

With Control
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James 3:1-12

The old saying tells us *“silence is golden.”* **What are some examples of times when we are tempted to speak but should keep our mouths shut? What is the danger of giving in to the urge to speak when we should remain silent?**

Proverbs 17:28 (ESV) advises, ²⁸ *Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.*

Someone (Lincoln? Mark Twain? It's up for debate) said, *“Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt.”*ⁱ

Silence may be golden in certain circumstances, but it's not practical 100% of the time. We need to speak, and when we do it needs to be speech that pleases God. That's why James's admonition to believers is not just “shut up,” but “control your tongue.” It's an impossible task without the power of the Holy Spirit.

Big Idea: Believers demonstrate godly maturity by controlling our speech. When I open my mouth do I sound like a follower of Christ? It can be a challenge!

- In chapter two James said faith without works is dead. We defined “works” as obedient behavior that looks like Jesus and pleases God.
- If I profess to be a Christian my actions should provide evidence that what I say is true. As they say, “actions speak louder than words.”
- But words matter too, so James moves immediately to warn us about controlling one of Satan's favorite tools, our tongues – what we say.

James 3:1–12 (ESV)

3 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.

- Verse one: James is not trying to discourage believers from using their gift of teaching; he's warning teachers that we are held to a higher standard.
- I don't want to have to explain to God one day that I carelessly taught something that wasn't biblically solid or simply my own opinion!
- Verse two is encouraging because all our heads will nod in agreement when James said, "*we all stumble in many ways.*" Yep, that's me!
- And if you don't stumble you are perfect! Nobody's perfect!
- Scholars debate how James uses that word "perfect" in this verse. He might be saying we won't stop "stumbling" in sin until Heaven; that's true!
- The word "perfect" here may mean "mature" since James is challenging us that believers should be able to control our speech with God's help.

- James gives three examples of how this small tongue can cause big problems: a bit in the mouth of a horse, a rudder on a ship, and a spark.

³ We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. ⁴ And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong.

⁵ In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches. ⁱⁱ

- The last sentence of verse five got very real to me on Friday morning as we woke to news of wildfires in California consuming thousands of acres and dozens of homes. Two of the fires were within fifteen minutes of our corporate offices where I'm scheduled to be on Monday night.
- James said our little tongue *"can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself."*ⁱⁱⁱ That's why the tongue is one of Satan's favorite tools!
- My thought: In the dry tender of human emotions it only takes the small spark of an ill-advised or angry word to leave a lot of "scorched earth."
- **What are some examples of an untamed tongue?**
- Some people think you can spew bad speech at will as long as you say "I'm sorry" later. These days we hear non-apology apologies.
- A sincere apology for careless speech is good but the scars can linger.
- The Life Application Study Bible advises: *"Before you speak, ask, 'Is what I want to say true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?'"*^{iv}
- That's good advice, but we can't put it into practice on our own.
- In verse eight James shoots us straight: *"...no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison."*
- Verses nine and ten describe the hypocrisy of an untamed tongue: ⁹ Sometimes [our tongue] praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. ¹⁰ And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right!

- That makes me think of someone who stands in church piously singing God’s praises then cusses every bad driver all the way home.
- James asks in verses eleven and twelve (NIV) 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.
- The poison of the tongue starts deep in the heart! What did Jesus say?

In Matthew 12:33–37 (ESV) Jesus is talking to religious hypocrites: ³³ ...the tree is known by its fruit. ³⁴ You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵ The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. ³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

- I can hear my grandmother’s voice when my words were not Christ-like: *“You’ll give an account one day for every careless word you say!”*
- “...By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” doesn’t just apply at the judgment seat of Christ one day.
- People are taking stock of what comes out of our mouths daily.
- When I open my mouth do I sound like a follower of Christ?
- This passage is mainly about controlling evil, careless speech. Thinking about James’ examples, we don’t tame a horse to just stand still, use the rudder of a ship to sail in circles, or control a fire just to look at it. Not only should we control evil or hurtful speech, we should also be intentional about saying the right things. Here are three verses that teach us that:

Proverbs 16:24 (ESV) ²⁴ Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.

1 Thessalonians 5:11 (ESV) ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Ephesians 4:29 (ESV) ²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

- A successful interaction with others isn't just about what we DON'T say. In fact, in a relationship silence can actually BE a problem.
- Spouses need to encourage spouses, parents need to encourage children, believers need to speak words that build up and *"fit the occasion."*

So, What's the Takeaway?

- When I open my mouth do I sound like a follower of Christ?
- The tongue problem is really a heart problem.

In his commentary on James, David Platt uses an example I've heard before:

"Imagine a man who has an apple tree in his backyard that only produces rotten apples. He really wants it to produce delicious, red apples in order to make an apple pie, but all he gets is rotten fruit. Then he tells you he has a plan to fix the tree, and you see him come home from the grocery store the next day with a big bag of shiny red apples. He gets out his heavy-duty nail gun and starts stapling these good apples to the tree. The tree is alive and healthy, right? Wrong. The fruit on the tree may look good from a distance, but there's still a problem with the root. So it is with us: our hearts, and not just our behavior and our speech, are bad apart from Christ. So much of what we read and hear about in terms of people changing and growing spiritually is nothing more than fruit stapling. When our children use bad language, we tell them to talk better. That's certainly necessary, but we've got to address the problem at a deeper level. Jesus tells us that our tongue problems are heart problems. We don't need a spiritual tongue doctor but a spiritual cardiologist. And, praise God, we have one."^v

- The real solution for taming the tongue is for the heart to be changed by Jesus through salvation. That gives us the power to tame the tongue.
- The fact that James was writing to people who had BEEN SAVED reminds us that salvation doesn't automatically tame our tongues.
- James told us no human can control the tongue and the good news is, as David Platt said, we have a "spiritual cardiologist." We need to daily call on the power of Holy Spirit of God living in us to be successful in our speech.
- Here's a prayer we should pray and a great mental image to remind us to pause and ask God's help before we engage our tongue: Psalm 141:3 (ESV) says, ³ *Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!*
- By praying that prayer for God's strength and remembering that image, we can have success sounding like a follower of Christ when we speak.

ⁱ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/05/17/remain-silent/>

ⁱⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Jas 3:3–5). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} Tyndale. *Life Application Study Bible NKJV (LASB: Full Size)* (Kindle Locations 177421-177422). Tyndale House Publishers. Kindle Edition.

^v Platt, David. *Exalting Jesus In James (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 1480-1488). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.