

The Book of James, Session 5

James 3:1-12, Taming the Tongue

Matthew 3:16-17 and 17:5. “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” That’s my son, I love my son and I am proud of my son!

The power of a Father’s words, to give us strength to face the challenges of life!

- Matthew 3: Jesus was getting ready to go into the desert to be tempted for 40 days and then inaugurate his public ministry
- Matthew 17: Jesus was getting ready to turn toward Jerusalem and the cross.

Think of some times when you have been greatly impacted, positively or negatively, by another’s words.

Think of some times when you have greatly impacted others, positively or negatively, with your words.

The Point; “No human being can tame the tongue,” vs. 8a.

Verse 7 makes the observation that we can tame all kinds of animals, and that is consistent with the command given in Genesis 1:26-28. Verse 26 states, “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’” Verse 28 states, “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’”

But while we can tame all kinds of animals, **no one** can tame the tongue, in their own strength!

The Reality; “We all stumble in many ways,” including with our speech, vs. 2

The word “stumble” literally means “to slip up.” Oftentimes we sin when we are caught off guard and react impulsively, especially with our speech.

The Bible speaks often of the universality of sin: Romans 3:10, Romans 3:23, 1 John 1:8 and Ecclesiastes 7:20.

We need to intentionally reduce our “slips.”

- Tend to our heart, for God and for others. Matthew 22:34-40
- Be quick to listen and slow to speak. James 1:19
- Remind yourself that the purpose of your speech is to build others up, according to their needs. Ephesians 4:29
- Practice the “sundown” rule. Ephesians 4:26-27.

The Power; Our small tongues have great influence and impact, vss. 3-5.

- Similar to the bit in the mouth of a horse.
- Similar to the rudder of a massive ship.

Be aware of the potential power and impact of a small comment, for good or for bad.

The Impact; “The tongue is a fire,” vs. 6

The Bible speaks often of the power of a wildfire;

- Psalm 83:14, “As fire consumes the forest or a flame sets the mountains ablaze.
- Isaiah 9:18, “Surely wickedness burns like a fire; it consumes briers and thorns, it sets forest thickets ablaze, so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke.
- Zechariah 12:6, “A blazing pot in the midst of wood, like a flaming torch among sheaves.”

The tongue can destroy and consume much that was good, and it can happen very fast!

The Daily Tension; Our tongue is used for both good and evil, vss. 9-12

James’ point is not that we simply stop talking. While silence can be a very wise choice in many situations, James is not forbidding speech. He is advocating for careful, constructive, wise speech.

But our speech inevitably gets used for both good and bad.... Praise to God and cursing toward people, made in God’s likeness.

This is as unthinkable as fresh water and salt water flowing from the same spring, a fig tree bearing olives or a grapevine bearing figs.

A practical tension: While our speech is not to be destructive, in order to be truthful sometimes we need to say difficult things to others. Ephesians 4:15 can help us understand how to proceed....“Speaking the truth in love.”

The Warning; If you teach, be very careful, vs. 1.

A secondary warning; we all teach through our words. Whether as friends, parents, spouses, co-workers, neighbors, etc. our words teach and our words always make some kind of impact. The sobering question we must all regularly wrestle with is, “What kind of impact are our words having?”

- Beware of shifting the focus from Jesus to self.
- Beware of considering yourself better than those you are teaching.
- Our words will betray us if we are distorting the purpose of teaching in either way.

Discussion Questions

1. How has someone powerfully impacted you through their words, either in a positive or a negative way?
2. How have you powerfully impacted someone through your words, either in a positive or a negative way?
3. Why do you think it is so difficult for us to “tame our tongues”?
4. What factors practically help you to better control your speech?
5. What factors make it more difficult for you to control your speech?
6. “The tongue is a fire.” Tell of a time when you saw someone’s words destroy like a fire destroys. How can you help prevent and/or put out verbal fires?
7. Some people have few filters and say almost anything. Often they hurt others with their words. Others say little and yet they hold grudges or gossip. Neither approach is helpful. The apostle Paul tells us to “speak the truth in love.” How do you try and apply that? What helps you do that? What makes it difficult for you to do that?
8. We are all teachers, formally or informally. What helps you teach well and provide a great example through your words? How can you encourage others to use their words to teach well?