

Do Our Words Injure or Inspire?  
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James 3:1-12

Opening Question: In this section of His letter, James talks about “Taming the Tongue.” In fact, in verse two he tells us: *2 Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way. (NLT)* That’s a pretty big claim. If we could control our tongues we would control ourselves totally. **So, in your own opinion, why does James make such a BIG deal out of such a small thing as what we say?**

This chapter begins in verse one with a warning —to those who feel called to teach God’s word: 3 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

- **Why will a teacher of God’s word be judged with greater strictness?**
- **How might a teacher “mess up” in this area?**
- **Why is this not an “escape hatch” or excuse for people to decline teaching?**
- **What is the real purpose of this verse?**

In his book Pastor Johnny writes:

*“(James’) purpose is not to discourage but to raise awareness that the role of teaching is not to be taken lightly. No one is infallible; nor does God expect us to be. But since words are the teachers primary tool, teachers face greater responsibility for their kingdom service because of the powerful position teaching provides in influencing others lives.”*

- Now James moves into the subject of “taming” our tongue, our speech, our words.
- We said in verse two he states what would be the ideal circumstance:

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 gives some excellent word pictures to make his point about taming the tongue:

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.

- **What happens when we are either careless or we “over correct” the steering of a car?**
- **Does that mean the safest thing to do is just keep the steering wheel in one position?**
- **Compare that to our speech. Is James saying we should just never say anything? What IS he saying?**

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.

- **In what ways is the damage our words can cause like a forest fire?**

William Barclay pointed out two ways careless words are like a forest fire:

1. *It is wide-ranging. The tongue can damage at a distance. A chance word dropped at one end of the country or the town can end up by bringing grief and hurt at the other.*
2. *It is uncontrollable. There is nothing so impossible to kill as a rumor; there's nothing so impossible to obliterate as an idle and malicious story. Before we speak, let us remember that once a word is spoken it is gone from our control.*

An ancient proverb says:

*“Three things come not back – the spoken word, the spent arrow, the missed opportunity.”*

- Back in verse two James stated the ideal: If we could control our words perfectly, everything about us would be perfect. Now he states the reality, verses seven and eight:

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.

- **If no human can tame the tongue, does that mean there's no use trying?**

- **Is James letting us off the hook? Why or why not?**

- Next James talks about the inconsistency of human nature when it comes to our words:

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.

Quoting William Berkeley again:

*“John Bunyan tells us of Talkative (Pilgrim's Progress): ‘He was a saint abroad and a devil at home.’ Many people speak with perfect courtesy to strangers yet snap with impatient irritability at their own families. (Some speak) with piety on Sunday and curse a team of workers on Monday. Some utter the most pious sentiments one day and repeat the most questionable stories the next.”*

- That's a good segue to a little study I want us to do right now.
- **What are some “types of speech” that can be evil?**
- **What does the Bible say about them?**

- Profaning God's name Ex 20:7
- Lies and deceit 17:20
- Foolish boasting Jas 4:13-16;
- Ridicule and insults Pr 11:12; Mt 5:22;
- Criticism and complaint Php 2:14-15
- Slander Jas 4:11
- Cursing Jas 3:9-10
- Gossip Pr 16:28; Pr 17:9;

- Obscenity Eph 5:4; Col 3:8
- **Any further thoughts on all this?**

So, What's the Takeaway?

- Taming our tongue (being careful with what we say) may be our biggest daily challenge.
- James makes it clear, NOT being careful with what we say can cause BIG injury.
- Use your imagination: What if we trained our minds so that just before we say something stupid or hurtful, we'd picture ourselves dropping a lit match on a dry forest, or steering our car into oncoming traffic?
- This week, we should catch ourselves before we utter "evil speech" we've discussed.
- Finally, the most convicting takeaway I can think of are the words of Jesus:

Matthew 12:36 (ESV)

36 I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak,