

JAMES

LIVING FAITH



The Power and Danger of Our Words

James 3:1-12



Introduction

During World War II the War Advertising Council coined the phrase “loose lips sink ships” as part of a campaign to remind servicemen to keep military information away from enemy ears. If someone was careless with information about a navy ship’s course and destination, then the enemy could intercept the ship and sink it. Over time the phrase has been used as a warning about the danger of unguarded, careless words. In this passage, James tells us that loose lips sink ships.

In James 3:1-12 we have the longest section on speech in the New Testament. James uses powerful illustrations and strong words to catch our attention. He wanted his readers to listen carefully to what he has to say about the power and danger of our words. And the Holy Spirit who inspired this letter wants all Christians to know the impact our words can have on others. This passage is a *warning* about the power and danger of speech.



Study

Context: James not only wants Christians to believe the right truths but to live out their beliefs. Christian theology is pregnant with relational ethics and should give birth to them often. Throughout the letter James tells us that Christian maturity involves both words and works. This is brought together in summary form in 1:26-27. In chapter 2 James focuses on works, but turns his attention to words in chapter 3. James warns us of the power and danger of words, but then begins connecting our words to our heart (3:14, 4:1).

Structure:

- I. Warning #1: Don’t Underestimate the Power of Your Words (3:1-5a)
- II. Warning #2: Don’t Overestimate Your Ability to Control Your Words (3:5b-8)
- III. Warning #3: Don’t Fail to Realize You Speak with a Forked-Tongue (3:9-12)



Reflect

Warning #1: Don't Underestimate the Power of Your Words (3:1-5a)

1. James begins with a caution to people who want to become teachers of God's Word. He puts up the yield sign and gives two reasons why in vv.1-2. What are these two reasons?

APPLY → On Sunday afternoons throughout America, Christians sit around the table for “roast preacher” where they pick apart that morning's sermon. Yes, all preachers need to improve on their preaching constantly, but faithful teachers/preachers of God's Word are a gift to the church. And, according to James 3:1, teaching God's Word is risky. It results in a stricter evaluation of a person's speech. And like all sinners, teachers of God's Word “stumble in many ways” (v.2). Read 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15, 1 Timothy 5:17-18, and Hebrews 13:7. How does the Bible instruct the church to think about those who teach God's Word? What are some practical ways you might put these verses into action?

2. James begins his string of illustrations in v.3. What two illustrations does he use in vv.3-4? What point do you think he is making in reference to our words?

APPLY → Our tongue directs our life, in a way, by the words it produces. Generally speaking, what comes out of our mouths will determine the health of our relationships, the success of our careers and the fruitfulness of our Christian lives. The tongue is very powerful! Read Ephesians 4:29. What kind of words should not come out of our mouths? What kind of words should come out of our mouths? Now think about the past week and write down, according to Ephesians 4:29, some good and bad ways you've used the power of the tongue.

Warning #2: Don't Overestimate Your Ability to Control Your Words (3:5b-8)

3. In vv.6-7, James lists several characteristics of the human tongue. What are they? What is your response to this list?

APPLY → James wrestles us to the ground, pins us down and holds us there until we cry out, "I need help!" Who seems to be the object of your uncontrollable tongue (i.e., spouse, co-workers, etc.)? In what situations do you have the hardest time controlling your tongue? These warnings are here to move us quickly to the Holy Spirit. This week pray for the Spirit's ministry in your life with these people and in these situations.

Warning #3: Don't Fail to Realize You Speak with a Forked-Tongue (3:9-12)

4. In vv.9-10 James tells us why he thinks the tongue is untamable and dangerous. What reason does he give?

APPLY → God made all human beings to reflect him. Consider the absurdity of praying to God and then belittling something made to reflect him. Consider the wickedness of worshiping God on Sunday morning and then verbally assaulting something made to reflect him that afternoon. We are an inconsistent species! What do these two extremes say about the human condition and the state of our hearts? How do you think you can grow to be more consistent in your speech?

5. James closes out the section with two final illustrations about the source (spring and tree) and what the source produces (kinds of water and types of fruit). James is likely speaking about the human heart (the source) and the words it produces. Read Matthew 7:33-37. What point is Jesus making?

APPLY → In this passage James has given us three clear warnings about our words. What has this passage taught you about your words? What do you think your words reveal about your Christian maturity? After evaluating how you use your tongue, what are the sinful patterns in your heart you need to bring before the Lord for grace to change?



Connect

Gospel Connections. The prophet Isaiah said this about the Messiah:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his *mouth*;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his *mouth*.

⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered

that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?

⁹ And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his *mouth* (53:7-9)

Our mouths are full of sin but there was “no deceit in his mouth.” And yet there is Jesus suffering silently on the cross for our sinful speech. The One who is called the Word remained silent under the mocks and insults that poured out of human mouths. Through this One man’s sacrifice, all God’s people are forgiven of their sinful speech and will have their hearts completely transformed to sing songs of praise forever.

Whole-Bible Connections. The Bible is full of verses about our words but few books have as much to say as Proverbs. Below are a few highlights from Proverbs about human speech.

- When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent (10:19).
- The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the mouth of the upright delivers them (12:16).
- There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing (12:18).
- Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge (14:7).
- Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body (16:24).
- Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding (17:27).

Theological Connections. This is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. The doctrine of sin was one of the main doctrines discussed during the Reformation. John Calvin, a French Reformer, has greatly influenced the Protestant view of sin in what came to be known as *total depravity*. It doesn’t mean that we are as sinful as we possibly could be. Although we all are sinful, some actions are more evil than others. Although we all are sinful, some people are more gripped by sinful desires than others. Rather, it means that our entire person – the will, the mind, the body – has been corrupted by the influence and power of sin. We are totally depraved in that sense that our whole person is affected by sin. But the whole person – the will, the mind, the body – will be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit forever.

Praise Connections.

O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing

O, for a thousand tongues to sing
my great Redeemer's praise,
the glories of my God and King,
the triumphs of His grace.

Jesus! the name that charms our fears,
that bids our sorrows cease!
'Tis music in the sinner's ears;
'tis life, and health, and peace.

He breaks the power of canceled sin;
He sets the prisoner free.
His blood can make the foulest clean;
His blood availed for me.
Hear Him, ye deaf! His praise, ye dumb,
your loosened tongues employ!
Ye blind, behold your Savior come,
and leap, ye lame, for joy!

My gracious Master and my God,
assist me to proclaim,
to spread through all the earth abroad
the honors of Thy name.

Charles Wesley (1739)