

# JAMES

## Application for Christians

### Week 3, James 3:1-12 (Wise Speech)

#### Discussion Questions

1. Has something you said ever got you into trouble?
2. Why can words hurt so much?

#### *Read James 3:1-12*

3. Did you grow up with (and maybe even perpetuate!) the old adage that “sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt you”? Do you think that this is true? Why do words sometimes hurt so much?
4. In the first few verses of the passage (vv.1-2), it is pretty clear that James is addressing this part of the letter to ‘teachers’. Who are these teachers and what was their role within this community?
5. In our church, it’s not just the clergy who are involved in ‘teaching’. Many others involved with Religious Education in Schools, Sunday School, Small Group Leadership, and Youth Group (and much more) ‘teach’. Even more broadly, in a society that is largely post-Christian and unfamiliar with the stories and life of Jesus, we are all teachers to some degree. Do you see yourself as a teacher in your school/university/workplace/family/friendship circles?
6. What does James mean by those that teach will be “judged more strictly”? How does this make you feel?
7. In verses 3 to 5, what do James’ series of illustrations (i.e., the horse’s bit, the rudder of the ship, and the forest fire starting from a spark) teach us about the power of words?

#### *Read Proverbs 12:18*

8. Sometimes it is easy to say something without thinking of the pain it might cause someone (e.g., an insult, lie, gossip). Has anyone ever said something to you that was hurtful? Have you ever been the one who has caused the pain? Do you think that this is normally a conscious decision to inflict pain or just the tongue out of control?
9. When are you more likely to say something unwise? Are your words harsher on the phone, by email, SMS, online, or in person?
10. Encouraging someone and being wise in speech can be a really powerful way to bring life to another person. How can we be more active in encouraging people everyday? Try to actually plan how you will encourage someone tomorrow.
11. Do you think that you are more in danger of saying too much or too little? What does your speech (in person, by email, behind people’s backs, on the phone, on Facebook, etc.) say about you as a Christian?

*For Prayer: That we might realise the responsibility and effect of our words. That God might continue to encourage us by his words and transform us by his Spirit. And that this week we might actively tame our tongues.*

## **Talk 3/4 (James Series): 6/7/14**

“Wise Speech” by the Rev’d Adam Lowe

*Bible Passage: James 3:1-12*

Prayer: That we will come to a greater understanding of the responsibility and effect of our words and the need to not only avoid unhelpful words, but to also be full of helpful ones.

That we may show the world our heart by the things we say and that these words may boldly proclaim the Gospel of grace found in Jesus Christ.

### **INTRODUCTION \ TONGUE GET YOU INTO TROUBLE?**

*Does your tongue get you into trouble?*

- I’m sure we can all think of some famous examples for whom it has...
- George Bush, John McEnroe, Charlie Sheen,  
or just take your pick from a typical sitting day of parliament.
- But, unfortunately, this problem isn’t just restricted to those in the public eye.
- It’s certainly easy to poke fun at some of the more visible examples, but I’m sure we can all think of instances in our own lives when our tongue has caused damage.
- *Those harsh words at a loved one.*
- *That cutting response to a colleague who has caused us some inconvenience.*
- *A passive-aggressive response to someone by whom we feel maligned.*
- *A taunt or tease to a vulnerable peer. The gossip behind someone’s back.*
- *Or even that frustrating phone call with a particular telecommunications company.*

**It's easy for this little muscle, to inflict a great deal of harm.**

**It's just so easy to say something in one instant, only to regret it an instant later.**

Our words are powerful.

- *We know they have an effect.*
- Not only because we see the damage, but also because we've experienced it.
- We know that the old adage of "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" is rubbish!
- And today in our age, the responsibility is even greater, because our ability to express ourselves, to speak, isn't just limited to the spoken word.
- Never before has it been so easy to voice our opinions without even thinking.
- We can fire off an email, an SMS, a letter, or even a flippant comment on Facebook.
- **Never before have individuals had such immense power to use words.**

But of course, even though the technology may look different, words have always been powerful. James understands this and so he shows us:

- That we have a **responsibility**.

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- That our words have an **effect**.
- And he also shows us how to **live it**.

## **1. OUR RESPONSIBILITY \\ VERSES 1-2**

So first, our **responsibility**.

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Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. (vv.1-2)

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Now, as we begin exploring that responsibility, you might say "But Adam - have you read the text?" - because James is talking to teachers! This sermon is for the one standing behind the lectern, not before it!

- Well, for sure, in this circumstance James is directing the advice to a particular group within the community who teach.

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- Remember that there wasn't a copy of the NT floating around, and there was extremely low literacy, so teachers were entrusted to memorise and pass down the traditions about Jesus to the people.
- Just think about that - almost the only source of information about Jesus was from those who were entrusted to teach.

So you can imagine why James' warning is so dire (cf. v.1).

*And his reference there to being judged actually might refer to being judged in two senses.*

- **First**, by a court in the Earthly realm. We know that teachers in this era were often judged harshly. Josephus wrote about John the Baptist being arrested and executed because of his teaching (Antiquities 18.5.21 sec. 116-19). We know too from the Dead Sea Scrolls that the founder of the Jewish Qumran community - who is described as a teacher - was persecuted by the religious authorities in Jerusalem (1QpHab 8:9-12:6). And we also know of course that Jesus' teaching - not least that about himself - got him into all sorts of trouble culminating in the cross.
- So James might be referring to that harsh earthly judgment.
- **But in a second way**, James is also probably referring to a heavenly court in which those who teach are held as very accountable to God. Think about - if the only source

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of information about Jesus was these teachers, and they're teaching is flawed, then that will lead people astray.

- So, more than ever, you might feel relief that you don't consider yourself a teacher...

However, whilst the verse two verses are a bit of a case study of ministers, actually what James purports is so comprehensive that it can't help but be for all Christians.

- After all, just think of the people in our community who teach the Word of God. Sunday School Teachers, Small Groups Leaders, RI Teachers, Youth Group Leaders - it's not just the ministers.
- And then, when we think about how for most people in our country - where Biblical literacy and the basic information about Jesus are not really well known - actually all us are probably the first port of call to them hearing the Gospel; being taught.
- So, at some level, we are all teachers of the good news.
- So retract that sigh of relief, because we all have to embrace this responsibility.

**Not that we are perfect - James makes the point that we all make mistakes.**

*But there is the expectation that we handle this responsibility - of taming our tongues - with a seriousness, a maturity.*

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We're all responsible for using our tongues wisely.  
Not least of which is because our words reveal our heart to other people.  
In fact, I'm not sure if you've ever considered it before, but our words reveal our hearts better than our thoughts - *because it's only our words that our heard.*

## 2. OUR EFFECT \\ VERSES 3-8

Second, our words have an **effect**.

- In contrast to the sticks and stones adage, it would be more accurate to say "sticks and stone may *only* break my bones, but words can penetrate into my soul and haunt me for my entire life".
- Some of you will remember things said to you when you were just a child and you've never been able to forget them. *Some of them good, some of them bad.*
- All throughout Proverbs the effect **of words is so clearly articulated.**

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Reckless words pierce like a sword,  
but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Proverbs 12:18)

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That's so true isn't it? [B]

- And I'm sure we can all think of examples where we have used our tongue recklessly, causing much pain. Or used our tongue wisely, and brought much life.
- The point is that words have a life to them.
- When words are spoken, they impart a reality.
- That's why when you hear the word curse, it doesn't just mean to *wish evil* but also *impart evil*.
- *Just like blessing* is more than just to wish good, but also to *impart good*.
- Words are powerful because we need them. We need to speak them, we need to hear them. This is part of what it means to be created in the image of God.
- So it's no wonder they can have such an incredibly effect.

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When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and

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creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

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James drives this home in his delightful series of illustrations (vv.3-6).

- a. **The bit in the horse's mouth**, able to control the whole body;
- b. **An enormous ship** that is steered by a small rudder.
- c. **The spark** that can set off a bush fire.

Do you see what James is driving home?

- a. First, something **small can control something big, of great power.**
- b. Second, it can have both a **positive and negative effect.**
- c. Third, **we are to make an effort to control it.**

Just for a moment I want you to think about the effect. **[B]**

- On one hand, think about a word that has been spoken concerning you or by you - a lie, an insult, gossip. *Now think about all the unexpected outcomes that flow from this.*

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- But now, I want you to think about a person in your life who is or has been a source of encouragement. *How words have been used to build you up and enable you to flourish.*
- It's such a dramatic difference but both reveal the power of words.
- With every utterance we make, we have the choice in how to use this power.
- The problem is that, *only being slightly aware of the effect, we struggle to really live it.*
- We can struggle to really take hold of those reigns and use our tongue for good.
- Note it's not enough to only avoid speaking badly - we must also use for good.

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I remember in Grade 5 I was on a game show called "Now You See It". I was in the final round as the champion of the day, and the task involved me being asked a series of questions to which I had to find the answer on a grid (basically, a find-a-word). And the one question that I could not answer was "a mouthpiece, typically made of metal, that is attached to a bridle and used to control a horse". The answer of course - a BIT - but I had no idea!

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**Well, how I fear that some days I still don't know what a bit is.**

That I speak more when I ought not to and less when I should. *How about you?*

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### 3. LIVING IT \ \ VERSES 9-12

So we have a responsibility and an effect, how can we possibly live it.

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With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. (vv.9-12)

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In verses 9 to 12, James ups the ante once again.

- He tells us that the standard for us living it is to yield the right type of fruit.
- Yet how easy for our same mouths that praise God, to also yield cursing.
- There's that image of a fountain from you expect fresh water to flow, only to discover that there's salt water (brackish water) also mixed up amidst it.
- And I think we all probably have slightly different areas of our lives where we need to gain better control over the tongue.

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**If you're extroverted**, then sometimes we need to think a little more before we speak.  
**And if you're introverted**, then sometimes we need to speak when we should.

Using words harshly and failing to speak wisely when we should - are both unhelpful.

- And I think that means that every single day, we need to pray intentionally to be wise in the control of our tongue.
- I think we also need to be greatly encouraged by the ways in which God speaks into our own lives.
- We need to be greatly encouraged that our God has equipped us with his Spirit by whom we are strengthened.
- And we need to remember that every single person to whom we speak is made in the image of God.

So when we look into that person's eyes, or imagine them on the other end of the phone or email, or in another room if we are speaking about them - we must with our hands on the reign question whether what is about to burst forth is going to build up or tear down (cf. 2 Corinthians 13:10).

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- It's not just a question of "Does your tongue get you into trouble", but it's also "Does your tongue bring life to the world".

The words we say or don't say don't make us Christians, but they do show what type of Christians we are.

## Conclusion \\ OVERVIEW

I heard of a Christian course that set out a tongue exercise for the students.  
**And the task for one week was simply this.**

- *Do not complain or grumble.*
- *Do not boast about anything.*
- *Do not gossip or repeat something.*
- *Do not run someone down even a little bit.*
- *Do not defend or excuse yourself not matter what.*
- *Always affirm someone else.*

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Just for one week. And of course everyone to some degree will feel overwhelmed by just how challenging this is! *After all, James says no one can fully tame the tongue.*

But the point is the more we have confidence in the Gospel - that we are set free, that the verdict is in, the less we'll feel a need to tear people down so we look better, or try to justify ourselves in order that we might be found righteous, or boast in order that we might be deemed good.

Friends, the way we use our words not only reveals our heart,  
*but it also reveals our understanding of grace.*

*With our words comes a responsibility, because they have a powerful effect.*

Let's encourage one another to wise with our words.

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