



TAMING THE TONGUE • Godly Speech

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

James 3:1-18

Once again, context is important. James has been developing the theme of living a complete and mature Christian life – one that puts faith into practice. He’s already focused on several areas where there’s a sizable gap between what we believe and how we act. Speech is next on the list.

The Tongue’s Power to Affect Others (3:1-2)

There seems to be no clear reason why James begins his discussion with those desiring to be teachers other than it simply needed to be addressed in his reading audience. Whatever his reason, the teaching is clear. Those who aspire to maturity, and to be teachers of God’s Word, have a greater responsibility to watch what they say because more people are listening. We’re in no immediate danger from, say, heretical truck drivers or night watchmen, but an errant teacher on the other hand (e.g., a Pharisee) is extremely dangerous.

The Tongue’s Power to Corrupt and Lead Astray (3:3-6)

In 3:1-2, James is speaking to those who would teach, concerned with the power the tongue has on listeners. In verses 3-6, he focuses on the tongue’s power to corrupt and lead the life astray. The study raises this question: do tongues simply verbalize a corrupt heart or is an uncontrolled tongue responsible for corrupting our heart and life? Both are true. Our heart certainly affects our speech, but what we say inflames the heart. For example, words we release in rage certainly add fuel to our anger.

The study diverges from the text and moves to Proverbs 26. The book of Proverbs lies in the backdrop of James, so the excursion is quite appropriate. There is an abundance of Proverbs that relate in some way to the tongue. The Study does not attempt to focus on any particular proverb, but to expose the group to the great wealth of teaching on the tongue found here.

As Proverbs 26 makes clear, the tongue is not only the “rudder” or “bit” that drives our life, it also affects all of our relationships. Conducting our relationships with an unchecked tongue is like running with a pair of scissors, putting people, friends and relationships in jeopardy.

The Tongue’s Unholy Power (3:3-6)

Moving back to the text, James mentions that the tongue is “set on fire by hell.” This is somewhat confusing, but what follows seems to explain it.

What’s the Big Idea?

This study looks at the doubleness of speech, or “forked-tongue,” of a believer, where words are out of alignment with his profession of faith.

Wisdom is the solution. Wisdom is a oneness of life, where belief and action are fully integrated. That wisdom is found in Christ.

What’s the Problem?

Our sinfulness expresses itself in a doubleness of life, speech, thought and actions. The opposite of this doubleness (wisdom) integrates life (brings into one) and orders it under God.



James uses the imagery of Genesis (specifically the mandate to subdue nature given to Adam and Eve) to open the door to some theological insight that Genesis provides.

Genesis is about “beginnings” or root causes, and so whenever Scripture forages from Genesis, it’s usually for insight on the root cause, or “genesis”, of why things are the way they are. So why is the tongue so twisted? The first reason has already been inferred – Satan. Second, our hellacious tongue is a result of the Fall and thus untamable and unalterably so. Third, from the Garden came the original sin of pride expressed by Adam and Eve in wanting to be like God. As James has already accused the tongue of prideful boasting (vv. 5 and 14), he sources pride as the ultimate and original sin. The Garden, The Fall, the Serpent, the Original Sin of pride – this is the genesis and sordid history of the tongues’ restless evil.

Double Talk (3:7-12)

Having considered the power the tongue has to affect others and corrupt ourselves as well as where that power comes from, James chides believers who have a different genesis altogether (in Christ), saying that this kind of speech is entirely unacceptable. James moves back to a theme that runs through the book – doubleness. Doubleness is the opposite of wisdom. Wisdom integrates (brings together into one) belief and practice. Doubleness, well, doesn’t.

In chapter 1, James spoke of the “double-minded man” and in chapter 2, he looked at those who would separate faith and works. In this passage, he’s pointing at the “double-talk” or “forked-tongue” of Christians, who out of the same mouth both praise and curse. Again the answer lies in wisdom – integrating faith and practice and not separating the two. We are Christ-followers and so we should speak like Christ-followers.

This double-speak is at the core of most of our sins of speech: saying one thing, but meaning another or saying something to someone’s face, but something different behind their back. Lying or exaggeration is saying the truth is something different than it is. James describes the tongue as a restless evil ready to strike with deadly venom. He pictures it as a recoiled snake with a forked (doubled) tongue. James says this doubleness is unacceptable for the mature believer.

The Source of Wisdom (3:13-18)

Here then is how the forked tongue is stitched back together: through wisdom – wisdom that “comes down from heaven”...not empowered or “set on fire” from hell.

Now is the time to make an important point about wisdom. And here is why the book of James is a *New Testament* version of Proverbs. In the New Testament we learn that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom” (Col 2:3); “a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began” (1Cor. 2:7); and that Christ is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1Cor. 1:24).

As James describes wisdom in these passages, he is describing having “the mind of Christ.” This wisdom is the fruit of being in the Word and having a close intimate walk with Christ, where he transforms our worldly thinking into wisdom. These verses also bring out another facet of wisdom, which is humility. Here’s how it all fits together: wisdom integrates life (brings back into one) and orders and unites it back under God (humility). We need wisdom...we need Christ.

What’s Our Response?

The first response is to be aware of how much our speech really is inappropriate for a child of God – to see, per James’ analogy, just how “forked” our tongue is.

The second response is to embrace Christ as our wisdom. While our tongue is energized by sin and Satan (“set on fire by hell”), wisdom is from God (“comes down from heaven”). What we need is the mind of Christ.

The third response is to consider how Christ transforms and renews our mind, thinking and as a result our speech.

What Are the Questions?

James 3:1-12

LAUNCH

Was there ever a time when you wished you could take back your words? In what situations do you find your speech most out of character with who you really are?

EXPLORE

Read James 3:1-6.

1. James introduces this section on speech with a warning to those who would be teachers of the faith. What do you think he means by “judged more harshly”? Why?
2. Why do you think James would say that if a person doesn’t stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man?
3. How does this section relate to the overall theme(s) of James?
4. James uses three examples (bit, rudder and spark) of something small that has enormous influence on setting direction. Do tongues simply verbalize a corrupt heart and life? Or is an uncontrolled tongue responsible for corrupting our heart and life?
5. According to verses 5 and 14, pride is at the root of our evil tongue. In the areas of speech with which you struggle, where can you see pride?
6. The tongue is not just personally destructive but damaging to all our relationships. How have you seen this?
7. What is the most devastating thing someone has ever said to you, or you’ve said to someone else?

Read Proverbs 26

8. The book of Proverbs is often in the backdrop of James, and it has many things to say about the tongue.

In just this one chapter, what is something you have never considered concerning the tongue?

Read James 3:7-12

9. In Genesis, man was given a mandate to tame creation and while this is happening, no one can tame the tongue (3:7). In pointing to Genesis and the Fall, what insights can we find here for why the tongue is so untamable?
10. James 3:8 pictures the tongue as a recoiled snake waiting to lash out. Was there a recent time you lashed out with your tongue? Why?
11. In verses 9-12, perhaps thinking of the snake’s forked tongue, James returns to a familiar theme, “doubleness.” Where else does he mention “doubleness” or a dichotomized life? What is the opposite of doubleness?
12. James uses the strongest example of the duality of the tongue. We use it to both curse and praise. What does it mean to curse someone?
13. Hypocrisy is saying one thing and being another. Lying is saying one thing when the truth is another. How do different the types of sinful speech all manifest this forked tongue or “double-talk?”
14. What would you say is the biggest issue of “double-talk” in your life right now?

APPLY

15. Read 3:13-18. What does James offer as the solution to our speech problem?
16. The Scriptures declare that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom”(Col. 2:3). How did Christ embody these characteristics of wisdom (v. 17)?
17. To have the mind of Christ is to have wisdom. How do we get the mind of Christ into us?
18. The verses mention the humility of wisdom. How is humility a key to accessing all the wisdom of Christ? How do you regularly experience this?

What Are the Answers?

1. Because teachers affect the most people, they have a greater responsibility and accountability to God. This is the reason the Pharisees are so sharply rebuked by Jesus.
2. He is putting such strong emphasis on the tongue and the fact that it is an expression of desires, intentions, motives, jealousies, ambitions, dreams, hatred, ignorance and on and on and on.
3. Our sinfulness expresses itself in a doubleness of life, speech, thought and actions. Wisdom integrates life (brings into one) and orders it and unites it under God.
4. Both are true. Our tongues lead us astray, but they also can reveal a heart that is already astray.
5. Allow the group to share.
6. Allow the group to discuss.
7. Allow the group to discuss.
8. Go around the group and read out loud. Discuss.
9. See notes under “The Tongue’s Unholy Power.” In tracing the roots to the Fall in Genesis we see the Fall, Satan and the original sin of pride at the source.
10. Allow the group to discuss.
11. He mentions the double-minded man in both chapters 1 and 4. In chapter 2, he looks at those who separate faith and works. The opposite of doubleness is integrity, wholeness or maturity.
12. You want people to see that this is not just swearing, but to speak ill of someone is also to curse.
13. Whether saying one thing to a person’s face and another behind their back, or criticizing when we are actually jealous, there is almost always a discernible doubleness.
14. This is to start getting practical and specific.
15. Read carefully the notes under “The Source of Wisdom.”
16. Again refer to the notes under “The Source of Wisdom.” You want the group to connect the wisdom we need and lack with the person of Christ. What we need is Jesus.
17. Discuss how Christ transforms and renews our minds through His Word, the Spirit in us, intimacy with Him, prayer, etc.
18. To receive these things from Christ, we must humble ourselves and repent, humble ourselves and rely, humble ourselves to receive his forgiveness. Humbling ourselves is how we order our hearts under God.

Memorize

Between now and the next study, have the group read through Proverbs (a couple chapters each day), underline the Proverbs that deal with the tongue, and commit one of them to memory.