

## Lesson Overview

### 1 Life Need:

Discuss why it is wise to think before you speak.

### 2 Bible Learning:

Study what James says about the importance of controlling your tongue.

#### *Suggested Material:*

- *Adult Teacher's Resource Kit:* Poster and reproducible sheet—The Wisdom of James

### 3 Bible Application:

Understand that you can and should control what you say.

#### *Suggested Material:*

- *Adult Teacher's Resource Kit:* Reproducible sheet—Words Frame Our World
- Sheets of paper, colored markers

### 4 Life Response:

Show wisdom by controlling your words.



# Taming the Tongue

**E**ducate Wisely—Teaching and interpreting God's Word may look like a glamorous job, but those who stand up to instruct people representing God need to take this responsibility extremely seriously. Also, a walk of integrity should go hand in hand with this responsibility. This calling to interpret the Scriptures can influence the heart of people to go one way or another.

**A Life of Integrity**—No human being will teach the Bible 100% correctly, nor have a completely pure, sin-free life. James did not call for perfection. However, a teacher needs to humbly ask God for His help and empowerment to live with integrity because teaching is not in the background but upfront, helping people come to a greater understanding of God. What teachers say should not be self-centered, boastful, overly critical, gossipy, or insincere, but instead help students to see God's love for them.

**Tongue Control**—James used examples to show the influence of one's speech. He described the tongue as a small instrument controlling something of greater magnitude, like a boat regulated by a tiny rudder or a healthy horse put in check by a little bit in his mouth. A tiny wooden match can cause a major forest fire. The tongue can speak truthfully or tell lies causing a person to go in a constructive or destructive direction. James admitted that bringing the tongue under control is quite the task. Animals are more natural to tame. No human can bring their tongue under submission on their own; divine intervention is needed. The Holy Spirit should take over, communicating to the individual to be quiet or to speak up.

**What Is Your Reputation?**—It is impossible for a Christian's tongue to go in two different directions at the same time, praising God and at the same time ripping apart another brother or sister. A woman once came to John Wesley and said she knew what her talent was: "I think my talent from God is to speak my mind." Wesley replied, "I do not think God would mind if you buried that talent." One's conversation is a good indication of what is rumbling around on the inside of the heart, labeling the person as wise or foolish.

## AS YOUR STUDENTS ARRIVE

Ask students to give you some words they would like to hear spoken to them and some words they don't want spoken to them. Make these into two lists on a board or sheet of newsprint. The "Like to Hear"

list could include words such as "You're wonderful," "I love you," "Jesus loves you," and "You have just inherited \$1 million dollars." The "Don't Want to Hear" list could include "You'll never amount to anything," "There's been an accident," or "You have

cancer." This week's lesson looks at what James says about the power our tongue has in our lives and what God wants us to say.

**Link to Last Week:** Discuss ways your students were able to live out their faith this past week.

# Taming the Tongue

## A Present-Day Illustration

Rozina heard the shower water cut off, as she lay in bed going over the day's events in her mind. Her husband Roscoe was wrong, wrong, wrong!

Roscoe had not listened to her first cousin before jumping down his throat at the family reunion. Being on disability was a sensitive subject for some people. Why would Roscoe immediately form the opinion that Colby did not want to work?

Then when Rozina had come to Colby's defense, Roscoe lost his temper in front of everyone.

"Why keep giving people the impression that black people don't want to work?" Roscoe had said. "I work two jobs, and I've worked all my life."

"I know you have, Roscoe, but sometimes it seems like you force your beliefs on everyone!" said Rozina on the drive home. She had waited to say her piece for the drive home.

Now Rozina thought more about her husband. He grew up without a father. He put himself through college and landed a good job as an architect. From time to time, Roscoe still financially helped his mother and three sisters. He was a proud black man, and Rozina respected him for his work ethic and forgave his criticism of Colby.

Rozina soon felt calm as Roscoe opened the bathroom door. He looked to his wife, "Do you have any more to say tonight?"

"Yes," said Rozina, with a slow smile crossing her face. "Please give me a kiss good night."

1. *Finish this sentence: "Words can \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_."*
2. *What does the phrase, "Be sure to taste your words before you spit them out" tell us about how we should speak to others?*
3. *Why are words so powerful in shaping a person's character?*

**LESSON FOCUS:** Your words demonstrate your wisdom (or lack thereof).

## 1 Life Need

*Discuss why it is wise to think before you speak*  
.....

The world was framed by God's words. A frame is a solid structure that surrounds or encases something. A frame is also a support or stand to hold something together. So it's safe to say that words carry much substance. We must seek wisdom before we speak because we are framing worlds with our words.

Read the anecdote in the student books, then ask your students to form small groups to discuss **Questions 1, 2, and 3.**

For Question 1, students may fill in the blanks with such words as "hurt or heal," "uplift or tear down," or "praise or condemn." We always have a choice of which kind of words we will use when we talk to other people.

Question 2 reminds students to think before they speak. Our words can come back to hurt us or haunt us, especially if those words are spoken in anger, hate, or criticism of others.

Finally, for Question 3, you likely have students who can verify that both positive and negative words shaped who they are today. Words such as "I have confidence in you" may have led them to be the first one in their family to go to college, or those words could have encouraged someone to start his or her own business.

# Bible Learning 2

Study what James says about the importance of controlling your tongue

On the poster sheet, read paragraph five and note the photo of the fig tree.

## JUDGING THE TEACHER'S TONGUE

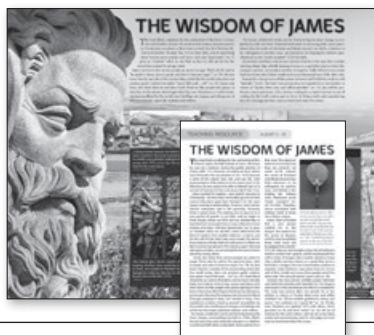
Read James 3:1-4 and discuss these key points:

- James says many should not quickly desire to be a teacher because being a teacher has high standards, and a teacher must not lead others to stumble in their faith.
- Perfection is for people who are able to say everything perfectly. However, no one is really able to do that.
- The tongue is small but it controls our bodies just like a large horse is able to be controlled with a small bit placed in their mouth.
- Another example of this control is how a huge ship is controlled and steered by a small rudder.

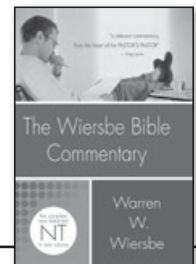
## BIBLE EXTRA

### Jesus' Teaching on Our Words

Jesus provided insight on what the real issue is regarding the words we speak when the religious leaders asked why His disciples did not wash before eating in accordance with the elders' tradition. The scribes and Pharisees taught that failure to wash appropriately defiled the person. After calling out these men for their hypocrisy, the Lord made it clear that it is not what goes into the mouth but rather what comes out of the mouth that defiles because "the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matt. 15:18-19).



You can find more commentary on the Scripture passage on pp. 866-870 in *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: New Testament*.



Week of August 23 • Page 83

## Judging the Teacher's Tongue

*James 3:1-4, KJV*

1 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.

*James 3:1-4, NIV*

<sup>1</sup>Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. <sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. <sup>4</sup>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.

It is important to understand that controlling the tongue means more than just watching what one says in certain company. There was a time when, generally, cursing and foul language were not acceptable in most social circles. Sadly, that way of thinking has long gone by the wayside in much of today's society. Scripture's admonishment to control the tongue holds God's people to a much higher standard than just not cursing or swearing in certain situations because the first step in effectively controlling the tongue is having a new heart. This comes by faith in Christ, so people become new creations with new hearts (see 2 Cor. 5:17). Therefore, in Christ, we have the ability to control what we say because we have the love of the Lord in our hearts and want to glorify Him in all we say and do. This is not something that comes naturally; we need to cultivate it by time with the Lord in prayer, Bible study, corporate worship, etc.

## SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 4

Because it is so important to speak correctly about His Word, God will hold Bible teachers to a higher standard. Therefore, churches want to be sure that those who teach the

Bible know and understand its truths and can communicate those truths clearly and accurately.

## SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 5

Teachers have a place of trust and authority with those they teach.

As a result, they could more easily offend their students and cause them to stumble in their walk with the Lord.

## SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 6

James used the illustrations of a bit in a horse's mouth and the rudder of a ship to illustrate the power of the tongue. The bit is small compared to the horse, as is the rudder compared to the ship. Yet both these small items are used to steer the course of the much bigger entities.

Week of August 23 • Page 84

Since controlling the tongue does not come naturally, James helped his readers see the importance of taking care in what they say. He began by addressing the teachers in the church.

Churches need to be mindful when selecting teachers of God's Word. The ability to teach biblical truth effectively is a special calling and gift of the Spirit (see Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:28-30). One reason God holds teachers to a higher standard is that what they say as they teach has such a powerful influence in the lives of others. James likened the tongue to a bit in a horse's mouth or the rudder of a ship. The bit and the rudder are relatively small things, but they hold great power over what they steer. And the same is true regarding the tongue of teachers over the hearts and minds of their students.

**4.** *Why should there not be too many Bible teachers within a congregation?*

**5.** *Why do teachers have such a powerful influence with their tongues over others?*

**6.** *What two earthly examples did James use to illustrate the power of the tongue?*

## Taming the Prideful Tongue

*James 3:5-8, KJV*

**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 serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and

*James 3:5-8, NIV*

<sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are

## BIBLE EXTRA

### False Teaching Condemned

Scripture condemns false teaching. Peter warned of the possibility that there would be false teachers in churches today just as there were false prophets in Israel in Old Testament times (2 Pet. 2:1). In secret, these false teachers would seek to bring destructive heresies into the church, even to the point of denying the very Lord who paid for our salvation with His precious blood. Sadly, many will unwittingly follow after the evil ways of these false teachers, thereby giving God's truth a bad name in the eyes of others. The main motivation for many of these false teachers is greed and the desire to exploit for evil gain anyone who will listen. As a result, God's wrath is upon them, and one day they will pay for their heretical teachings (vss. 2-3).

It is for these reasons that James admonished church leaders to take great care regarding whom they ask to teach in their churches, and each believer is to take great care in deciding to become a teacher in the church. Those who want to be teachers should be diligent students of Scripture in order to be as faithful to God's truth as possible. And churches that need teachers should strive to train and equip them to carry out the important responsibility of explaining God's truth to others.



## TAMING THE PRIDEFUL TONGUE

Now read James 3:5-8, and note these important ideas:

- Although it's small, the tongue boasts of great things and great matters.
- The tongue is uncontrollable, like a spark that sets a forest fire, so it can corrupt the whole body.
- Man can tame every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and everything in the sea, but the tongue no one can tame.
- The tongue is poisonous, restless, and full of evil.

### BIBLE EXTRA

#### The Tongue and the Fire of Hell

The letter of James is not the first place in the New Testament to connect what one says to the fire of hell. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus helped His disciples understand the importance of having a right heart when it comes to God's kingdom. Take for instance the commandment not to kill. Though it is most certainly wrong to murder someone, a hateful heart condition is just as condemnable in the Lord's eyes as the actual act of murder. As Jesus put it, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matt. 5:21-22).

So again we see the truth that what comes out of the mouth reflects what is in the heart. Therefore, to ensure that the tongues of God's children do not become instruments worthy of hell fire, we must deal with the condition of the heart. In the case of animosity toward a brother or sister, Jesus said that immediate reconciliation is the answer (vss. 23-24). This principle of dealing with sin quickly and effectively is important in every area of life and will go a long way in helping believers tame that fiery tongue.

## SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 7

In this part of the passage, James described the tongue as boastful, fiery, evil, corrupt, set on fire by hell, untamable, restless, and poisonous.

## SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 8

To make his point about the uncontrollable tongue, James compared it to wild animals. People can tame wild animals, but they can't control their own tongues.

Week of August 23 • Page 85

*KJV*

hath been tamed of mankind: 8 but the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

*NIV*

being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, <sup>8</sup>but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Here we see a shift from the specific need for teachers to take care to present God's truth to the general need for all Christians to take care what they say to others. True wisdom recognizes the power of the tongue and how damaging it can be to others if not properly controlled.

To that end, James pointed out to his readers just how boastful the tongue is, and as a result of boasting, how damaging it can be to others. Pride can truly be destructive in the lives of believers and those around them. To make oneself look good, one can all too easily surrender to the temptation of making others look bad or putting them down in some manner. In so doing, the tongue can become like a flaming fire of destruction. As a small spark can start a fire that burns down a whole forest, so can the tongue when it seeks to harm others. Here, James helped his readers understand just how destructive the boastful tongue is by describing it with such terms as evil, corruption, hell fire, and deadly poison.

Not only do these terms capture something that can be very harmful, but they also indicate a condition that can be outright fatal emotionally, relationally, and in some extreme cases, even physically. Indeed, James describes how people can tame and control all manner of animals—land, air, and sea—but we cannot seem to control what we say or how we say it.

Taking time to think before we speak will go a long way in controlling the tongue. A great first step in this regard is James's earlier admonition to be quick to hear and slow to speak (1:19).

**7.** *How did James describe the tongue in this part of our Scripture passage?*

**8.** *What seems more controllable than the tongue, according to this passage?*

**9.** *How is one's heart condition related to what one says?*

## SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 9

We find in several passages of Scripture that how a person speaks is indicative of the heart condition. A heart close to God will speak words that edify others to His glory. A heart

that has strayed from God will often speak words that harm others and do not bring Him glory.

## TAMING THE HYPOCRITICAL TONGUE

Finally, read James 3:9-12 and review these ideas:

- It is not right that praise and curses come out of the same mouth.

- We should not praise God and curse the human beings He created.

- By way of illustration, James says that a fig tree cannot bear olives, a grapevine cannot bear figs, and a salt spring cannot produce fresh water.

Week of August 23 • Page 86

## Taming the Hypocritical Tongue

*James 3:9-12, KJV*

<sup>9</sup> Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

<sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

<sup>11</sup> Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?

<sup>12</sup> Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

*James 3:9-12, NIV*

<sup>9</sup>With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. <sup>10</sup>Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. <sup>11</sup>Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? <sup>12</sup>My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Having addressed the teaching tongue and the boasting tongue, James turned his attention to the hypocritical tongue. When God's people praise Him but curse people, who are made in His image, then they are playing the role of a hypocrite. Hypocrisy and lying are unholy allies that seek to destroy our testimony for God, and we do well to stand firmly against them. If we do not, then our lives will be like springs of salt water, unpalatable to those who hear us. As a fig tree cannot produce olives and a grapevine cannot produce figs, neither can the tongue that curses people effectively point others to the Lord. As fresh water cannot flow from a salt water spring, neither does the one who curses others have any credibility when speaking of godly matters. Only when the heart is right, and the tongue blesses both God and those whom He created in His image, is there a credible testimony to His glory.

**10.** *What evidence did James give of a hypocritical tongue?*

**11.** *How did James use water as an example of hypocrisy?*

**12.** *How did he use fruit plants as examples of hypocrisy?*

## SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 10

James gave evidence of a hypocritical tongue by noting the difference in how people speak of God and how they speak of people made in God's image. To praise God and curse people with the same tongue is evidence of hypocrisy.

## SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 11

As a spring cannot produce both salt water and fresh water, neither should both cursing people and praising God come from the same mouth.

## SUGGESTED ANSWER TO QUESTION 12

As a fig tree cannot produce olives, and a grapevine cannot produce figs, neither should the mouth of a Christian praise God and curse others.

## WINDOW ON THE WORD

### Words Are Things

*Maya Angelou, an American poet, author, singer, and civil rights activist, wrote this about the power of words: "Words are things. You must be careful, careful about calling people out of their names, using racial pejoratives, and sexual pejoratives and all that ignorance. Don't do that. Someday we'll be able to measure the power of words. I think they are things. They get on the walls. They get in your wallpaper. They get in your rugs, in your upholstery, and your clothes, and finally in to you."*

# Bible Application 3

Understand that you can and should control what you say

Photocopy this page, cut out the boxes, and give instructions to each group. Give sheets of paper and markers to the group making the word pictures. Make copies of the handout to give to the group using it.

## GROUP ACTIVITIES

### • Discussion Group

Read "Distribute with Care" and answer **Questions 13, 14, and 15**. People should always remember that words can build up or tear down. Words can hurt or heal. People who say they "shoot from the hip" or "tell it like it is" may be using that as an excuse for not correcting or changing their speech. While Scripture says to "speak the truth" (Eph. 4:15), it also says to do so "in love." Words are especially important when talking to people about Jesus. Berating someone or saying they need to "shape up" to come to Jesus will not convince someone of their need for a Savior.

### • Word Pictures

Read the words below to your group and ask them to draw faces (like emojis) depicting how the words make them feel when they hear them. If they don't want to draw a face, tell them to write the word and circle it if the word makes them feel positive, and a black dot if it makes them feel negative. Here are the words: "creative," "critical," "capable," "courageous," "callous," and "compromising."

### • Handout: 'Words Frame Our World'

Read the instructions on the sheet and share your answers with the class.



Week of August 23 • Page 87

## Distribute with Care

Studies have shown that if children are consistently told they are loved or not loved it shows up in their behavior. Children who are told they are loved are more optimistic, happy, and secure. Accordingly, if children are verbally abused, that also shows up in their daily behavior. Verbally abused children may become depressed, unhappy, and lack confidence.

Without a doubt, as James tells us, words are commanding and influential. Words should be distributed with care; the tongue should be treated like a loaded gun and handled wisely. Even a word or two said in jest can be misunderstood and ruin a relationship.

Studies also reveal that women or men who are verbally abused fail to thrive in their environment. The victim's home life and work life are affected by the verbal abuse. They walk around bleeding unnoticeably from wounds to the soul.

There are many positive words and phrases that children and adults should hear, and hear regularly:

"I enjoy spending time with you."

"You're special to me."

"I trust you."

"I'm sure you can do it."

"Your opinion is important."

"I believe in you."

What you say and how you say it is very significant. Psalm 37:30 summarizes the principle best: "The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom, and their tongues speak what is just."

**13.** Do you mostly say positive or negative things to other people?

**14.** What would you say to a person who says this about his or her speech: "I just tell people whatever I think and feel. I can't control how they respond"?

**15.** What are some of the best words you can say to an unbeliever you are trying to tell about Jesus?

# 4 Life Response

Show wisdom by controlling your words  
.....

Words are instruments of expression; therefore, they must be used wisely. Our voice box should come with instructions that read, "Handle with care! Someone's life depends upon what comes out of it."

Ask students to read in the

student books, "Heavenly Words." Students will likely be able to think of someone they may have spoken to in a less than helpful way. Often we say these things to those closest to us. We may say these words without really thinking about them first and regret what we said later. This is a chance to make amends for those words and also to remember this week to be the person who spreads heavenly words to the people we meet.

End the lesson in prayer asking God to help students to tame their tongues and use wisdom whenever they speak.

When the students are dismissed, distribute copies of this week's *Power for Living*. Send *Lesson Leaflet* to people who could not be with you today.

Before next week, read James 3:13-18 and 5:7-12. Ask your students to think about what they have learned about wisdom in our studies the past few weeks.

Week of August 23 • Page 88

## Heavenly Words

Heavenly words are uplifting, kind, edifying, and encouraging. Heavenly words are graced with wisdom and love. They build up, fortify, and anchor the soul. Ephesians 4:29 reads, "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."

► *Think of some words you said to a person lately that you could have said better. Ask that person for forgiveness and replace those harsh words with heavenly words. Also, commit to sharing heavenly words with the people you meet this week even if it's just, "God bless you!"*

### KEY VERSE

Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! —James 3:5, KJV

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. —James 3:5, NIV

### DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of August 24 through August 30

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Matthew 24:3-14—Wisdom about End Time Signs.
- Tues.** Jeremiah 38:1-6—Wisdom for Speaking a Prophetic Message.
- Wed.** 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13—Wisdom in Knowing Hearts without Blame.
- Thurs.** Matthew 5:33-37—Wisdom in Not Swearing Oaths.
- Fri.** 1 Peter 4:7-11—Living Gracefully with One Another.
- Sat.** James 5:13-20—Wisdom in the Prayer of Faith.
- Sun.** James 3:13-18; 5:7-12—Acting Wisely with Patience and Love.