

August 23, 2020

Lesson 12

# TAMING THE TONGUE

ADULT/YOUTH

ADULT/YOUNG ADULT TOPIC: "Bite Your Tongue"  
YOUTH TOPIC: Watch What You Say

CHILDREN

GENERAL LESSON TITLE: Taming the Tongue  
CHILDREN'S TOPIC: Watch Your Tongue

DEVOTIONAL READING  
Isaiah 50:4-11

ADULT/YOUTH

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 3:1-12  
PRINT PASSAGE: James 3:1-12  
ADULT KEY VERSE: James 3:5  
YOUTH KEY VERSE: James 3:10

CHILDREN

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 3:1-12  
PRINT PASSAGE: James 3:1-12  
KEY VERSE: James 3:10

## James 3:1-12—KJV

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

## James 3:1-12—NIV

NOT MANY of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.  
2 We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.  
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 body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.  
7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea

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.

creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind,

8 but no human being 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 human beings, who have been made in God's likeness.

10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

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.

**UNIFYING LESSON PRINCIPLE:** The spoken word can be either an affirming or destructive force in the lives of vulnerable humans. How can the affirming force prevail in human interactions? James informs believers that only through the discipline required in taming the tongue can the fruits of godly wisdom be made visible in the lives of others.

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

*Upon the completion of this lesson, the students will be able to do the following:*

1. Explain how bits and bridles, ships' rudders, and small sparks illustrate the power of the tongue.
2. Repent of times when the use of their tongue has ignited a destructive fire.
3. Practice controlling the tongue so that it becomes consistently a source of healing and refreshment to others.

## AGE-LEVEL POINTS TO BE EMPHASIZED

### Teachers of ADULTS and YOUTH

—The warning that those who teach will be judged more strictly expands on what Jesus said in Matthew 12:36-37.

—"Able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle" (verse 2) is the verb form of the same

word that appears in verse 3, where it is a plural noun and translated as "bits."

—James speaks of the tongue as if it operates independently ("boasting great things," etc.). This must be tempered with what Jesus says about the role of the heart in what comes out of the mouth (see Matthew 12:34-35). Controlling the heart, then, becomes key to controlling the tongue.

—The irony of blessing the Lord with the same

mouth that curses those made in His likeness (verse 9) has a parallel in 1 John 4:20 (NRSV): “those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

- Teaching is a serious vocation.
- Speaking with restraint may keep the tongue from doing harm.
- James stresses that we all make mistakes in the things we say.
- The tongue can cause harm.
- The tongue is a contradiction, speaking both blessings and curses.

## Teachers of CHILDREN

- Perfect speech is not only saying the right thing but also controlling what we say.
- Vivid images are used to highlight James’s point about the power of the tongue.
- James indicates that though the tongue is one of the smallest members of the body, it can cause much trouble.
- Humans tame animals better than they control/tame their tongues.
- James wrote about the contradictory nature of the tongue.

## THE CHRONOLOGICAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

The book of James was largely written to Jewish Christians. There is little doubt in regard to the authorship of this book. This is especially so because the title of this book already names the author. However, to which James is the book attributed? It is generally believed that the author of this book, the “James” being referred to, is most likely Jesus’ sibling. The author identifies himself as James in the beginning of the book. It is believed that he was the brother of Jesus and a leader of the Jerusalem church. This same James spoke up in Acts 15:13.

In the New Testament, four men bear the name *James*. The author of the epistle of James could not have been the apostle *James* who died in AD 44, since the book is believed to have been written at a later time—probably around AD 60. The other two people who bore the name *James* did not have the status, respect, or authority that the writer of this letter seems to have had.

## THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF THE LESSON

We already know that the book of James

was written to Jewish Christians and focuses on happenings in the synagogue and among Jewish Christians. In an era when people’s lives and living were dominated by segregation of various sorts, James admonished Christians to keep it all out of the church. He admonished the Jewish Christians in particular to treat everyone impartially.

In James 3, James stresses the importance of controlling the tongue (watching our speech). James advises that we should not all be teachers because teachers would be more strictly judged. At a time when all sorts of teachings were being spread, there was a need to make sure that the teachings in the young Christian church remained true to Christ’s teachings as affirmed by the Old Testament.

James 3:9-12 reads, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water” (NIV). James decided to let people know the power of speech, the importance of what we speak, and that there are consequences for evil teachings.

## PROMINENT CHARACTER(S) IN THE LESSON

**James:** the author of the book of James. He was a brother of our Lord, Jesus.

## KEY TERMS IN THE LESSON

**Boasts (verse 5)—Greek: *megalaucheó* (meg-al-ow-kheh'-o):** boasts; shows arrogance; vaunts; “boasteth” (KJV).

**Obey (verse 3)—Greek: *hypakouō* (hüp-ä-kü'-ō):** to be obedient to; to harken to a command.

**Perfect (verse 2)—Greek: *teleios* (tel'-i-os):** complete in all parts, specially of the completeness of Christian character.

**Stumble (verse 2)—Greek: *ptaió* (ptah'-yo):** fall; sin; err; transgress; “offend” (KJV).

**Teachers (verse 1)—Greek: *didaskalos* (did-as'-kal-os):** instructors; “masters” (KJV).

**Tongue (verse 5)—Greek: *glóssa* (gloce-sah'):** an organ of speech; a member of the body; language.

## TOPICAL OUTLINE OF THE LESSON

### I. Introduction

- A. Control That Tongue!
- B. Biblical Background

### II. Exposition and Application of the Scripture

- A. The Challenge of the Tongue  
(James 3:1-4)
- B. The Corruption of the Tongue  
(James 3:5-8)
- C. The Duplicity of the Tongue  
(James 3:9-12)

### III. Concluding Reflection

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Control That Tongue!

Isaiah 50:4-11 (Devotional Reading) and James 3:1-12 teach us the importance of having guided utterances. In Isaiah 50, the prophet speaks of the confidence he has in his utterances because the words he speaks are from God. He knows that he will not be put to shame, no matter the storm around him. In verse 10, he admonishes people who fear God and obey His commands to continue walking that path. In James 3, James warns the assembly of Christians against false teachings and advises that we are to tame our tongues. He explains that the tongue, despite being small, is capable of destroying a person. Both Scriptures inform us of the power of words. In James 3:6 and in Isaiah 50:11, we see the consequences of false declarations, false teachings, and deceitful words. Both Scriptures tell us to guide our tongues and speak words that are of God.

### B. Biblical Background

At a time when various sorts of teachings were rampant and everyone wanted to be a teacher in the assembly of the saints, James took it upon himself to remind the people of the responsibilities and the yoke of being a teacher. He reminds them that teachers will be subject to a stricter judgment.

Deuteronomy 27:18 and Jeremiah 23:13-22 are just some of the Scriptures that show how much God detests teachings that do not come from Him. God detests teachings and utterances that lead people astray. In Isaiah 50 and James 3, we see that these servants of God

echo the same point, telling us to guide our teachings and speech. It was an important lesson to the early Christians and helped to keep the flock together in unity and oneness until various teachings came up, creating division in the church much later.

## II. EXPOSITION AND APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

### A. The Challenge of the Tongue

(James 3:1-4)

**MY BRETHREN, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. 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. Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. 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.**

When those who were Jews converted to Christianity, many of them desired to become teachers because that was a highly honored and respected office. However, just as every spiritual gift is given by the Holy Spirit, teaching is a gift and an office into which people need to be called rather than just calling themselves (verse 1). In any spiritual position, those who call themselves must keep themselves; those whom God calls, God keeps.

The reason why spiritual teachers are judged more strictly is because they are in a position to shape and influence others who are in the vulnerable position of students. Teachers are held responsible for the content they teach as well as for the example they set with the lives they live. Jesus felt so strongly about this that in Matthew 18:6 (NIV), He said, "If

anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."

In addition to being called by God to teach, some of the other important and desirable characteristics for spiritual teachers include the following: (1) Good teachers have genuine love for the student population being taught and a connection with/understanding of the students. They ask questions like, "How do these students think? What are their priorities?" They also can overlook temporary flaws in order to fulfill a greater cause. (2) All good teachers have a little bit of preacher in them and all good preachers have some teacher in them. In other words, there should be insightful instruction delivered with conviction, passion, and enthusiasm. (3) Good teachers are current and relevant. Good teachers are good students of the culture and of the felt needs of the class. (4) Good teachers are transparent, and they keep it real. Students are drawn in and captivated by teachers who do not mind displaying appropriate personal vulnerability in order to gain the trust of the students and so that they can adequately identify with them. (5) Good teachers incorporate their students

into the learning process. When students are involved in the subject matter through interaction rather than being detached, the percentage of learning and comprehension significantly increases. (6) Good teachers teach both for education and for transformation. They are not satisfied with mere head knowledge, but they keep pushing for a change in the heart and the life of the student.

Everybody has faults, and no one is exempt from personal flaws, spiritual shortcomings, and character deficits. The word *offend* (verse 2, KJV) means “to stumble, to fall, to make a mistake, and to fail in our line of duty.” Often our errors lead to injury of others. It is common for our life errors to be facilitated by the instrument of the human tongue. Offending with the tongue is such a common human occurrence that the one who is able to escape the tongue trap is designated in this text as a “perfect” man. The word *perfect* carries with it a sense of spiritual maturity as opposed to carnal thinking and acting. Successfully controlling the tongue requires daily spiritual discipline and consistent practice. Controlling the tongue is an exercise in humility, and this character quality can be applied across the board to the “whole body” of other life functions and relationships such as marriage, family, school, work, and church.

Unless one was raised on a farm, the usage of a “bit” (verse 3) may seem like a totally foreign and unfamiliar concept. A *bit* is a part of a bridle which is used in equestrian activities, is usually made of metal or a synthetic material, and is placed in a horse’s mouth for the purpose of controlling and directing the animal. The “bit” for the Christian might be the spiritual fruit of self-control. This fruit allows us to rise above the common annoyances, temptations,

and provocations that might arise in everyday life to make us veer from the path of righteousness.

The imagery of the horse bit is exchanged for the metaphor of a ship rudder (verse 4), but both serve the same purpose: to control. Both a bit and a rudder are considerably smaller than the much-larger objects to which they are attached. The larger object is rendered practically useless without the proper operation of the smaller object. A broken bit or a malfunctioning rudder would be catastrophic, just as a malfunctioning tongue spells trouble for the Christian.

## **B. The Corruption of the Tongue** **(James 3:5-8)**

**Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! 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. 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: but the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.**

The power of the tongue continues to be emphasized through the power of imagery. Although small in size, its ability is impressive (verse 5). Verbal imagery is matched with the movement of the tongue. When speaking, the tongue has a tendency to boast and to brag with a very high estimation of itself. Both positivity and negativity can flow from the tongue, and the outcome is dependent upon which exerts the greatest amount of influence. This same dual quality exists in the property of fire. When applied in the right conditions, fire has the capacity to heat living spaces, ignite the spark to propel engines, and provide illumination. But



when used with faulty motives fire can burn buildings, can ruin vehicles, and can literally kill people.

The tongue as a fire (verse 6) is a metaphor which continues the analogy from the spark mentioned in verse 5. What may begin as a seemingly innocent spark can easily morph into a blazing inferno of wickedness and trouble, much like the infamous California wildfires that seem almost unstoppable. The kinds of fire that the tongue can set include the fires of gossip, falsehood, slander, and negativity. The way that wildfires proliferate is by continuing to have something left to burn. Likewise, the co-conspirators of the heart and tongue are so deceitful that they will continue to destroy if left to their own devices. A corrective measure is available through heeding the classic advice to T.H.I.N.K. before you speak: **T**—Is it True? **H**—Is it Helpful? **I**—Is it Inspiring? **N**—Is it Necessary? **K**—Is it Kind?

James now moves from the imagery of fire to the imagery of animals to further illustrate the power of the tongue (verse 7). The reader of the day would have easily identified with the need for a bit, a bridle, and reins in order to control and direct an animal such as a horse, mule, or ox. The irony is that even though these items can successfully subdue a beast, there are few things known to humans that are truly effective in controlling the tongue (verse 8).

### C. The Duplicity of the Tongue

(James 3:9-12)

**Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear**

**olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.**

Unfortunately, the tongue has a tendency to turn into whatever happens to be convenient at the time (verse 9). If telling the truth is more convenient, the truth is told. If the tongue can get by with a lie, then the lies have it. This tendency to turn into a creature of convenience is a characteristic of the unredeemed, disobedient, rebellious tongue. On the other hand, the same tongue that is used to curse and defile can be the same tongue used to praise and worship. One might wonder how these things can be so. First John 4:20 (NIV) also raises this question of duplicity of character: “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.” There are some Christians who depend on their own ability to live the Christian life, but they are continually frustrated because they lack the power to persevere.

Two different kinds of water originating from the same source would indeed be a curious phenomenon (verse 11). It is highly unlikely for fresh water and salty water to be near each other, much less emanating from the same source. The concept of sanctification focuses on the dedication of a thing to one purpose only. In a kitchen, a mixing bowl is not also used as a planter for flowers—and in a bathroom, one’s toothbrush is not used to scrub the tub. Likewise, a disciple’s words should be devoted to the activities that would match a disciple’s heart, such as praise and worship of God and encouragement/instruction offered to other people. For a disciple to use that same tongue for slander, lies, or blasphemy (verse 10) would

be less than expected, because consistent discourse that honors God is a witness to the world and a blessing to other believers.

The metaphorical comparison and contrast of the tongue continues in verse 12 and extends to the plant world. Luke 6:43-45 bears a very close resemblance to the spirit of James 3: “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn-bushes, or grapes from briars. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (NIV). The unusual production of fruit of a type different from its original source is very unlikely.

God has given us everything we need to develop a life of godliness, but we are required to do our part in disciplining ourselves like an athlete prepares for a sports competition.

### III. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Since the power of life and death is in the tongue, then we must be careful to harness

the power of our words. The careless use of the tongue can burn down relationships and demolish institutions. We all could use an inspirational word to motivate and uplift us in the midst of life’s everyday occurrences. As we use our tongues to bring hope, healing, and encouragement to others we will live out what it means to be the living letters referenced in 2 Corinthians 3:2-3 (NIV): “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” God’s plan is for disciples to reflect a sense of spiritually pleasing consistency in our thought life, in our words, and in our actions.

### PRAYER

*Dear Lord, please give us the grace to develop the discipline we need to control our words, so that all we say and do honors You and uplifts others. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.*

## HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(August 17-23, 2020)

### Taming the Tongue

**MONDAY, August 17:** “It Is Unwise Not to Listen to Teachers” (Proverbs 5:7-14)

**TUESDAY, August 18:** “The Testimony of a Wise Teacher” (Isaiah 50:4-11)

**WEDNESDAY, August 19:** “Slander and Abusive Language Are Not Allowed” (Colossians 3:1-11)

**THURSDAY, August 20:** “Use the Tongue to Speak God’s Praise” (Psalm 119:169-176)

**FRIDAY, August 21:** “Believers Anointed with Fire and Tongues” (Acts 2:1-12)

**SATURDAY, August 22:** “Tongues and Teachers Are God’s Gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:27-31)

**SUNDAY, August 23:** “Speech Is for Healing and Refreshment” (James 3:1-12)