuming the position of a teacher. It raises the dignity of the position by pointing out the dangers and responsibilities of the office for those who might otherwise neglect these requirements. It seeks to restrain the rush into the office by those who lack spiritual qualifications for it.

Verse 2 explains the need to control the tongue. The concern is enlarged beyond the work of a teacher and includes all. Human beings stumble in many ways. We shows that James put himself in the category of those who made these "slips" of the tongue, an evidence of James's humility.

We show our imperfection and sinfulness by committing sins of the tongue. By the same measure we show our maturity by controlling the tongue. Two truths should encourage us to control our tongues. First, those who use the tongue, such as teachers, receive a stricter judgment. Surely the prospects of an intensive examination by God should prompt a desire to use our tongues rightly. Second, controlling our tongues provides evidence that we can control our personality. A person who can bring the tongue under control is able to keep his whole body in check. The verb used to describe the act of controlling the body refers in other contexts to the act of bridling a horse. Perhaps this word influenced James's decision to use the example of a bit in influencing a horse in verse 3.

One method of complying with the biblical warning about the tongue would be enforced silence. The Bible does not call for silence but for a tongue empowered by the Holy Spirit and used for the glory of God. Silence would not bring complete control of our thoughts. James wanted us to use divine power in bringing our thoughts into captivity to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

3:3-5a. The rider of a horse can use a bit to control and govern a wild, unmanageable horse. Though the bit is small, its use gives riders the potential for turning the animal wherever they want. In gales and violent winds, pilots use the rudder to guide the ship to safety or point it in the direction of intended travel. Compared to the size of a ship, the rudder was very small, but its importance in controlling the ship demanded careful attention in its use.

Verse 5a summarizes the point of these illustrations. Like the bit for the horse and the rudder for the ship, the tongue is small in relation to the body and yet has powerful potential to achieve great results, both good and bad. It can stir up violence or promote peace. It can crush the spirit or soothe the discouraged. If the tongue could personally express itself, it could legitimately boast of its great exploits.

3:5b-6. Verse 5b shows that an uncontrolled tongue is a source of great destruction. Just as a little flame can destroy a huge forest, a small misuse of the tongue can cause pain and agony to many.

The tongue can produce ruin and may represent the presence of a vast system of iniquity within our body. Within this body the tongue can produce three results. First, it can corrupt the whole person. It is a source of pollution and defilement for the entire personality. Second, it sets the whole course of his life on fire. Course may also mean "wheel." Life may refer to "birth," "origin," or "existence." A misused tongue may affect the

cycle of life from birth onward! Third, the tongue is itself set on fire by hell. This describes Satan's influence on the tongue.

James 3:1-6 describes the tongue as it is by nature. By nature the tongue could serve as a divisive instrument of evil. By grace the tongue can become an instrument of positive blessing (Col. 4:6). We must not conclude that our tongue is doomed to be an instrument of discord and strife. God can mold an abusive tongue into a force for good and righteousness.

3:7-8. Verse 7 mentions four classifications of earthly animals men have subdued or tamed: animals which could walk, fly crawl, or swim. Genesis 9:2 follows the same type of classification. These classifications represent a human observation about different types of animals rather than a scientific ordering.

Certainly no one has ever tamed a rhinoceros or an alligator, but in general wild animals can be brought under human control. Elephants, charmed snakes, and porpoises are examples of this principle. Although human beings can tame animals, they cannot tame their own tongues. The tongue is a restless evil, always busy creating more mischief. We must always keep the tongue under careful guard and never give it freedom to roam relentlessly, for it is full of deadly poison. Like the tongue of a serpent, the tongue deals out death (see Ps. 140:3).

3:9-10. Verse 9 mentions both a positive and a negative use of the tongue. The positive use involved praise of God, the highest function of human speech (see Ps. 103:1-5). The negative use involved cursing human beings. Cursing refers to personal verbal abuse, perhaps arising from loss of temper in an argument or debate. It also involves the expression of angry wishes on enemies. It includes speech which is insulting as well as profane.

Verse 10 spotlights the inconsistency of this action. We are sinfully inconsistent when we bless God and then curse those made in God's likeness. When we curse those whom God has made, we are effectively cursing God. He is the object of both expressions. Such a double standard is outrageous: My brethren, this should not be.

3:11-12. These verses show the consistency of nature. Both verses ask questions to which the expected answer is "no." The illustrations from nature would have been familiar to inhabitants of Palestine. Areas around the Dead Sea contained many salty springs. Farther north of the Dead Sea travelers could find springs emitting fresh water. One spring could produce only one type of water.

The farmers of Palestine produced figs, olives, and grapes in abundance. James emphasized that a tree produced its own kind of fruit. We don't go to grapevines to find figs. We do not pluck olives from fig trees. Nature is consistent, but our tongues have never provided models of consistency.