



YOU: Connect. Grow. Serve. Go!
Winter 2017-18 Leader Commentary

Unit 3: Dare to Be Different
Session 3: Clean Up Your Mouth (see pp. 150-153)

The Question: Why are words important?

The Point: Words reveal what's in our hearts.

Background Passage: James 3:1-10

Focal Passage: James 3:1-10

This commentary is designed to help you think about the question, "Why are words important?" and drive home this one truth: Words reveal what's in our hearts.

Focus on These Points

Our Words Tell on Us
(Jas. 3:1-2)

James, the half brother of Jesus, led the church in Jerusalem. James wrote this letter to the Jewish Christians in Palestine and likely to the surrounding area as well. However, he didn't always believe in Jesus as the Christ (John 7:3-5). After His resurrection, Jesus presented Himself to James and several others (1 Cor. 15:1-9). James believed and later became a pillar of the Jerusalem church (Gal 2:9). James began this section of his letter by showing his concern for uncontrolled speech. He wrote about this sin several times (1:26; 2:12; 4:11; and 5:9), but he addressed it extensively in James 3:1-18.

Right away he singles out teachers. Since speaking was a requirement of teachers, James expected them to do it carefully. He couldn't support those who pursued such a great position with weak motives. They needed a solid understanding of the gospel message and its applicability to life. Since these teachers are given an enormous responsibility to interpret, apply, and correctly teach the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15), much is required of them (see Luke 12:48). James's intent wasn't to frighten away Christians who believed they were answering God's call to teach in the church. Instead, he was admonishing those who were treating the position as a platform to build their personal brand, stroke their ego, or put themselves in the public eye. Churches need diligent, committed, compassionate, capable teachers who value God's Word.

Although he primarily addressed teachers, when he said, "We all stumble" (v. 2), James's words applied to all Christians, including himself. The Greek word translated *stumble* gives the impression of committing an error. However, a more weighty interpretation could include offending or transgressing. Here the meaning falls somewhere in between. It involves sinning by failing to control one's speech—something James claimed his audience did "in many ways" (v.

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2)—meaning “frequently” or “many times.”

James stated that those who did not allow sinful language to come from their mouths were “mature” (v. 2) or “perfect” (v. 2, KJV). He probably had spiritual maturity on his mind when he made this declaration.

Small Words Set Big Fires (Jas. 3:3-6)

James provided various illustrations to demonstrate the power of our words. All of them depicted something tiny that controlled something out of proportion to its size. In 3:2, the Greek word translated *control* could also be rendered “bridle” (KJV). This hinted that his first illustration would have an equestrian theme.

James continued with the idea in the next verse. He mentioned “bits” (v. 3), small apparatuses riders place in the mouths of horses that enable the riders to guide the animal. In his next example (v. 4), James used a seafaring reference to relay stark contrasts in size and power. When storms at sea were fierce (“stiff” or “harsh”), the ships’ pilots used small rudders to guide their vessels. The disparity in size was emphasized with James’s descriptors “very large” ships and “very small” rudders (v. 4). Rudders are only a fraction of the size of the ships they guide. The layperson who isn’t privy to the level of attention a rudder demands from a pilot may find its small size nearly incomprehensible.

James continued his discussion by adding the tongue to his lineup. According to James, the tongue is a small body part but “boasts great things” (v. 5). To give insight regarding exactly how much power the tongue holds, James finally compared it with fire. He started by reminding his readers how a small fire can wipe out a forest (v. 5b). Then he boldly declares, “the tongue is a fire” (v. 6).

When James says the tongue “is itself set on fire by hell” (v. 6), he implied that when our speech goes unchecked, hell’s fires continually fuel it. Evil begets evil in this cyclic process. However, God judges this behavior. The similarities between fire and evil words are many. Like a fire, our tongue can “heat up” an argument. Similar to clouds of smoke rising from a fire, our tongues can cloud others’ judgment.

Only with God’s Power Can the Tongue Be Tamed (Jas. 3:7-10)

Our efforts are mostly futile in taming our own tongues (vv. 7-8a). James reveals that the tongue “is a restless evil” (v. 8). It is unstable, impulsive, and unpredictable. Like a venomous snake, it is “full of deadly poison” (v. 8). Poisonous speech has the power to kill. However, neither our tongue nor our speech is evil in itself. When used recklessly, though, the tongue can serve as the vehicle by which death and destruction travel (v. 6).

Next James points out an appalling contradiction regarding believers’ toxic speech. We bless and we curse from the same mouth (v. 10). Blessing and cursing are a moral contradiction. We

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reach an apex when we use our tongues for holy purposes by praising God. We reach an absolute low when we curse people, the beings “who are made in God’s likeness” (v. 9).

Our behavior should be respectful, without verbal abuse and hatred. We all have a Christian responsibility to use speech in a way that builds up others; no foul language should exit our mouths (Eph. 4:29). After all, our words can draw people to Christ or turn them away.