

# Taming the Tongue

Bible Background • JAMES 3:1–12

Printed Text • JAMES 3:1–12 | Devotional Reading • ISAIAH 50:4–11

## Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLAIN how James’ illustrations demonstrate the power of the tongue, REPENT of times when the use of our tongues has ignited a destructive fire, and PRACTICE controlling the tongue so it becomes a consistent source of refreshment to others.

## In Focus

Eugene wondered how Jerry made it through the day with everyone always angry at him over the things he said. Eugene and Jerry hung out all the time and were as tight as brothers. They had even been the best man for each other when they both got married. They lived in the same neighborhood, went to the same church, and each of them had three kids who went to the same schools and participated in Sunday school and youth activities.

However, while Eugene was well-liked and had lots of friends, that wasn’t the case with Jerry. Jerry always came off as mean. He had a way of phrasing every comment like an insult. Worse, Jerry always got defensive when people told him to tone it down, or he would claim, “It was a joke; you’re too sensitive!”

Eventually, people avoided talking to Jerry unless they absolutely had to. More and more, Eugene found himself making excuses for his friend—excuses his other friends didn’t want to accept. Eugene was frustrated because he knew Jerry to be a good and loyal friend, but everyone they knew was put off by him. Eugene prayed that Jerry would learn to understand the effect he was having on people and to see things from the view of those who got hurt by his comments.

*How can we learn to step outside of ourselves and truly be as good to others the way God wants us to be, and not just as we think we are?*

## Keep in Mind

“In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches. But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire” (James 3:5, NLT).

## Words You Should Know

**A. Perfect** (v. 2) teleios (Gk.) — Complete, having attained a particular virtue

**B. Turn around** (v. 3) metago (Gk.) — To guide, direct, or lead over

## Say It Correctly

**Alphaeus.** AL-fee-us.

**Zebedee.** ZEH-buh-dee.

## KJV

**James 3:1** My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

2 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

3 Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.

4 Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth

5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

7 For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind:

8 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

9 Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

10 Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren these things ought not so to be.

11 Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?

12 Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

## NLT

**James 3:1** Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly.

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.

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. But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire

6 And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.

7 People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish,

8 but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison.

9 Sometimes it 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!

11 Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water?

12 Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty spring.

## The People, Places, and Times

**James.** The New Testament identifies several men named James, not surprising as it is derived from the Hebrew name Jacob, one of the patriarchs of Judaism. James, the son of Zebedee, had a brother John, was a fisherman by trade, and was one of Jesus' closest disciples. James, the son of Alphaeus, was another of Jesus' disciples. James is also the name of the father of Judas (not Iscariot, but another of Jesus' disciples). James, the son of Joseph and Mary, grew up with Jesus but did not believe He was the Messiah until after the Resurrection. Although there is still debate among scholars, the author of this letter is believed to be James, the younger half-

brother of Jesus. James became a leader in the church at Jerusalem at a time when persecution of Jewish believers was increasing, thus scattering Christians throughout the Roman Empire. This forced many of the displaced Jewish Christians to settle in nations of unbelievers.

## Background

During the time of this writing, religious leaders were no longer ignoring the new Christian church. Although they were still a part of Judaism, Christians were now being singled out, and the persecution of Christians had begun in earnest. Two other men named James mentioned in the New Testament (the apostle identified as the son of Zebedee and the brother of John, and the apostle identified as the son of Alphaeus) had been martyred. Similarly, Stephen had been stoned to death for his faith. In this increasingly hostile and dangerous atmosphere, it is not surprising that many Christians were abandoning the faith.

Internal strife was also taking place within the church. Christians were dealing with doctrinal arguments, false teachers, power struggles, gossip, and slander. The Christians were being encouraged to pursue self-fulfillment. During this time, many philosophers believed and taught the importance of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Very little importance was placed on putting knowledge into practice. They mistakenly taught that the way to spiritual enlightenment was through knowledge. James wrote to combat this mindset. Faith, not knowledge, is key. Our faith is rooted in our hearts; it is this faith that transforms us into “doers.” James insisted Christians must seek to attain the will of God. Only then can we bring about a change in our life, and in the life of the church. The remaining apostles, as they had been instructed to do, were off on missionary efforts. It was left to James, as leader of the Jerusalem church, to encourage the Christians and to provide much-needed instruction to sustain them during this period of persecution. Like the excellent pastor he was, James taught the believers to keep their eyes on Christ, not their situation, and to continue to live lives that reflected Jesus Christ and His teachings.

### At-A-Glance

1. Wisdom for Teachers (James 3:1–3)
2. Wisdom from Environment (vv. 4–6)
3. Wisdom for the Tongue (vv. 7–8)
4. Wisdom for the Double-Minded (vv. 9–12)

## In Depth

### 1. Wisdom for Teachers (James 3:1–3)

This word of wisdom is aimed at those who would teach the Word of the Lord. Teachers are in a position to inform and misinform others. James cautions that this highly valued and respected position should not be taken lightly. James warns those who aspire to teach, informing them they would receive harsher judgment and greater condemnation. James is certainly aware of the power teachers hold in shaping the spiritual lives of others. He warns teachers to examine their motives and not be self-serving. Teachers are tasked with stronger speech ethics as a way of achieving the maturity needed to keep the “whole body” in check.

*Why do teachers need to select their words carefully and weigh the effect of their words on those they lead?*

### 2. Wisdom from Environment (vv. 4–6)

James demonstrates the challenges of taming the tongue using images of things that affect daily life and survival. Horses are a common form of land transportation, but wild horses had to be tamed in order to be useful. James describes the tongue similarly. Using a bit, a skillful rider can control the horse’s every move. An

experienced captain will successfully guide a ship of any size by controlling the rudder. Particularly if a ship is experiencing severe sea conditions, mastery of the rudder makes the difference between death and deliverance. James challenges believers to control their speech to avoid self-destruction. Describing the tongue as a fire, James cautions against allowing Satan to use the tongue to “settleth on fire the course of nature.” The tongue has the power to ignite the fire of hell.

*How can we learn to control and modify the words that come out of our mouths?*

### **3. Wisdom for the Tongue (vv. 7–8)**

James issues another startling revelation. Animals can be tamed, but the tongue cannot. Trained animals were known to be an amazing sight in the first century Greco-Roman culture. However, James says the skills do not exist that can tame the tongue. His shocking comparisons continue. Since the Fall of humanity, snakes have been considered repulsive and deadly. James similarly characterizes the untamed tongue. James’ description recalls David’s prayer to be delivered from evil men who “have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adders’ poison is under their lips” (Psalm 140:3). James issues this sobering reality—words kill. Without God, James warns, believers would not only destroy other Christians but also be consumed by the deadly poison that resides within the power of the tongue.

*What are some examples of how your words can produce negative impacts on someone’s life?*

### **4. Wisdom for the Double-Minded (vv. 9–12)**

The contradictions James describes are reflective of our human nature. James addresses these double-minded, double-talking contradictions by using the example of believers who speak out of both sides of their mouths—blessing God, yet cursing people. God is consistent, and Christian speech must consistently reflect the heart of God. Words from the mouth speak the content of the heart (cf. Luke 6:45). James says blessings can neither come from a heart filled with venom nor can curses come from a heart of love. In much the same way that olives cannot come from a fig tree nor can a spring produce both fresh and salt water, James punctuates the need for believers to think, say, and do those things that reflect who they are in Christ. The reality of the heart will flow through the consistency of ethical speech. We can choose to listen to the voice of God and do His will, or we can choose to put ourselves first and the care, concern, and love of others last.

*When people irritate you, how difficult is it to stop and pray before speaking?*

### **Search the Scriptures**

1. How does James tell us that teachers will be judged (James 3:1)?
2. In what ways does James say our lives are controlled by what we say (vv. 3–5)?
3. How does James describe the tongue (vv. 6–8)?

### **Discuss the Meaning**

In these verses, James points out the dangers of an unbridled tongue. How have you seen the wisdom of restraining one’s speech in a difficult situation make a difference in the outcome?

### **Liberating Lesson**

What a wonderful gift speech is. Christians have the ability to exhort, coach, and build up other believers through our speech. Similarly, our words provide the vehicle to lovingly counsel the lost and to soothe and console the suffering and bereaved. This gift of speech is most perfectly employed when we speak words of truth and witness to others of God’s saving plan. We must be very careful not to abuse this wonderful gift. Many Christians would never imagine causing someone physical harm. Yet this is exactly what we do when we say thoughtless, careless, and unkind things to or about others. Especially if the person or people group we are talking about has historically not been allowed space and attention to speak for themselves, we must be careful

that our words about them are loving and truthful. Each day offers us a challenge to not only walk in the will and the way of our Lord but also to speak in ways that glorify Him.

### **Application for Activation**

It's never easy to listen to someone say unfair, incorrect, or mean-spirited things to us. Yet as Christians, we are never allowed to respond in the same matter. Our obligation is always to show a dying world that we are the children of a living God. We can only do this when our walk and our talk mirror those of our Savior. What comes out of our mouths must be loving. This means that our motivation to speak must be godly and intended to comfort, heal, and teach godly principles to others. Pray, and ask God to use your speech today as a vehicle for aid, comfort, and reconciliation.

### **Follow the Spirit**

What God wants me to do:

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### **Remember Your Thoughts**

Special insights I have learned:

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## **More Light on the Text**

### **James 3:1–12**

#### **1 My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.**

The Greek word *didaskaloi* (dee-DASS-kahloy), translated in the King James Version as “masters,” also means “teachers.” The teachers in this context were Jewish males, including the author, with expert training in the Scriptures. As such, they were authority figures held in high esteem. Some people wanted to become teachers to attain higher social status. However, those trained in the Scriptures were also charged with imparting to the community how to live according to God’s will. Therefore, they were held to a higher standard. If they led the believers astray, they would be judged and suffer condemnation (Gk. *krima*, KREE-mah) more harshly than others. Technically, *krima* could be any sentence passed by a judge in a court, but it is almost always used to describe a negative judgment, making condemnation an appropriate translation.

#### **2 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.**

The Greek word for “offend” is *ptaio* (PTAH-yo) and means to stumble. James acknowledged that as human beings we too often get tripped up and do or say things unintentionally. But the person who has the ability to guard his speech achieves perfection in disciplining his entire body. The Greek word for “perfect” (*teleios*, TEH-lay-occe), when referring to human beings, does not mean without sin. Rather, it symbolizes completion, the attainment of virtue in a moral sense. For example, the person who is able to deal with young children without complaining or anger is considered perfect in patience. A “bridle” (Gk. *chalinós*, khah-lee-NOCE) is literally a harness that fits over a horse’s head. It has a bit that fits into the horse’s mouth and reins that guide the animal in the direction it should go. Figuratively, to “bridle” one’s speech means to show restraint.

**3 Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.**

Horses were a common mode of transportation in the first century. Soldiers also used them in battles whether as cavalry mounts or as chariot teams. People who ride horses use a bridle to control or guide the horse's movement. The horse responds to the tugging on the bit in its mouth by turning its whole body in the direction its rider wants it to go. Likewise, when we demonstrate the ability to control our speech, we display the discipline to govern other parts of our body and guide them in the direction they should go.

**4 Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.**

James furthers his argument on the importance of selecting teachers who have mastered the ability to guard their speech (and therefore their whole bodies) by using the example of a ship at sea being steered by something as small as a rudder. The Greek verb *metago* (meh-TAH-go) means to guide, direct, or lead over. Similar to the horse, a large ship, which needs the power of strong winds in order to move it, is able to be steered this way or that by a relatively small rudder.

**5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!**

James finally gets to the heart of his sermon: that something as small as the tongue can wield great power for good or evil. The forest fire metaphor is a good example of how a single spark can start a fire that can quickly burn out of control. If the right person is in control of speech, then he or she can guide others in the right way to go. Likewise, a single word by a person with no self-control can do damage that can take months or even years to repair.

**6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. 7 For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind.**

James returns again to the metaphor of the tongue represented by the teacher within the community whose speech could bring good or evil to bear. This verse is obscure, and many scholars have found it difficult to interpret. The world of first-century Rome was far removed from our contemporary society, and many of the metaphors and images used in ancient writings such as the Bible are unfamiliar to today's readers. The Greek word for "iniquity," elsewhere translated unrighteousness, is *adikia* (ah-dee-KEE-ah) and means a deed violating law and justice, as in an unfair judge. A biased judge who hands down an unjust ruling negatively impacts the individual, his or her family, and the whole community. Or the tongue, with its potential for sin, represents a smaller version of the potential for all of humanity to sin. James likened the tongue to a living being. However, in contrast to all the creatures of the land and sea which human beings are capable of restraining and taming (Gk. *damazo*, dah-MOD-zo), humans appear to be incapable of taming the tongue

**8 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.**

We might believe that James exaggerated the power of the tongue by comparing it to fires raging out of control. However, he takes very seriously the power of someone in the authority position of a teacher to do great harm if he does not have the ability to control his speech. James refers to the tongue as "an unruly evil" (Gk. *kakon*, kak-ON). In the Greco-Roman context of the first century, the word "evil" meant to be foul or rotten down to the bone. It was an inward decay, somewhat like cancer developing and spreading through one's body. Anyone who has ever been the victim of slander knows how lies left unchallenged can destroy careers and lives.

**9 Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.**

It is ironic that the very same tongue we use to bless God is also used to curse others. To bless (eulogeo, yew-low-GEH-oh) someone is to speak well of them or to praise them. In contrast, “to curse” (Gk. kataraoimai, kah-tah-RAH-oh-my) someone means to doom or call down evil upon him or her. As creatures made in the image and likeness (Gk. homoiosis, hoe-MOY-oh-sees) of God, we should have only good words for one another.

**10 Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.**

The Greek word for “mouth,” stoma (STOW-ma), refers both to the physical facial feature and to speech, especially eloquent speech. It also means the point on a sword. Metaphorically, the tongue can be a sharp sword cutting down people with insults and imprecations. Or it can offer words of praise that lift up people. The notion that both virtuous and vile speech can come from the same source is anathema to James.

**11 Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?**

Fresh or living (Gk. glukus, gloo-KOOS, literally “sweet”) water is from a new or previously unused source. Bitter or brackish (Gk. pikros, peek-ROCE) water is fresh water mixed with salt water, such as in river estuaries. Living water is uncontaminated and refreshing; you wouldn’t want to drink from brackish water that has not been treated to remove the salty taste. Those of us who grew up in urban areas have probably never encountered brackish water. However, those from rural areas likely learned as children not to drink such water. James rhetorically asks whether fresh and brackish water can come from the same source, knowing that his audience, who had come in contact with both types of water, would answer no.

**12 Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.**

Being an effective preacher requires delivering a message using illustrations your audience is familiar with. James does a commendable job demonstrating his point using metaphors, images, and illustrations from the world around his audience, such as the modes of travel to the methods of agriculture. Anyone who has ever cultivated or produced crops for food knows that a fig tree cannot yield olives any more than a grapevine can produce figs. This would be an aberration of nature. The fig tree can only produce figs and the olive tree only olives, as is their nature. Likewise, salt (Gk. halukos, hahloo-KOCE) water cannot yield sweet (fresh) water. James is making the point that a person with an evil disposition is not likely to be virtuous, as it is not in them to do so.

## **Daily Bible Readings**

### **MONDAY**

Unwise Not to Listen to Teachers  
(Proverbs 5:7–14)

### **TUESDAY**

Testimony of a Wise Teacher  
(Isaiah 50:4–11)

### **WEDNESDAY**

Slander and Abusive Language Not Allowed  
(Colossians 3:1–11)

### **THURSDAY**

Use Tongue to Speak God's Praise  
(Psalm 119:169–176)

### **FRIDAY**

Believers Anointed with Fire and Tongues  
(Acts 2:1–12)

### **SATURDAY**

Tongues and Teachers Are God's Gifts  
(1 Corinthians 12:27–31)

### **SUNDAY**

Speech Is for Healing and Refreshment  
(James 3:1–12)