

Taming *the* Tongue



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: James 3:1–12; Deut. 6:6, 7; Luke 9:51–56; Prov. 16:27; Matt. 7:16–18.

Memory Text: “‘For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.’” (Matt. 12:37, NKJV).

Words hold tremendous power. “A word fitly spoken” (Prov. 25:11)—praise, poetry, stories—can shape lives in profound ways. What we say may linger for days or even years. Children, for example, absorb words like sponges. That’s why they soon speak fluently whatever language they grow up hearing. It’s also why the messages they hear about themselves may foreshadow their future success or failure. For better or worse, the communication style of parents is replicated and amplified in their children.

The written word is powerful, too, and even more lasting. Most powerful of all is God’s Word. Consider: “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Ps. 119:105); and “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee” (vs. 11). Jesus directed the attention of the disciples away from temporal blessings to something much more vital: “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63).

Words can soothe and reassure or poison and contaminate. How often have you said something you wished you could take back?

This week, as we will see, James has some important words about, well, words.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 15.

Accountability

Read James 3:1. What important point is James making here about accountability?

Teachers in the church and in Christian schools have an especially heavy responsibility because they shape minds and hearts in ways that will last for years. This effect includes the rippling impact they will have on many others beyond their immediate sphere of influence. The more we know, the more responsible we become for utilizing and imparting that knowledge.

At the entrance to the Tyndale House library in Cambridge, England, is a plaque reminding every scholar who enters there: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (*Prov. 9:10*). Man is not the measure of all things; God is, and all true education begins and ends with Him. Unfortunately, as knowledge increases, dependence on God tends to diminish. It is too often practiced and taught, for example, that science functions independently from God. Some teachers of theology, in striving for credibility, also may utilize methods that leave little or no room for faith. As a result, faith can gradually get squeezed out of the minds and hearts of both teachers and students. But as long as educating for eternity, not just for this world, is uppermost for teachers and students alike, learning will be a precious, even inspirational, endeavor.

Paul understood this responsibility, for he trained and ordained leaders in the churches he raised up (*Acts 14:23; compare Titus 1:5*). He even gave instructions to Timothy to guard God’s flock from inexperienced and unwise shepherds (see *1 Tim. 1:3–7; 3:2–6; 6:2–5; 2 Tim. 2:14, 15*), warning that some are “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (*2 Tim. 3:7, NKJV*).

Parents carry a weighty responsibility in teaching their children, who in turn influence others. All of us, in fact, by the example we set, can have a profound influence on those around us. How important then that we seek God’s wisdom, which He has promised us (*James 1:5*), that we might model His ways and exert a godly influence. For we all, for good or for bad, do exert influence over others.

Think about those who have influenced you in a positive way. What did they do? How did they impact you? And, most important, how can you do the same for others?

Word Power

“For we all stumble in many ways” (*James 3:2, ESV*). What a refreshing admission, especially considering James’s emphasis on behavior! Still, our acknowledgment of the “real” need not dim our belief in God’s ideal for us as His representatives on earth.

“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body” (*vs. 2, ESV*). The form of the condition in Greek implies that not stumbling in word is a real possibility. The importance of words can scarcely be overestimated. Thoughts lead to words, which in turn lead to actions. Words also reinforce what we think. Thus, they influence not only what we do but also what others do. We are interconnected through language.

This week’s passage contains several illustrations of the power of the tongue. The first three emphasize how something small can have huge consequences: a bit and bridle can turn a horse, a rudder can steer a ship, and a spark can engulf a forest in flames.

What positive kinds of “word power” do we find in Scripture? See *Deut. 6:6, 7; 23:23; Ps. 40:3; Prov. 10:20, 21; 12:25; Mal. 2:6, 7; Luke 4:22; Rom. 10:6–8.*

Young children are impressionable, but, like trees that grow stiffer and more fixed, children resist change more as they age. In one sense, we are all teachers, whether in the home or in the church. Because our words have so much power, it’s important to bathe our thoughts in God’s Word early in the day. After all, what feeds our thoughts and words, God’s Spirit or another source? We must not underestimate the enormous changes that are possible through God’s Word (*Ps. 33:6; compare 2 Cor. 4:6*) as opposed to other sources.

Words are so potentially powerful that, with just a few sentences, you can devastate a person, perhaps for the rest of his or her life. On the other hand, positive words can uplift someone, perhaps for just as long.

If you had dynamite in your hands, how careful would you be with it? What should your answer tell you about how you should deal with something even more powerful than dynamite?

“Little” Things *Are* the Big Things

Read James 3:3–5. What do the two illustrations have in common, and how do they relate to the tongue?

Both the bit in a horse’s mouth and the rudder of a ship are very small compared to what they control. Yet, with a slight movement of the hand, the horse’s or the ship’s direction can be completely changed. By the same token, “even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things” (*vs. 5, NKJV*). In other words, a word or even a look or a gesture might seem small, but each can change a friend into an enemy or transform a bad situation into something good. “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger” (*Prov. 15:1*). Imagine a horse galloping at full speed and a ship slicing through the water at full throttle but both headed in the wrong direction. The faster something goes, the farther away it gets from its destination. The best course then is to stop and turn around as soon as possible. The same is true of our words. If a conversation is going from bad to worse, the sooner we stop, the better.

Read Luke 9:51–56. What was Jesus’ response to the suggestion of the disciples? What was the result, and what lessons might this story have for us?

Although the disciples had a biblical precedent for their suggestion (*2 Kings 1:10, 12*), Jesus rejected the suggestion. His rebuke dramatically altered the situation. The story ends simply by indicating that “they went to another village” (*Luke 9:56*). Jesus turned His rejection by a Samaritan village into a learning experience for His followers. In the heat of the moment, when feelings rise up and clamor for us to defend ourselves, we can remember the example of Jesus and, figuratively speaking, move on “to another village.”

“As drops of water make the river, so little things make up life. Life is a river, peaceful, calm, and enjoyable, or it is a troubled river, always casting up mire and dirt.”—Ellen G. White, *That I May Know Him*, p. 209.

What are some “little” things in your life that, as you dwell further on them, might not be so “little” after all?

Damage Control

We've all experienced it. Something we said gets magnified, perhaps even exaggerated, to the point that we don't even recognize it anymore. As James says, "See how great a forest a little fire kindles" (3:5, *NKJV*).

Read prayerfully and carefully James 3:6. What is he saying about the power of our tongue, of our words, to "defile" everything about us? Why should this verse make us tremble before we speak?

While fire, when used symbolically, can signify cleansing (*Isa. 4:4, Zech. 13:9*), it more frequently refers to destruction (*see, for example, Josh. 6:24; 11:9, 11; 1 Sam. 30:3; Matt. 7:19*), including the destructiveness of ill-advised words (*Prov. 16:27, 26:21*).

Not only can a large fire start from a spark, it can also ravage and destroy with amazing speed. In the same way, words can destroy friendships, marriages, and reputations. They can sink into a child's psyche and mar his or her self-concept and future development.

Sin originated on earth with a seemingly innocent question (*see Gen. 3:1*). It began in heaven in a similar way. Lucifer "began to insinuate doubts concerning the laws that governed heavenly beings."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 37. So, it is no exaggeration to say that the tongue is "set on fire by hell" (*James 3:6, NKJV*).

While it is true that words once spoken are gone forever and that we cannot fully undo what we have said, we should do all we can to lessen the damage and correct what we can. Taking steps to make things right will also help us not to repeat the same mistake. For example, after a further revelation from God, Nathan the prophet returned to David immediately to correct something he had said (*see 2 Sam. 7:1–17*). Peter wept bitterly over his denial of Christ and later demonstrated more openly the genuineness of his repentance (*John 21:15–17*).

Though "no man can tame the tongue" (*James 3:8, NKJV*), we are admonished to "keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies" (*Ps. 34:13, NIV*). Only the Spirit of God can help us to keep our words in check (*see Eph. 4:29–32*).

Read James 3:6–8. Why should the thoughts in these verses make us be so careful with what we say? How can we learn to appreciate the power for good, or evil, contained in our mouths?

Blessing and Cursing

Read James 3:9–12. What truth does James illustrate using the fountain, the fig tree, and the grapevine?

The idea of both blessing and cursing coming out of the mouth of a Christian is disturbing, to say the least. What about watching profanity-laced television programs or movies during the week and attending church on Sabbath to hear the Word of God? What about someone who speaks the truth and wonderful words about Jesus, only to later be heard telling an off-color joke? These images should be spiritually disturbing because they are contrary to what we know to be right. The same mouth that praises God later tells a dirty joke? What's wrong with this contrast?

James uses the image of a spring. Water quality depends on its source, and the root determines the fruit (*compare Matt. 7:16–18*). Similarly, if God's Word is implanted in us, its working will be evident in our lives. Understanding this truth frees us from the burden to "prove" our faith. Pure religion is rooted in faith, which is self-authenticating, just as a pure water spring needs no proof other than the water that flows naturally from it.

At the same time, though, one could ask, "If we were to take a 'snapshot' of certain devoted followers of God at low points in their experience (Moses murdering the Egyptian, David with Bathsheba, and so on), might we not legitimately question their profession?"

God's will, of course, is that we do not sin (*1 John 2:1*). However, since the fall of Adam and Eve, God has made provision for our forgiveness if we do sin, based on faith in the promised Sacrifice (*compare Ps. 32:1, 2*). Nevertheless, the fact remains that sin brings sadness while obedience brings blessing. Moses spent 40 years tending sheep to unlearn the training that led him to kill, and David suffered the death of the child Bathsheba bore, as well as a divided household that threatened his kingdom to the end of his life. Sure, we can be forgiven our sins after we do them; the problem, however, is that so often the consequences of those sins can remain, often with devastating results not just for ourselves but for others too. How much better to be on our knees asking for the power of victory than having to ask for forgiveness afterward and then plead for the damage to be brought under control.

Further Study: Read about the power of speech in “Talents,” from the book *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 335–339, by Ellen G. White, and share the points that impressed you with your Sabbath School class.

“When in the company of those who indulge in foolish talk, it is our duty to change the subject of conversation if possible. By the help of the grace of God we should quietly drop words or introduce a subject that will turn the conversation into a profitable channel. . . .

“Far more than we do, we need to speak of the precious chapters in our experience. We should speak of the mercy and loving-kindness of God, of the matchless depths of the Saviour’s love. Our words should be words of praise and thanksgiving. If the mind and heart are full of the love of God, this will be revealed in the conversation. It will not be a difficult matter to impart that which enters into our spiritual life. Great thoughts, noble aspirations, clear perceptions of truth, unselfish purposes, yearnings for piety and holiness, will bear fruit in words that reveal the character of the heart treasure. When Christ is thus revealed in our speech, it will have power in winning souls to Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 337, 338.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 The problem with words is that, for most of us, they come out so easily. So often, too, they come out almost before we even have a chance to think about what we are saying. Because this is true, how can we learn to think carefully before we open our mouths?
- 2 Think about the power of your words even upon your own self. Do this experiment: consciously talk to others as much as you can about what God has done in your life, how He has blessed you, how He has gotten you through trials, and so on. Do this even for only a day or so, and then ask yourself, How has this impacted my faith?
- 3 What do you think your words reveal to others about what goes on in your heart? Might they be revealing more than you would like to think? If you recorded all your spoken words in a single day and then played them back to yourself, what would they reveal about you?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *James 3:2, 6–10*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize the destructive capabilities of negative speech and the secret to controlling the untamable tongue.

Feel: Nurture a desire to speak only words that uplift.

Do: Extinguish the fires that his or her negative speech has kindled.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Sum of a Perfect Man

A What does James mean by perfect?

B What is the secret to gaining control over the untamable tongue?

C How does negative speech behave like a fire?

II. Feel: The Tongue Is a Fire

A What does it feel like to be “burned” by unkind words?

B How can speech be used to uplift others around you, cultivating in their hearts a feeling of hope and joy?

III. Do: Taming the Tongue

A What can be done to put out the fires your tongue has ignited?

B How can you heal those who have been burned by your words?

▶ **Summary:** Speech has the power to heal or destroy; thus, we must choose our words wisely.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *James 3:2, 6–10*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: *Speech has the power to heal or destroy; thus, we must choose our words wisely.*

Just for Teachers: *Help students grasp, through an exploration of James’s comparison of the tongue to fire, the destructive capabilities of negative speech.*

Opening Activity: Describe fire, using as many of the senses as possible. What are its characteristics? How does it behave? What are its benefits to humankind, as well as its dangers? What happens when a fire rages out of control?

Consider This: James compares the tongue to a fire. If a drought-stricken field or forest catches fire, what chance is there of putting the fire out without any damaging effects? Based on how a fire behaves, how does our incendiary or blistering speech “burn” others?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: *Help students to understand what James means by being “perfect,” as well as the secret to controlling the untamable tongue—a seemingly impossible task over which every Christian, nonetheless, is exhorted to strive for mastery.*

I. Taming the Tongue: The Sum of the Perfect Man *(Review James 3:2 with your class.)*

What is the definition of a perfect man? Contrary to popularly held cultural or even religious ideals, it may not be what one expects. Perfection in the Bible is defined not by a plethora of good works, education, wealth, recognition, or by abstaining from harmful practices or excess. According to James, the embodiment of “perfection,” at least in this context, is an individual who has complete mastery over his or her speech. “And if anyone does not offend in speech [never says the wrong things], he is a fully developed character and a perfect man, able to control his whole body and to curb his entire nature” (*vs. 2, Amplified*). James’s assertion begs a vital set

of questions: What exactly is meant by “perfect”; and, consequently, how does not offending in speech lead to becoming a mature, fully developed individual?

In light of these questions, let’s delve into the origins of the word *perfect* as used in this verse. The word rendered “perfect” here has its roots in the Greek word *teleios*, meaning to be complete or mature in one’s growth, work, or moral character. Here, James reveals that the key to attaining such mastery or perfection resides in the tongue. By this image, he means, metaphorically, our power of choice over the words we use. Think of it. Every individual is endowed with this astounding power to choose, which includes the wondrous, even radical, potential to combine words in verbal and written arrangements with life-altering capabilities: to heal wounds or cause them; to destroy or grow relationships; to inspire or discourage minds. All this potential resides in the freedom to choose our words. Implicit in such choices are not merely the words we say but the ones we *refrain* from saying.

But to conclude with this observation is to fail to grasp the full importance of the transformational effect on our lives that comes from controlling our speech. Thus, we must dig deeper into this verse to get at its meat. We begin by noting that James establishes a connection between perfection, or controlling one’s tongue, and controlling the entire body, or physical nature, with all its appetites, passions, desires, and cravings. Implicit in this connection is a very powerful promise for character growth and spiritual victory: control the tongue and control the nature. The result? Attaining full maturity as an individual—what James calls perfection.

The connection between speech and maturity is so pivotal because the promise here goes far beyond simply gaining victory over saying the wrong thing. It promises us that if we control our words, we can gain control over every other facet of our lives, both our bodies and our entire natures. Why? Words are an indicator of the state of the heart. “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (*Matt. 12:34, NKJV*). If the heart is pure, the speech will be. What an incredible admission, which, in turn, leads to the issue of our accountability to use this power wisely. For, as we are told elsewhere in Scripture, we will have to give an account in the judgment for every word used, whether for good or evil.

Consider This: How does the world define perfection? By contrast, what is the Bible’s definition, as outlined in James, of a perfect man? What does James mean by perfect? What is the connection between having control over one’s speech and control over one’s entire nature? Why is this true?

II. The Tongue Is a Fire (Review James 3:6–10 with your class.)

Georgia O’Keeffe, arguably the greatest American landscape artist of the twentieth century, once wrote, “It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things.” Or to frame her observation another way: what you leave out is just as important as what you leave in. If this is true of art, it is doubly true of language.

Every Christian must strive for this mastery in speech—for a “word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (*Prov. 25:11, NKJV*). But how do we attain it? James openly admits that control is hard—even impossible, in human strength. Yet, as we learned in the first section of the commentary, if the tongue is controlled, then the entire nature is subdued. However, now James seems to be telling us that it can’t be controlled. He presents us with a powerful contradiction that cannot be resolved in human terms. But the Bible tells us that what can’t be resolved in human terms can be resolved in divine ones, for “the things which are impossible with men are possible with God” (*Luke 18:27, NKJV*).

But how does God make the impossible possible?

By way of answering this question, let’s first unpack the verse to see exactly how difficult it is to control the tongue, given how dangerous it is. James uses poetic language to describe the power of words to destroy and wound. He compares negative speech to (1) fire, (2) wild, undomesticated animals, and (3) poison. Fire decimates. Wild animals are feral and can kill. Poison is deadly. All three images suggest the infliction of total annihilation, damage, or permanent destruction. James is using such potent imagery to make his point: the negative power of speech is deadly, and no human can tame it.

But implicit in this blatant admission about how difficult it is to attain this mastery is the key to obtaining it. For while it is true that no man can tame the tongue, we can do all things through Christ and His indwelling presence in the body temple. “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 2:5, NKJV*). Thus, we are assured victory through this union: “Greater is [H]e that is in you, than he that is in the world” (*1 John 4:4*).

Consider This: What does James mean when he says, “The tongue is a fire”? How is the power of speech like a poison? Why is the tongue a wild beast that no man can tame? James presents us with the following paradox: on the one hand, he says that no one can tame the tongue, but on the other, he says that if it is tamed, then we can have control over our entire nature. Such an admission implies that the impossible can be achieved. By what power is this feat achieved, and how does transformation take place?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Help students to apply James’s wisdom to their everyday interactions with others.

Application Questions:

① Change someone’s mind and you change his or her heart. Arguments are won less by the power of our words than by the spirit behind them. In conflict, why is it more important to ask yourself, “Am I revealing Christ and His Spirit,” rather than “Am I winning this war of words?” What does the first attitude reveal of one’s motives and attitude? Why is the war for the heart of the one with whom we are in conflict more important than winning the battle of wits and words?

② Fire often costs billions in damages. And even when it is finally extinguished, priceless resources—including lives—are irretrievably lost. What can you do to put out the fires, so to speak, that your tongue may have lit or spread? How can the passage in James, put into action, help you to retard the flames and salvage the situation?

③ How can you heal the “burn victims” wounded by your hasty, careless speech?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Help the students, through this exercise, to create new understanding of the destructiveness of negative speech. Divide into small groups, assigning the following task. Appoint a spokesperson for each group.

James uses potent images to convey his point about the destructive power of negative speech. Fire, feral animals, and poison are all deadly if ingested or permitted to run unbridled and out of control. Think of other images in contemporary life that are equally destructive (examples: natural disasters, such as tornadoes, tsunamis, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, et cetera; and manmade ones, such as oil spills, nuclear weapons, chemical or germ warfare, et cetera). How do such modern images lend fresh insights into the destructiveness of unbridled speech? Share your insights with the class.