

RUF Large Group Bible Study
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James 3:1-12²

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

Words matter. Actions matter too. And James is making the point here that words are an action. He goes straight from 2:26 *For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead* to a whole section on words. Words are “works. They help to reveal or prove or justify our faith. I took an informal poll as to the greatest words or sentences ever spoken and here are the results:

”Here I stand. I can do no other.” – Luther

”One small step for [a] man. One giant leap for mankind.” - Neil Armstrong

”I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar.” - Nietzsche

”homousias” the same substance – Athanasius, from the Council of Nicea, 325 AD

”I think, therefore I am...” - Descartes

”We hold these truths to be self-evident...” Declaration of Independence

”God is dead.” - Nietzsche

”December 7th, 1941, a date which will live in infamy...” – Franklin Roosevelt

”Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall...” – Ronald Reagan

”An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.” – Ghandi

”I did not have sexual relations with that woman.” – B. Clinton

Dum spiro, spero. While I breathe, I hope.

”Alea jacta est.” The die is cast. - Julius Caesar upon crossing the Rubicon, signifying the transition between the Roman Republic and Imperial Rome.

”FREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEDOM!!!” - William Wallace in *Braveheart*

”There is only one God, and His name is Allah.” - the angel Gabriel (according to Mohammed)

With great power, must come great responsibility. – Peter Parker’s uncle in *Spiderman*

”But this one goes to 11.” – Nigel Tufnel, *This is Spinal Tap*

”When mama ain’t happy... ain’t nobody happy.”

”What are you gonna do- bleed on me!” - to the Black Knight after his legs and arms are cut off in *The Holy Grail*

”Yo Adrienne, I wuz wonderin’ if you wouldn’t mind marryin’ me or tompin...” - Rocky

”Are you ready for some football?” – Hank Williams Jr.

”God must have spent a little more time on you.” – N Sync

As we move into this chapter, I am totally convicted. I not only have a job and a calling that requires me to use words all day long, but I talk way too much. I get in trouble with my words and usually that is the thing I have to ask for forgiveness for. Saying the wrong thing. Talking rashly. Saying too much. Subtly boasting or manipulating the conversation. If I have done these things to you (and I’m sure I have) I apologize. Please forgive me. The Bible says that our tongues reveal our true hearts, and mine is filled with far more self than I wish.

My failures are evident, but not an excuse for even more failures. We are to get a grip on our tongues. Our thoughts are to be controlled by God, by the Holy Spirit. We are to take every thought captive and conform it to Jesus Christ. Remember as we go that our words give concreteness to our thoughts. So when we talk about our tongue, we’re also talking about our thought life, our beliefs. “The tongue is so much more than what we actually say out loud. In fact

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² Resources used: Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982; Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000; John MacArthur, *James*, Moody Press: Chicago, 1998; Dr. Tim Keller’s sermons on James found at www.redeemer.com; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Doubleday: New York, 1995; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (New Interpreter’s Bible), Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1998; J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, Intervarsity Press: Downer’s Grove, Illinois, 1985.

actual speech is probably only a small percentage of the use of the tongue. We cannot think without formulating thoughts in words; we cannot plan without describing to ourselves step by step what we intend to do; we cannot imagine without painting a word-picture before our inward eyes; we cannot write a letter or book without ‘talking it through’ our minds on to the paper; we cannot resent without fuelling the fires of resentment in words addressed to ourselves; we cannot feel sorry for ourselves without listening to the self-pitying voice which tells us how hard done by we are. But if our tongue were so well under control that it refused to formulate the words of self-pity, the images of lustfulness, the thoughts of anger and resentment, then these things are cut down before they have a chance to live: the master switch has deprived them of any power to ‘switch on’ that side of our lives.”³

John MacArthur puts this tongue section in context with the rest of James: “Scripture contains many inscrutable truths which, on the surface, seem to be contradictory or inconsistent and not able to be reconciled with each other by finite minds. For example, believers are chosen for salvation by the sovereign grace of God before the foundation of the world; yet they must exercise faith in order to be saved. As believers, we are kept secure in Christ by God’s sovereign decree; yet we must persevere. We can live a holy life only through the power of the Holy Spirit; yet we are commanded to obey. As James has pointed out in the first chapter of his letter, we *will* endure trials; yet we *must* endure them. We *will* receive the Word; yet we *must* receive it. We *will* be gracious to the needy without partiality; yet we *must* be gracious to them without partiality. We *will* produce good works; yet we *must* produce them. Where there is genuine living faith and spiritual transformation, those things and many others, both *will be* and the result and *must be* the result.

Here James mentions another of the incomprehensible realities: True believers *will* possess a sanctified tongue; yet they *must* maintain a sanctified tongue.”⁴

Let’s look at what James says to us about this action, that of our tongues, our thoughts. He says that not many of you should presume to be teachers, because teachers of the Word will be judged more severely than others. We know from other Scripture that it is good to seek to be an elder and a teacher, so we don’t want to suddenly dry up our source of teachers and preachers. But James does give us caution. There needs to be some sort of process for discernment here, both for the teacher’s sake and the listeners’ sake.

The Importance of Words

Words are an essential part of what makes us human. They are symbols; they are representative of reality for us, allowing us to communicate without merely pointing at something in front of us; they allow even more from a relationship because we can give our thoughts to others in a way that animals cannot do.

The story is told of a Holy Roman Emperor in the 1200s who wanted to find out what mankind’s primordial language was. He secured babies when they were born, gave them all the care and love they needed, but required one condition – absolute silence by their caretakers. What language would they come up with? Guess what happened – they even with all that love and all their needs provided for, they all died. Without words, they withered away.

James says it’s really amazing when you look at this little bitty muscle in our mouths and how much it does. It’s like a bit in a horse’s mouth or the rudder on a ship. It’s really small but has tremendous power to turn the whole thing one way or another.

Positive – Words can be used to heal, build up, edify, and encourage. Prov. 25:11 says: *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.* When you hear the right words at the right time, and from the right voice, you are thrilled and even emboldened for action. Words give life. Think of Helen Keller and how her world changed when she understood words and speech. Consider what it means to say “I do” when you are getting married. Nothing really happens there except for the taking of vows, the exchanging of words that become a promise for the future.

Or, to think of the positive but from the negative, you know of people whose husbands love them, show them that they love them, act like they love them, and yet the wives complain, saying, “He never says “ I love you.” Why does it matter if he tells her or not when his actions show his love? Because words matter.

Words show our faith. They put forms on our thoughts about ourselves, our world and about God. Ps. 35:28 says: *Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness and of your praise all the day long.* This is why it’s good to pray out loud, to memorize confessions and catechisms, to sing the hymns of our faith, to know what “justification” and “propitiation” and “atonement” mean.

Negative – But words can also be negative. They can be used to destroy, weaken, tear down, hurt. James describes this as a fire. Fire is a great metaphor and simile for this, as it continually can be fed. Fires can feed themselves and burn indefinitely (as opposed to water). And fires can cause great damage.

The Great Chicago Fire on Oct. 8. 1871. Here are the rough statistics: 17,500 buildings destroyed, 300 people died, 125,000 people left homeless. And why? All because of Mrs. O’Leary’s cow, which presumably knocked over a lantern in her barn.

³ Motyer, p. 121

⁴ MacArthur, p. 146

We've all been torn down by words. Four eyes. Fatso. Ugly. Slow. Dumb. At our house, the bad words are "Grumpy Pants", "Do-Do brain" and the enigmatic "Ibis." You don't deserve it. Why can't you be more like your brother? You'll never get a date. You'll never amount to anything. You're a slut and a whore.

When Paul describes the total depravity of mankind, the radical corruption of all people, a part of what he says has to do with their speech. Ro. 3:13-14: "*Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.*" "*The venom of asps is under their lips.*" "*Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.*"

In James, he talks about the **character** of our speech – it's toward unrighteousness. *And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.* James next mentions the **influence** of our speech – it stains all it touches. *The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body.* He then touches on the **continuation** of that influence – we just don't grow out of it like we do other sins. *setting on fire the entire course of life...* He finishes with our tongues' **affiliation** – it is pro-Satan and anti-God. *and set on fire by hell.* He wraps this all together with this statement: *It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

Needless to say, James is dwelling on the negative here. He's pointing out something we don't often consider – that our speech reveals who we really are. Is your speech negative or positive? Start off with the obvious – cursing and coarseness. Lying about yourself and your accomplishments. Making something sound more grand than it was. Telling a story with too much embellishment. But move from there. Boasting, manipulation, gossip, always talking about what you want or what you don't have, feeling pity for yourself. These are in view as well. And even *not* talking. Needing to say the right word, but afraid to. Keeping silent when your words are needed. Afraid to confront. This reveals the heart too.

All of this has an affect on us. What is that affect?

Words Affect the Hearer

I'm more and more convinced that it is words spoken from the outside that define who you are. You cannot make meaning for yourself, but you must borrow from someone to make that meaning. You cannot invent your own language. You have to have a commonality with others in order to communicate. You cannot define yourself like it is popularly taught. Imagine you are a musician. Let's say you played a song for ten years and every person you played it for hated it. They booed and cackled you off the stage. Would it make sense to say, "But I know that song is great." No, you desire affirmation from the outside, someone to appreciate what you're doing. You may think you're great, but you may have a warped view of yourself.⁵

Often we understand ourselves from a democracy standpoint. This is what it means to be a man in our culture. This is what it means to be a woman in our culture, etc. This can be positive or negative. Much of the oppression and denigration of people came from this democratic collective thought on women's roles or slavery and the worth of people. But it can also be a monarchy. You can have someone say something that no one else does and believe it if it's the right person. This is often what movies are made of. The media says the team can't do it, but the coach believes in them and inspires them. An athlete's mom says he can do it – she's the only one who thinks so, and he believes her and succeeds. The whole world says you're plain but your husband thinks you're beautiful, and he's the one who matters.

You have to understand that words affect you. Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me is exactly wrong. The opposite is true. People heal from physical wounds, but many are still walking around with psychological wounds that are as fresh as if it happened yesterday.

So what words do you listen to? If you're a hearer, then what are you hearing? Where do you get your information? Take that seriously. And do you listen to yourself? What are you saying to yourself? What words do you use when you're in trouble, when you look in the mirror, when you fail, when you succeed?

This is the idea behind counseling. You need to get people talking so they can hear the words come out. Many times you'll see this strange look on his face: "Oh, I didn't know I thought that. When I said those words, something clicked." Exactly. Talking it through, hearing yourself and your thoughts take form, making connections. These are the stuff of life.⁶

Words Affect the Speaker

James also says, be careful what you say, teachers! You will be held accountable for what you say. You can't just say anything you want and get away with it. Words are too important.

John Knox is reported to have felt this awesome weight before his first sermon. He is said to have wept uncontrollably and had to be escorted from the pulpit to compose himself. I can remember about halfway through seminary when I realized what it was I was getting myself into. Am I worthy of this?, I thought. Can I bear this?

It's good for us to consider that, those who have been called to be teachers. It forces us to think through our callings and give the honor and glory to God. And to confess when we mess up, asking for forgiveness for our tongues.

But there is more for all of us, regardless if whether we are teachers or not. James is showing us that everyone must consider his or her tongue and what it is that our speech and thoughts reveal.

Prov. 25:28 says: *A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.*

⁵ *American Idol* cut shows are good for this.

⁶ And why OU just hired Dr. Nicki Moore as the only athletic sports psychologist in the nation.

Prov. 18:6-7 says: *A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating. A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul.*

Our tongue reveals who we really are. It's like a spring or a fig tree. Brackish water comes from a bad well. Good water from a clean well. Rotten fruit comes from a tree and good fruit from a healthy tree.

Matt 12:34 puts it this way: *For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.* (NIV) I have always found that verse to be terribly convicting. What comes out of my mouth shows who I really am. Ouch. What is coming out?⁷

James says the tongue is the key to holy living. Huh? Can he really say that? He does in 3:2: *For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.*

James is telling us that self control with your tongue can change your whole life. This goes along with the bit and the rudder idea. Those do control the larger entity. All the power of a ship and a horse can be reigned and controlled and steered by this seemingly small mechanism. "We ask ourselves how we are to control the powerful forces within us that drive us into sin, and James replies by talking about something we never considered – do we control our tongues?"⁸

We need to pray this prayer from Ps. 141:3: *Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!*

Again, we have to ask ourselves, If this is true, how can I change? How can I put my faith into action?

The Word

I believe James offers two solutions for us.

The first is hidden away in these sentences: ⁷ *For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,* ⁸ *but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.* ⁹ *With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.*

It seems that James is saying that you cannot do it. You can't just zip your lip and make everything better. Even if you tried to control your tongue that way, you wouldn't be able to affect your thoughts.

Jack Miller, in his Sonship course, wants people to really understand justification and live by it. He believed that most of us live like orphans instead of the sons and daughter that we really are. To get at this, he would prescribe the "Tongue Assignment." For a week, you had to keep track of every time you gossip, spread a bad report, complain, criticize, boast, blameshift, make excuses, defend yourself and deceive others. And every time you don't encourage and edify someone else.

What is the point of that assignment? To show you that your tongue and your thoughts are beyond human repair. You can't fix them. But they can change. We see that through the second ditty James puts in there for us. He says that *With it [our tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.* So it's really bad to curse people who are made in the image of God. Got it. But what is the opposite of that? Wouldn't you think it would be to bless people? To speak well of them, good words to them, *benediction* to them? James says the opposite of cursing people is to bless our Lord and Father.

Aha. Of course we're headed here. When we understand who God truly is, we see people correctly. We see ourselves correctly, and our thoughts and tongues conform to that truth. That's how we change. Our cursing becomes blessing because we are thankful for all we get.

That's the other solution then. We serve a "speaking" God. His words have power to create life. The world, man and woman, spiritual life. Miracles. By his mere words.

Even more astounding is the Bible's claim that Jesus is "the Word" made flesh. He is the *logos*. That image was picked for a reason. The Word of life.

Consider how Jesus never messed up with his tongue. He always said the right thing. He never said the wrong thing. He always spoke when needed and kept silent when needed. His is our example, and our substitution for all our mess ups with our tongue.

Consider how he intercedes for us. He hasn't shut up. He prays for us, he is our advocate still and continually.

Consider how we have the Words of Life for us, the Bible which is our food.

Consider how the Holy Spirit is ready and willing to give us the words we need, through the study, preaching and teaching of the Word.

Consider how these things are sufficient for our lives.

As Francis Schaeffer says, "He is there, and He is not silent." He has spoken and still speaks today. Are you listening?

⁷ I had a friend who used to practice cussing.

⁸ Motyer, p. 120