



Study Series

James: Week Six

Bible

James 3:1-12 (NIV)

Taming the Tongue

1 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. 11 Can both fresh water and

salt water flow from the same spring?

12 My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?

Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Sermon Summary

You may want to consider this section as pre-reading.

James 3:1 opens a new section that runs to 4:12 where James has the community life in mind. His focus shifts between the teachers – whose words and deeds are causing significant issues for the church – and the wider church community. The bottom line, is that this is a word for each of us, not only for those who might hold a teaching role in the church.

In 3:1-12 James focuses on the tongue; namely the power of our words for good and for ill. He uses three illustrations that were commonly used in ancient near east to illustrate the disproportionate power of words. Like a bit in a horse's mouth or the rudder of a great ship which are used to guide and lead (presumably to a good end) our words can be used to guide and lead. However, the power of the tongue for good is outstripped by its capacity for evil. Like a forest set ablaze by a small spark, so our words can burn our lives (and the lives of others) to the ground.

To this point, of course, we have learned nothing profound. We all know the power of words to hurt and heal and also know that words that hurt often have a more significant impact than words of healing. James relies on us knowing this, because it leads into his next point. Even though we know the terrible power of the tongue we are incapable of controlling it. As a species we control some very powerful forces, like harnessing the wind or even nuclear energy, but we cannot control the tongue. This is evidenced by the words of blessing (life) and cursing (death) that pass from our lips.

If I can draw a comparison; consider how we prepare young people to drive. Automobiles are such a blessing. We are able to travel great distances at great speeds in relative comfort. However, we also know the devastation that can follow if we are not responsible drivers. We have all sorts of guidelines for drivers. Everything from seat belts, speed limits, quality controls, and licensing. If we do this for cars, how much more so should we seek to put controls on the tongue?

What's interesting, however, is that James doesn't advocate for greater self-control of the tongue. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit and is something that we should nurture in our lives, but to apply self-control by itself to the tongue – biting our tongue, counting to ten when angry, etc. – doesn't actually address the problem. The real problem, James states, is not a matter of self-control, but the source of our words.

In the concluding verses of this section he points out that the root of the plant determines the fruit just as the source of a spring determines the quality of the water. The problem with our words is our heart, because this is their source. And again, we know the truth of this in our own lives. The reason why words said in anger are impossible to take back is because we have harboured them in our hearts. And if our heart is the problem, then self-control is just managing the problem rather than dealing with the issue. In 3:2 James returns to an important theme when he states that those who are never at fault in what they say are perfect. Just as trials endured perfect our faith, and as our works perfect our faith, so our words reflect the perfection of our hearts.

So what do your words tell you about the state of your heart? And, if you hear evidence that your heart is not pure, what will you do about it?

The path of greater self-control is not the message of the gospel. Rather, the message of the gospel is that God will give us a new heart, purifying the source of our words so that we don't need self-control at all since the source of our words will be perfect. Once again, James implies that we should turn to our heavenly father and ask that he would renew and restore our hearts.

A new heart is critical for the transformation of our words, for building the Church, and is vital for effectively carrying out the mission of God in our world. If any of you lack wisdom – or a pure heart – they should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: Take some time to recall a time when words have brought healing, hope, guidance, or blessing to you. Share your reflections with the group.

2. Pause to read James chapter 3:1-12. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that 'jump out at you'. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain *why* it jumped out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to that word or phrase. Share what you've been lead to.
3. Why do critical words often have such an impact on us?
4. Followers of Jesus are in an ongoing process of restoration that includes God's deep work of giving us a new heart, but God does not force this upon us, He invites us to engage in that work of restoration and perfection. What practices might help put us in the best place to receive all that God intends to do in us?
5. Following on from question 4, what are the barriers to us engaging with these practices, and how might we create space or opportunity for God to be at work in us?
6. Vulnerability with others can be difficult or uncomfortable, but often brings situations into the light in such a way that we are better able to engage with God's work of transformation. If you feel comfortable in your group, share one type of speech that you recognise you might need particular heart renewal for:
Marc listed these types and the possible heart condition behind them, but you may think of others:
Angry words - self love
Complaints - greed
Arrogant speech - not pride, but fear
Slander or gossip - envy

Prayer

Take some time now to reflect on your answers to questions 5 and 6. Pray for each other, that the Holy Spirit would continue to shape our words as our hearts are being made new, and that we might make space for God to carry that work out in our lives.