

## Faith Works: The Book of James

### Blessing and Cursing

James 3:6-12

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*And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water (James 3:6–12).*

If you look on the side of a cereal box, toward the bottom of a loaf of bread, or on the backside of a container of ice cream, you'll find a list of ingredients. That requirement began in 1938 when Congress passed a law mandating that this information should be available to you.

After all, you may not know what sodium aluminum phosphate is (or what it tastes like!), but you need to know that it's in your pancake mix. Ingredient labels are helpful to inform us.

Other labels provide a warning. I would guess that you probably don't pay much attention to them. But they are there—likely because something bad happened. Often, these warnings make sense: keep your fingers away from the mower blades, don't get the curling iron too close to your forehead, and watch out for oncoming cars.

If you take time to read these warnings, though, they might make you smile. I often wonder about the story behind the warning label. A few examples:

- We purchased a new washing machine and the manual said, "Do not add gasoline to the wash water."
- A sign on the side of a wheelbarrow said, "Not for highway use."
- A portable baby stroller: "Remove child before folding."

You get the point. Some warnings seem a bit extreme—maybe even ridiculous.

But there are other warnings that are simple and yet really important. Here's one that you may have heard or sung growing up: "Be careful little mouth what you say." Now that's a warning we all need.

The third chapter of James is one of the most important passages in the New Testament as it relates to our words. After James talks about the vital connection between faith and works in chapter two, he immediately addresses the issue of how Christians communicate. He's writing to a group of people under pressure, and he knows what you know: hard times tend to create loose tongues.

Last week we examined the first five verses with three cautions:

- More Words = More Accountability
- Good Words = Good Sign
- Small Issue = Big Problem

These verses seem to address the scope of the problem. Verses 6-12 seem to push the issue deeper. If the first section caused us to say, "Wow, that's a problem," this section is designed to cause us to say, "Wow, this is scary." James would like for us to tremble a bit at what's at stake.

### **7 Ways Our Words Are Dangerous**

James could have simply told us that our words need to be handled with caution. He could have said, "Be careful what you say." But that would not have addressed the issue that we need to consider. James wants us to hear something that we'll feel. He wants us to know something that will stick with us. So he approaches the subject of the tongue from multiple angles and with a variety of warnings.

Yes, our words are *that* important and *that* dangerous.

#### **1. Our Words Can Be Destructive**

James repeatedly uses illustrations, and in verse 5 he utilizes the example of a forest fire that starts from a small fire. Something small creates something big. He goes further by saying, "...the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness." In verse 5, James wants us to see the connection between something little that creates big problems. But in verse 6, the lens pulls back to show us the after-effects of the destruction of sinful words.

Some of you have visited the Western United States, and you've seen what the landscape looks like after a forest fire. As far as the eye can see, the landscape is scorched. The forest fire consumes everything. The scope of its destruction is overwhelming.

James calls this tongue-fire a world of unrighteousness. I would imagine that you know what the word "unrighteous" means; maybe words like sinful, wicked, or ungodly come to mind. You wouldn't be wrong. But there's more. "Unrighteous" is a combination of a word meaning justice and the word that means "not." So it can also mean wrong-doing or injustice (see Rom. 9:14). Whether personally or in society at large, justice is connected to God's standard for what is true and right. We need to ask, "What does God think about this?"

Words create worlds. But notice the kind of world that is created: a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is a gateway for a whole realm of wickedness. Think of the clip that you saw online of a fist-fight.

Usually, it starts with words. Sinful words lead to an escalation of actions. Think of a home marked by abusive words. It's not just the words, the entire culture of the home has a shadow over it. Or think of the average daily diet of "breaking news" stories. Our culture is struggling under the destructive power of words that create a world of unrighteousness.

## **2. Our Words Can Be Defining**

Your words and your tones matter. Imagine someone saying, "Hey, everything about my life is rock-solid except for how I talk." Those words would be telling because how we talk and what we talk about defines us. A small tongue defines the entire person.

James says (v. 6), "The tongue is set among our members. . ." and I take this to mean that James is connecting us back to verse 5 – a "small member but it boasts of great things." The tongue is just one part of our body but that doesn't mean it should be treated lightly. It has a disproportionate power—both positively and negatively.

In this context, James says it stains the whole body. The word "stain" means that the tongue pollutes the entire body or the whole person. "The sins committed with the tongue spread spiritual pollution to the whole person."<sup>1</sup>

We can see this spiritual pollution all around—and within—us. For instance, have you ever seen someone at church, work, or school who you thought must be an amazing person; then they opened their mouth and you were shocked. Or, maybe you went out on a date with someone whose social media profile looked pretty solid; over dinner, you quickly realized that you had made the wrong choice. Or, maybe you find yourself talking only about negative things. And before you know it, your negativity has morphed into bitter feelings, internal tension, and even despair.

Or consider the word "reputation." It's what people think about you. Think of how much of that is formed simply by what people hear you say. The tongue stains the whole body; it defines you.

## **3. Our Words Can Be Devastating**

What follows is a gripping statement: "...setting on fire the entire course of life." James wants us to see the way in which the tongue can have massive destructive effects.

Last week, we talked about how the tongue can be predictive of your future. The way you talk can determine the people that are attracted to you and the kind of behaviors that you justify. Proverbs warns us about the dangers of learning sinful ways of living:

*Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare (Prov. 22:24–25).*

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas J. Moo, [James: An Introduction and Commentary](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 160.

We tend to mimic the tones and kind of speaking of people that we are around. The normalization of sinful words can lead you to begin to talk like other people even though you'd never want to be like them. Worse, if their sinful speaking is effective, you can justify that as just the way people talk who want to get things done or those who are cool or popular.

At another level, words create culture. It's remarkable how much words affect the environment of a home, small group, a friend group, or a church. What's more, one person has the ability to create a really negative environment by their words. They can become toxic. Deuteronomy 20:8 instructs fearful soldiers to go home "lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own."

Sadly, I've seen it where a person has set their closest relationships on fire because of their words. The people around them do not show any physical scars, but there are deep wounds created by a culture of devastating words. There are some you listening to this message who use demeaning words, ridicule, cruelty, or angry words to try and get what you want. And you don't know that you are destroying your life! Some people's words are so full of self-centeredness and judgment that they end up being very lonely.

Some of you know what that world has been like. It was the home, workplace, or school in your life. And now you are determined to go a different way. By God's grace, I hope you break the cycle of sinful communication.

#### **4. Our Words Can Be Demonic**

This next phrase is deeply concerning. Verse 6 concludes with a stunning statement that is meant to be shocking: "set on fire by hell."

We've seen James do this before. In chapter two, he challenged people who would say, "I believe in God." His shocking response was to tell them that even the demons believe that truth. James is trying to wake Christians up to the reality of life. It's too easy to minimize our words.

James intends to help us understand that our words can be part of the devil's strategy. Just think of that for a moment. The words you and I use can be part of the way that Satan is at work. He can use our words to hinder the work of God.

It's sobering to consider how the New Testament connects words to the work of Satan. Let me give you a few examples:

- In Matthew 16:21-23, Jesus told the disciples about his suffering, death, and resurrection. When Peter said, "This will never happen to you," Jesus rebuked him strongly: "Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."
- When Ananias and Saphira attempted to give an appearance and lie about their generosity, Peter said: "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit. . ." (Acts 5:1-11)
- When Jesus speaks to the church in Philadelphia, in Revelation 3:7-13, he warns them about people from ". . .the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie. . ."

So, this connection between our words and demonic strategy should not be quickly dismissed as something too extreme. If you read through the book of Acts, you'll find that opposition to the work of Christ was directly connected to what was said about Christians.

But I'm sure you know this on a personal level as well. Satan's strategy is to discourage, divide, and discredit the witness of the Church. He wants believers to gossip about each other, slander each other, and accuse one another. He wants friends separated, marriages falling apart, churches split, movements hindered, and the gospel stopped. He wants believers fighting among themselves. Instead of loving each other as ourselves, we end up destroying one another (Gal. 5:14-15).

The devil has historically used outside forces to damage the Church. But he's also used the internal wars of religious people to damage the Church. Now, this is challenging because sometimes false teachers or incorrect doctrine needs to be corrected. At other times, there are power-dynamics in play that hinder the truth from being known. The ability of anyone to publish anything or tell the world what is happening has led to greater accountability.

But, it's also led to greater irresponsibility. This is a time that requires a great amount of discernment. I've been shocked and disheartened by the levels of accusation, mischaracterization, and suspicion that are circulated by people—anyone who can write a blog, produce a video, or create a post. I share this with you just to caution you.

The Church of Jesus Christ is damaged with silence when accountability is needed, but it is also damaged by slander when responsibility is needed. Pray that you and I would be guilty of neither.

## **5. Our Words Can Be Difficult to Control**

James clearly wants us to feel the weight of this issue. In verses 7-8, he references the way the tongue can be used to tame all kinds of wild animals. This was probably not only a reference to what James witnessed in his own culture, but also what he knew from biblical history. God commanded Adam to exercise dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26). The language in Genesis is very similar to what James mentions here.

My family recently watched a documentary about training guide dogs for people who are visually impaired. It was fascinating to not only see the unique gifting of each dog emerge but also to see how these dogs were trained. In order to become a guide dog, they had to respond to multiple commands. I was as impressed with the trainers as I was the dogs. Think of the remarkable scene at the circus or Sea World with massive animals that have been trained by the command of a human voice.

And yet James says, "No human being can tame the tongue." Now, James is not saying that taming the tongue is impossible. His focus is on who can do it. If we rightly understand the weight of what James is saying here, we should find ourselves crying out, "Lord, help me!" Augustine, a North-African theologian

who lived from 354 – 430 AD, said “. . .when [the tongue] is tamed we confess that this is brought about by the pity, the help, the grace of God.”<sup>2</sup>

This is where we desperately need God’s help. Controlling the tongue only happens by a transformed heart through the work of grace. Consider how connected the fruit of the Spirit is to the tongue: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

We need to cry out to God to help us to know what to say and what not to say.

## **6. Our Words Can Be Deadly**

James takes his concern even further. In the second half of verse 8, he calls the tongue “a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” It seems that James continues the animal theme. Doesn’t it sound like he’s talking about a snake?

When he calls the tongue “restless,” he uses the same word as in James 1:8 that referred to “a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” The tongue is shifty, inconsistent, and unpredictable. Much like an animal, you need to be careful. It can strike at any moment.

What’s more, he calls the tongue “full of deadly poison.” Psalm 140:3 refers to the speech of the wicked as sharp as a serpent and like the poison of asps. The Apostle Paul uses this reference in his explanation of the depravity of mankind in Romans 3.

Words can strike. Words can wound. Words create pain and trauma. Words separate friends. Words destroy trust. Words create doubt. Words enact revenge. Words infect with deadly poison.

## **7. Our Words Can Be Deceptive**

James concludes this section with the danger of how deceiving our words can be. In verse 9, he identifies the real possibility of using our tongue for both worship and wickedness. James identifies a deceptive inconsistency that is easy to embrace.

Our tongues can be used to properly acknowledge the worth and the glory of God. That’s what James means when he refers to “blessing our Lord and Father.” We use our words to correctly reflect back to God what is true about him.

But James turns this around in relationship to cursing. When we speak in an evil way about someone, we fail to remember that the person is made in the image and likeness of God. Every person reflects the stunning beauty of a glorious God. To curse them is to violate the sacredness that God has endowed them with.

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas J. Moo, [\*James: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 162.

James invites us to think about the people who we might be tempted to curse. Who is your enemy? Who are you against? Who are you scared of? Who do you oppose? James cautions here about taking our language and words too far. Disagreeing with someone's position, policy, or view is one thing. But cursing them is another.

It's so easy and so common. This is why James uses three illustrations in verses 11-12: a spring, a fig tree, and a salt pond. These illustrations are meant to make a single point. These things don't go together. And if you think they do, you are deceived.

Faith should work in many ways but especially through our words.

What kind of warning label do you think is needed for your tongue? James gives us these seven warnings because the tongue is that dangerous and our words are that important.

Be careful little tongue what you say.

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