

JAMES 3

7: WORDS & WISDOM



Context & Historical Background

The book of James was written around 44-48 A.D., so a little more than a decade after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. After the church scattered because of persecution (Acts 11:19), the church had problems living out their faith well. They were suffering persecution and had in many ways adopted attitudes of the world. They had stopped doing what they heard (1:19-27); they began showing favoritism to the rich (2:1-13); they weren't letting their faith live through their deeds (2:14-26). All the while he's building to his main point: you can't split your allegiance to God (4:4-5). You're either his or the world's; the double-minded man should expect nothing (1:7-8). But at chapter 3, just before his sweeping declaration about belonging fully to God, James gives this bit of advice about wise living and the power of our tongues.



Related Passages

Luke 6:43-45 – How can perfect speech show the perfect man? Because speech is connected to our hearts. Jesus preaches this here.

James 1:19-27 – Pure religion involves listening quickly and speaking slowly, holding a rein on the tongue.

Ephesians 5:4 – “Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.”



Key Terms

Teachers: This doesn't just mean school teachers, but anyone who is passing along the doctrines of the church, anyone functioning as a kind of rabbi. This is an office of the church with a high calling and high demand. See 2 Tim. 2:2; 3:1-13. We should be hesitant to teach comfortably, and we should be hesitant to give ourselves to teachers. (How many Christian celebrities suddenly abandon orthodoxy and pull thousands of followers with them?)



Key Themes

The Power of the Tongue: The interesting thing about this section is the dual power of the tongue. James's teaching probably sounds extreme, if not hyperbolic. When he says if you can

use your tongue well, you're perfect (3:2), it sounds too easy: if we don't say bad things, somehow we're sanctified? Scripture gives the mouth a two-fold power. One of the most prevalent, especially with Jesus, is the power of the tongue to reveal the heart. Christ tells us that our mouths are the overflow of our hearts. So there is a sense in which if your tongue is pure, it reveals that your heart is pure. This is really instructive because then our tongue can be a kind of diagnostic tool. How do you use your words? How do you usually pray? When talking about people, are you generally more negative or gracious?

But James passage also suggests that the tongue is more than a kind of passive effect; it's a cause. The bit determines the direction of the horse, and the rudder determines the direction of the ship; they don't reflect them but cause them. So we have this synergistic relationship between our tongues and our hearts. There's a loop that feeds back: our hearts produce words which further affect our lives and hearts. James uses such strong language to make us aware of this power and to shock us into trying to break that positive feedback loop. Unfortunately James says that no man can tame the tongue. So what do we do? James gives the same advice he does everywhere else in his letter: You need the wisdom of God. You need that wisdom to face your trials (1:5), but you also need that "wisdom that comes from heaven" (4:17) to produce purity, peace, mercy, sincerity. There is a sense in which we can control the tongue—we can choose not to gossip and we can choose to give thanks—but only with God's help. We won't tame it if we don't ask God for the wisdom to speak wisely and the grace to rein in our tongues. St. Augustine said, "A man is needed in order to tame a horse, and in the same way, God is needed in order to tame a man." So part of this week can be a discussion about the power of the tongue, what it tells us, how it affects us, and how we can break the cycle of speaking loosely and hardening our hearts.

Poison and Fraud: James calls the tongue a poison and a restless evil. Why? What does the tongue do that makes it so bad? And why is this a distinctively bad problem that can set fire to everything? In the greatest work of Christian literature, *The Divine Comedy*, Dante paints a picture of the effects of sin in *Inferno*. When organizing his version of hell, in the lowest parts of hell Dante doesn't put murder, adultery, or greed. At the bottom is fraud: seduction (not just sex, but using words to entice to sin), flattery, lying, evil counsel, sowers of discord, hypocrites. Obviously Dante isn't the Bible, and his picture of hell isn't literal. But it does show us that some of the worst sins—what they do to us and others—come from our tongues. We use our cunning to get what we want by manipulating others. We defraud them. That's why the tongue is poison. The poison wasn't in the fruit Eve ate; it was in the words Eve heard. When we flatter, when we lie, when we gossip or stir up drama, we're poisoning the unity of our community (and so fittingly in the lowest circles Dante also puts the schismatics). This is why our tongues can be set on fire by hell. Satan loves dividing people from each other and from God. Not only is our tongue an evil among our individual bodies, it has a great potential to injure the collective body of Christ. St. Chrysostom said, "if you let [the tongue] run wild, it becomes the vehicle of the devil and his angels."

The second half of the third chapter is still about the tongue and the heart, the feedback loop between them. And it's here we see the problem that hypocrisy and our tongues produce—"disorder and every evil practice." The tongue divides, a result of—but also producing

more of—envy and ambition. This manifests in “boasts” and “denials.” James is worried about infighting, bickering, talking the talk but not walking the walk, and the division, disunity, and corruption this mix produces. He says as much in chapter 4:1-6. And his solution shows the inverse: we need to be “sowers of peace” which comes from and produces the list of virtues in 3:17. Our words have power, which James illustrates by saying our words can tame animals and even control men. And these words can set us on fire, or sow peace.

Hypocrisy: James is really tackling a practical problem, the same problem that he attacks in his entire letter: people aren’t living what they’re professing. They’re hypocrites. And his charge probably hits close to home because it’s so specific: how often have we walked out of Synergy and gossiped or complained about our roommate or sorority sister or other staff members? There are two kinds of speech, the praises we offer and the curses we offer; and there are two kinds of wisdom, that which comes from heaven to produces humility and that which comes from the devil and produces envy and ambition. The tool meant for praise and consecrated holiness shouldn’t be used for obscenity. James likens this worldly behavior to adultery (4:4): you’re sleeping with prostitutes in the same bed consecrated for your marriage when you use the tongue consecrated to God to curse your brother.

James wants this two-faced, double-minded, and double-tongued tendency to die in our community because he wants us to know that we can’t have both. His image of the two springs is meant to show us that the corrupt will out in our lives. The salt will taint the spring. This is a practical warning that loose lips and living isn’t remedied by singing a few praise songs at Synergy. James is telling us to give ourselves wholly to God. This is the message of his entire letter. We can’t join ourselves to the world and Christ. We can’t serve two masters. This means we have to give our entire lives to Christ. Now that doesn’t mean if we’re not perfect then we’re screwed. James tells us, “we all stumble in many ways” (3:2). But rather as we stumble, we stumble on our way to God, away from the world, forswearing the wisdom of the world and the curses of our tongues so that we may sow peace and grow in humility as we receive the wisdom from heaven.

📖 Quotes & Illustrations

“If you don’t have something good to say, don’t say anything.”

YOUR DAD

“Note that the comparison is taken from the beasts which we are able to tame. The horse does not tame itself, nor does a man do so. A man is needed in order to tame a horse, and in the same way, God is needed in order to tame a man.”

ST. AUGUSTINE

“Therefore, guard the tip of the tongue, for it is like a majestic stallion, For if you put a bit in its mouth and teach it to walk in order, it adapts to this and is satisfied. But if you let it run wild, it becomes the vehicle of the devil and his angels.”

ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

In the classic poem, *The Aeneid*, Virgil explains how a love affair brought a city to the brink of destruction: Rumor. Here Rumor is personified as a “monster, horrific, huge”:

“Rumor, swiftest of all the evils in the world.
She thrives on speed, stronger for every stride,
slight with fear at first, soon soaring into the air
she treads the ground and hides her head in the clouds.
She is the last, they say, our Mother Earth produced.
Bursting in rage against the gods, she bore a sister
for Coeus and Enceladus: Rumor, quicksilver afoot
and swift on the wing, a monster, horrific, huge
and under every feather on her body—what a marvel—
an eye that never sleeps and as many tongues as eyes
and as many raucous mouths and ears pricked up for news.
By night she flies aloft, between the earth and sky,
whirring across the dark, never closing her lids
in soothing sleep. By day she keeps her watch,
crouched on a peaked roof or palace turret,
terrorizing the great cities, clinging as fast
to her twisted lies as she clings to words of truth.” (Aeneid, IV. 220-236)

! Three Main Points

1. The tongue reflects and affects the heart.
2. “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” (Proverbs 18:21)
3. Hypocrisy dishonors God, ruins community, and doesn’t produce peace.

? Discussion Questions

- Where do we see these teaching echo Jesus’ life or teachings?
- Why is it that if a man can control his tongue, he is perfect?
- What are some of the ways our tongues can lead us astray?
- What is the main problem James sees that he’s addressing? Where are some places we see the same problems in our lives, in our communities?
- What are the effects of problems with the tongue? What is James looking to preserve?
- How do problems with our speech affect unity?
- How does our language affect our hearts? Why do you think your words change your heart?
- How do we practically begin to use our speech well? What steps can I take?
- Why do you think James makes sins of the tongue so significant? Why is this issue so important?
- Why does James single out teachers especially? Who is a teacher? Why are they judged

more harshly?

- When James says the tongue “makes great boasts” what does he mean? Why is boasting such a prevalent sin in Scripture?
- How does James characterize our tongues? Is there good that can come from speaking? What kinds of good? How do we use our tongues well?
- Where are there problems with your speech? What’s one step this week you can take to remedying that issue?
- It seems like James is making an all-or-nothing statement in verses 10-11. Does that mean if I’m not already perfect in my speech then I’m a “salt spring?” What if I’m trying to be better, but I’m not perfect yet?
- Does “showing it by good deeds” mean a kind of works-righteousness?

Application & Practice

Silence: Silence is actually a spiritual discipline. Pick a day this week, and to the best of your ability don’t speak. Tell your roommates so you don’t seem like a jerk. Eat at the house so you don’t have to order food. Spend some time alone in the quiet; don’t fill your day with noise. Silence also has very healthy effects on you physically and psychologically (read this!).

Thankfulness. Pick two days this week and very intentionally—very intentionally—only say positive things to and about people. Give compliments; say thank you. Don’t say anything critical of anyone or to anyone. Only pray prayers of thanksgiving on those days. Journal at the end of those days about that experience. Report back to the group!

Going Deeper

Article: “The Tongue, the Bridle, and the Blessing” – Sinclair Ferguson