

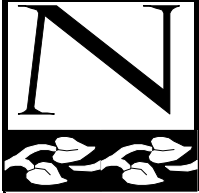
HOLD THAT THOUGHT!

TAMING THE TONGUE

James 3:1-12

Certain words retain their ability to shock us, even after many years. For example, how do you feel when someone says, “Students, take out a clean sheet of paper!”? James knows that words have the power to give life or take it away, to encourage or discourage, to build up or tear down.

What Does It Say?



Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ² 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.

What Does It Mean?

Write down 3 of the most impactful statements anyone ever said to you. (Often these come in our youth from parents and other authority figures.)

What is one of your most memorable “bloopers”?

We were often told that “sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” Would James say that?

Read the following 2 chapters and note what each has to say about God’s attitude toward those entrusted with spiritual teaching:

Matthew 23

Ezekiel 34

Think about how Jesus (the living “Word”) used words. Can you find examples of His words to match the situations below?

encouragement:

anger:

silence:

rebuke:

command:

challenge:

comfort:

³ *When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.* ⁴ *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.* ⁵ *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.* ⁶ *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.*

⁷ *All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man,* ⁸ *but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

⁹ *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness.*

¹⁰ *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.* ¹¹ *Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?*

¹² *My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*

Using a concordance, do a word study on **"words"** in the book of Proverbs. Look for any occurrences of "word", "words", "tongue", "mouth", or "lips". Then summarize your findings in the space below:

In verses 3-6 there are three illustrations. What is the point of the first two?

What new element is introduced in the third?

Someone has said that it takes 16 positive statements to offset 1 negative one.

Verse 9. Note: The Jews would say "Blessed be He" after every mention of God's name in the synagogue.

What light do the following verses shed on this discussion?

Luke 6:45

Ephesians 4:25 & 29

"Gossip is saying behind someone's back what you would never say to their face; flattery is saying to someone's face what you would never say behind their back."

What have you found helpful in controlling your tongue?

Read the following excerpt from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *Life Together* and discuss it as a group.

THE MINISTRY OF HOLDING ONE'S TONGUE

(from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together)

Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words. It is certain that the spirit of self-justification can be overcome only by the Spirit of grace; nevertheless, isolated thoughts of judgement can be curbed and smothered by never allowing them the right to be uttered, except as a confession of sin, which we shall discuss later. He who holds his tongue in check controls both mind and body (James 3:2). Thus it must be a decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that each individual is prohibited from saying much that occurs to him. This prohibition does not include the personal word of advice and guidance: on this point we shall speak later. But to speak about a brother covertly is forbidden, even under the cloak of help and good will; for it is precisely in this guise that the spirit of hatred among brothers always creeps in when it is seeking to create mischief.

This is not the place to discuss the limitations upon this rule in particular cases. They must be a matter of decision in each instance. The point, however, is clear and Biblical:

"You speak continually against your brother and slander your own mother's son. These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face." (Ps. 50:20-21).

"Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him, speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you – who are you to judge your neighbor?" (Jas. 4:11-12).

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." (Eph. 4:29)

Where this discipline of the tongue is practiced right from the beginning, each individual will make a matchless discovery. He will be able to cease from constantly scrutinizing the other person, judging him, condemning him, putting him in his particular place where he can gain ascendancy over him and thus doing violence to him as a person. Now he can allow the brother to exist as a completely free person, as God made him to be. His view expands and, to his amazement, for the first time he sees,

shining above his brethren, the richness of God's creative glory. God did not give him to me as a brother for me to dominate and control, but in order that I might find above him the Creator. Now the other person, in the freedom with which he was created, becomes the occasion of joy, whereas before he was only a nuisance and an affliction. God does not will that I should fashion the other person according to the image that seems good to me, that is, in my own image; rather in his very freedom from me God made this person in His image. I can never know beforehand how God's image should appear in others. That image always manifests a completely new and unique form that comes solely from God's free and sovereign creation. To me the sight may seem strange, even ungodly. But God creates every man in the likeness of His Son, the Crucified. After all, even that image certainly looked strange and ungodly to me before I grasped it.

Strong and weak, wise and foolish, gifted or ungifted, pious or impious, the diverse individuals in the community, are no longer incentives for talking and judging and condemning, and thus excuses for self-justification. They are rather cause for rejoicing in one another and serving one another. Each member of the community is given his particular place, but this is no longer the place in which he can most successfully assert himself, but the place where he can best perform his service.

In a Christian community everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. Only when even the smallest link is securely interlocked is the chain unbreakable. A community which allows unemployed members to exist within it will perish because of them. It will be well, therefore, if every member receives a definite task to perform for the community, that he may know in hours of doubt that he, too, is not useless and unusable. Every Christian community must realize that not only do the weak need the strong but also the strong cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of fellowship.

Not self justification, which means the use of domination and force, but justification by grace, and therefore service, should govern the Christian community. Once a man has experienced the mercy of God in his life he will henceforth aspire only to serve. The proud throne of the judge no longer lures him; he wants to be down below with the lowly and the needy, because that is where God found him. *"Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." (Rom. 12:16).*