

# JAMES – PRACTICAL LESSONS IN SPIRITUAL MATURITY

## CONTROLLING OUR TONGUE: BLESSINGS OR CURSES? JAMES 3:1-12

### 1. REVIEW

- A. **REMEMBER:** JAMES IS WRITING TO **CHRISTIANS**... James 1:1 (NLT2) This letter is from **James**, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am writing to the “**twelve tribes**”—**Jewish believers** scattered abroad.
- B. THROUGHOUT THE BOOK OF **JAMES**, THIS **QUESTION** HOLDS HIS **THEME** TOGETHER: “**IF YOU SAY YOU BELIEVE LIKE YOU SHOULD... WHY DO YOU BEHAVE LIKE YOU SHOULDN’T?**”
- C. **AND HIS THEME IS REAL FAITH PRODUCES GENUINE WORKS.**
- D. IN **3:1-12**, HE **DEVELOPS** THAT **THEME** IN A VERY **SPECIFIC DIRECTION**:  
**CONTROLLING THE TONGUE.**
  - 1. WE CAN **SUMMARIZE JAMES 3:1-12** IN THE FORM OF A **QUESTION**:  
“**IF YOU SAY YOU BELIEVE LIKE YOU SHOULD, WHY DO YOU SAY THINGS YOU SHOULDN’T?**”
- E. IN ORDER TO **IMPRESS** ON HIS READERS, THE **IMPORTANCE** OF **CONTROLLED SPEECH** AND THE **CONSEQUENCES** OF OUR **WORDS**, **JAMES** GIVES **SIX ILLUSTRATIONS** ABOUT THE **TONGUE**:
  - 1. A **BIT**, A **RUDDER**, **FIRE**, A **POISONOUS ANIMAL**, A **FOUNTAIN**, AND A **FIG TREE.**
- F. THESE **SIX ILLUSTRATIONS** FALL INTO **THREE CLASSIFICATIONS** THAT **REVEAL THE THREE POWERS** OF THE **TONGUE**:
  - 1. THE **POWER TO DIRECT**: A **BIT** AND A **RUDDER.**
  - 2. THE **POWER TO DESTROY**: **FIRE** AND **ANIMALS.**
  - 3. THE **POWER TO DELIGHT**: A **FOUNTAIN** AND A **TREE.**
- 2. THE **POWER TO DIRECT**: A **BIT** AND A **RUDDER.**
  - A. IN SELECTING A **BIT** AND A **RUDDER**, JAMES USES **TWO** ITEMS THAT ARE **SMALL** OF THEMSELVES, **YET EXERCISE GREAT POWER**... JUST **LIKE THE TONGUE.**
  - B. **JESUS** TELLS US THAT OUR **BASIC PROBLEM** IS **NOT** THE **TONGUE**... **BUT THE HEART.**
    - a. THE **TONGUE** IS JUST THE **MESSENGER** THAT **CARRIES THE WORDS FROM THE HEART.**

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- b. Matthew 15:19 (NLT2) But the words you speak come from the heart—that's what defiles you. For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander.
2. NOTE IT IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO CONSIDER WHAT OUR TONGUE REVEALS ABOUT OUR HEARTS.
- C. THE BOTTOM LINE: OUR TONGUE IS LIKE A BIT AND A RUDDER:
1. IT HAS THE POWER TO DIRECT.
  2. SOOOO... IT IS VERY IMPORTANT THAT OUR TONGUES DIRECT PEOPLE IN THE RIGHT WAY!
- D. OUR WORDS CAN BUILD UNITY... OR DEMOLISH IT.
1. OUR WORDS CAN ENCOURAGE FELLOWSHIP... OR DESTROY IT.
  2. OUR WORDS CAN FORM COMMUNITY... OR FRACTURE IT.
  3. OUR TONGUE IS A SMALL BUT POWERFUL MEMBER, AND IT HAS THE ABILITY TO DO TREMENDOUS GOOD... BUT IT ALSO HAS THE POTENTIAL TO DO INCALCULABLE HARM.
- E. DISCUSS: HOW WE CAN USE OUR WORDS AND ACTIONS TO ENCOURAGE:
1. UNITY
  2. FELLOWSHIP
  3. COMMUNITY
    - a. IN OUR FAMILY, AMONG OUR FRIENDS, AND IN OUR CHURCH.
  4. EXAMPLE: WE CAN SEND CARDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT.
3. THE POWER TO DESTROY: FIRE AND ANIMALS.
- A. James 3:5-8 (NLT2) In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches. But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.

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People can tame all kinds of **animals**, birds, reptiles, and fish, but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of **deadly poison**.

#### B. **FIRE**

1. A **FIRE** CAN **START** WITH JUST A **SMALL SPARK**, **BUT** IT CAN **GROW** TO **DESTROY** MILLIONS OF DOLLARS OF **TIMBER** AND **BUILDINGS**.

a. **SIMILARLY**, OUR **WORDS** CAN **START FIRES**.

1) **Proverbs 26:20 (NLT2)** Fire goes out without wood, and quarrels disappear when gossip stops.

b. **UNFORTUNATELY**, IN **LIFE** AND IN **SOME CHURCHES**, THERE ARE **FRIENDS**, **ASSOCIATES**, **MEMBERS**, **LEADERS**, OR **EMPLOYEES** WHO **CANNOT CONTROL THEIR TONGUES**, AND THE RESULT IS **PAIN** AND **DESTRUCTION**.

c. A **HOT HEAD** AND A **HOT HEART** CAN **LEAD TO BURNING WORDS** THAT **HURT PEOPLE** AND THAT **LATER WE WILL REGRET**.

1) **Proverbs 16:27 (NLT2)** Scoundrels create trouble; their **words** are a **destructive blaze**.

2) **Proverbs 17:27 (NASB)** He who **restrains** his **words** has **knowledge**, And he who has a **cool spirit** is a man of **understanding**.

d. **FIRE SPREADS**, AND THE **MORE FUEL** YOU **GIVE IT**, THE **FASTER** AND **FARTHER** IT WILL **SPREAD**.

e. **SIMILARLY**, A **PERSON'S ENTIRE LIFE** CAN BE **INJURED** OR **DESTROYED** BY THE **TONGUE** **SPEAKING WORDS** THAT **COME FROM OUR HEARTS**.

2. AS **FIRE SPREADS**, IT **DESTROYS**.

a. **SIMILARLY**, THE **WORDS** WE **SPEAK** HAVE THE **POWER** TO **DESTROY REPUTATIONS** AND **LIVES**.

1) **TIME DOES NOT CORRECT THE SINS OF THE TONGUE!!!!**

2) WE MAY **CONFESS OUR SINS OF SPEECH**, **BUT THE FIRE** **KEEPS ON SPREADING**.

b. **OUR WORDS** MAY **NOT** HAVE **CAUSED WARS** OR **WRECKED CITIES**, **BUT THEY CAN** AND **DO BREAK HEARTS** AND **RUIN REPUTATIONS**.

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- c. **NOTE:** IT IS VERY IMPORTANT THAT WE... “Let our speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.” (Colossians 4:6)
  - 3. **FIRE BURNS AND IT HURTS.**
    - a. SIMILARLY, THE WORDS WE SPEAK HAVE THE POWER TO BURN AND HURT OTHERS.
  - 4. James 3:6 (NLT2) And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.
    - 1) THE GREEK WORD TRANSLATED “HELL” IS GEENNA, OR GEHENNA.
    - b. JAMES’S JEWISH CHRISTIAN AUDIENCE WOULD HAVE CAUGHT HIS MEANING INSTANTLY.
      - 1) “GEHENNA” REFERS TO THE HINNOM VALLEY, WHICH RUNS ALONG THE SOUTH SIDE OF JERUSALEM.
      - 2) IN THE DAYS OF JESUS AND JAMES, RESIDENTS OF JERUSALEM STACKED ALL THEIR GARBAGE AND FILTH IN GEHENNA, WHERE IT WAS OFTEN BURNED.
        - i. IT’S AS THOUGH JAMES WERE SAYING, “YOU KNOW THAT STINKY, SMOLDERING TRASH DUMP SOUTH OF TOWN?... OUR TONGUES CAN BE JUST LIKE THAT.”
        - ii. ... AND, LIKE THE PUTRID SMOKE THAT REMINDS US THAT GARBAGE IS BURNING IN THE HINNOM VALLEY... OUR TONGUES ALLOW EVERYBODY TO HEAR THE WICKEDNESS IN OUR HEARTS.”
- C. **DISCUSS:** THE POISON OF GOSSIP:
- 1. WHY DO WE INDULGE IN THE GUILTY PLEASURE OF GOSSIPING BY EXPRESSING JUDGEMENTS ON OTHER PEOPLE WHICH ARE OFTEN WITHOUT ANY REAL BASIS?
    - a. Proverbs 20:19 (NASB) He who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets, Therefore do not associate with a gossip.
    - b. Proverbs 11:13 (NLT2) A gossip goes around telling secrets, but those who are trustworthy can keep a confidence.

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- c. Proverbs 16:28 (NLT2) A troublemaker plants seeds of strife; gossip separates the best of friends.
2. ON THE SUBJECT OF GOSSIP, I AM REMINDED OF THE FOLLOWING STORY OF AN UNUSUAL PENANCE ST. PHILIP NERI ASSIGNED TO A PERSON FOR THEIR SIN OF SPREADING GOSSIP:
- a. HE INSTRUCTED THEM TO TAKE A FEATHER PILLOW TO THE TOP OF THE CHURCH BELL-TOWER, RIP IT OPEN, AND SCATTER THE FEATHERS TO THE FOUR WINDS.
- 1) BUT THE PENANCE DIDN'T END THERE. HE GAVE A SECOND, AND MORE DIFFICULT TASK.
  - 2) HE TOLD THEM TO COME DOWN FROM THE BELL-TOWER AND COLLECT ALL THE FEATHERS THAT HAD BEEN DISPERSED THROUGHOUT THE TOWN.
  - 3) THE POOR PERSON, OF COURSE, COULDN'T DO IT... AND THAT WAS THE POINT HE WAS TRYING TO MAKE IN ORDER TO UNDERSCORE THE DESTRUCTIVE NATURE OF GOSSIP.
  - 4) THE MORAL: WHEN WE DETRACT FROM OTHERS IN OUR SPEECH, OUR MALICIOUS WORDS ARE SCATTERED ABROAD, AND CANNOT BE GATHERED BACK.
    - i. OUR GOSSIP CONTINUES TO SPREAD DISHONOUR AND DIVISION IN PEOPLE'S MINDS DAYS, MONTHS, AND EVEN YEARS AFTER WE HAVE SPOKEN THEM, AS THEY PASS FROM ONE TALE-BEARER TO THE NEXT.
3. JAMES SAYS THAT NOT ONLY IS THE TONGUE LIKE A FIRE, BUT IT IS ALSO LIKE A DANGEROUS ANIMAL.
- D. ANIMALS
1. SOME DANGEROUS ANIMALS ARE RESTLESS AND THEY SEEK THEIR PREY AND THEN POUNCE AND KILL.
  2. SOME ANIMALS ARE POISONOUS.
    - a. SIMILARLY, SOME TONGUES SPREAD POISON.
      - 1) THE DECEPTIVE THING ABOUT POISON IS THAT IT WORKS SECRETLY AND SLOWLY... AND THEN IT KILLS.

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E. JAMES REMINDS US THAT ANIMALS CAN BE TAMED, AND, WHEN YOU TAME AN ANIMAL, YOU GET A WORKER INSTEAD OF A DESTROYER.

1. HOWEVER, THE TONGUE CANNOT BE TAMED BY MAN... BUT, IT CAN BE TAMED BY GOD.

a. OUR TONGUE NEED NOT BE “a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself (James 3:6).

b. BECAUSE... OUR TONGUE CAN BE SET ON FIRE FROM HEAVEN!

1) IF... GOD LIGHTS THE FIRE AND CONTROLS IT... THEN THE TONGUE CAN BE A MIGHTY TOOL FOR THE WINNING OF THE LOST... AND FOR ENCOURAGING OTHERS.

2) THE IMPORTANT THING, OF COURSE, IS THE HEART.

i. Matthew 12:34 (NLT2) “...For whatever is in your heart determines what you say.”

3) IF OUR HEART IS FILLED WITH HATRED AND JEALOUSY... SATAN WILL LIGHT THE FIRE.

i. ... BUT IF OUR HEART IS FILLED WITH LOVE... GOD WILL LIGHT THE FIRE.

4) WHEN JESUS CHRIST IS THE LORD OF OUR HEART, THEN HE IS LORD OF OUR LIPS, TOO!

#### 4. THE POWER TO CONTROL THE TONGUE

A. James 3:8-10 (NLT2) “... but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right!”

B. James 3:8 LITERALLY SAYS, “NO PERSON HAS THE POWER TO TAME THE TONGUE.”

1. JAMES IS TALKING ABOUT SUBDUING OUR SINFUL SPEECH... BY OUR OWN POWER.

a. HE SAYS HUMAN BEINGS, ON OUR OWN, DON'T HAVE THE ABILITY TO KEEP OUR TONGUES IN CHECK.

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- b. HOWEVER, IF YOU RECEIVE CHRIST PERSONALLY, GOD'S POWER THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT CAN TRANSFORM YOUR HEART AND TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR TONGUE.
  - c. AS JESUS SAID REGARDING ANOTHER IMPOSSIBILITY... "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).
- C. James 1:8 "Sometimes it (OUR TONGUE) praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right!
1. JAMES SAYS THAT THE PERSON WHO BLESSES AND CURSES (SPEAKS OUT OF BOTH SIDES OF HIS MOUTH) IS "DOUBLE-MINDED".
    - a. James 1:6-8 (NASB) "For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord (regarding prayer requests), being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."
  2. DISCUSS: DOUBLE-MINDED
5. THE POWER TO DELIGHT: SPRING AND TREE.
- A. James 3:11-12 (NLT2) Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty spring.
- B. SPRING
1. DISCUSS: A SPRING
  2. A SPRING IS A DELIGHT BECAUSE IT PROVIDES FRESH WATER THAT WE NEED TO STAY ALIVE.
    - a. WE NEED WATER FOR DRINKING, CLEANSING, COOKING, FARMING, AND MANY OTHER ACTIVITIES THAT ARE NECESSARY TO LIFE.
  3. SIMILARLY, GOD'S WORD IS A DELIGHT BECAUSE IT IS THE SPIRITUAL WATER THAT CLEANSSES OUR HEART WHICH CONTROLS OUR TONGUE:
    - a. John 15:3 (NASB) "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you."

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- b. Ephesians 5:25-26 (NLT2) For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word.
  - c. Psalm 119:9-11 (NASB) How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word. With all my heart I have sought You; Do not let me wander from Your commandments. Your word I have treasured in my heart, That I may not sin against You.
  - d. John 8:32 (NLT2) "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."
4. NOTE: OUR WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT ARE LIKE A SPRING THAT CAN HELP TO CLEANSE OTHERS.
- C. TREE
- 1. WHAT MAKES TREES DELIGHTFUL?
  - 2. THE TONGUE IS ALSO DELIGHTFUL BECAUSE IT IS LIKE A TREE.
  - 3. AND... THE MOST IMPORTANT THING ABOUT A TREE IS THE ROOT SYSTEM.
    - a. IF THE ROOTS DO NOT GO DOWN DEEP, THE TREE WILL NOT GROW IN A HEALTHY MANNER.
  - 4. SIMILARLY, IF WE'RE ROOTED IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, THEN OUR WORDS WILL BE THE FRUIT OF OUR FELLOWSHIP WITH HIM.
    - a. ONE REASON JESUS WAS ABLE TO SAY THE RIGHT WORDS AT THE RIGHT TIMES WAS BECAUSE HE COMMUNED WITH HIS FATHER AND HEARD FROM HEAVEN EACH DAY.
  - 5. NOTE: IF BELIEVERS ARE GOING TO HAVE TONGUES THAT DELIGHT... THEN WE MUST SPEND TIME WITH THE LORD EACH DAY.
    - a. WE MUST GET OUR "SPIRITUAL ROOTS" DEEP INTO HIS WORD.
      - 1) AND WE MUST PRAY AND MEDITATE AND PERMIT THE SPIRIT OF GOD TO FILL OUR HEARTS WITH GOD'S LOVE AND TRUTH.
- D. JAMES ISSUED A WARNING: A SPRING CANNOT GIVE FORTH TWO DIFFERENT KINDS OF WATER.
- 1. AND, A TREE CANNOT BEAR TWO DIFFERENT KINDS OF FRUIT.



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- a. WE **EXPECT** THE **SPRING** TO **FLOW** WITH **SWEET WATER** AT **ALL TIMES**... AND, WE **EXPECT** THE **FIG TREE** TO **BEAR FIGS** AND THE **OLIVE TREE** TO **BEAR OLIVES**.
  - 1) **NOTE: NATURE IS NOT INCONSISTENT**... IT **REPRODUCES AFTER ITS KIND**.
- E. **SIMILARLY, IF OUR TONGUE IS INCONSISTENT, THERE IS SOMETHING RADICALLY WRONG WITH OUR HEART.**
  1. WE **KNOW** FROM **EXPERIENCE** THERE IS A **SPLIT** IN **HUMAN NATURE**...
    - a. IN **HUMAN BEINGS** THERE IS SOMETHING OF THE **APE** AND SOMETHING OF THE **ANGEL**,
      - 1) SOMETHING OF THE **HERO** AND SOMETHING OF THE **VILLAIN**,
      - 2) SOMETHING OF THE **SAINT** AND MUCH OF THE **SINNER**.
    - b. IT IS **JAMES' CONVICTION** THAT **NOWHERE** IS THIS **CONTRADICTION** MORE **EVIDENT** THAN IN THE **TONGUE**.
  2. THE **TONGUE** THAT **BLESSES** **GOD**, AND THEN **TURNS AROUND** AND **CURSES** **MEN MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE**, IS IN **DESPERATE NEED OF SPIRITUAL MEDICINE**!
    - a. **BELIEVERS** **MUST** BE **CONSISTENT** IN OUR **ENCOURAGEMENT** OF **OTHERS**!
    - b. **JAMES SAYS**, "Surely, my brothers and sisters, **this is not right**!"
    - c. THE **PROBLEM**, OF **COURSE**, IS **NOT** THE **TONGUE**... IT IS THE **HEART**.
      - 1) **Matthew 15:18 (NLT2)** "But the **words** you speak come from the **heart**—that's what defiles you."
6. **IN CLOSING:**
  - A. THE **SMALLEST** **BUT** THE **LARGEST** **TROUBLEMAKER** IN ALL THE **WORLD** IS THE **TONGUE**.
    1. **HOWEVER**, IT DOES **NOT** **HAVE** TO BE A **TROUBLEMAKER**!
    2. THE **TONGUE** IS A **LITTLE MEMBER**, **BUT** IT HAS **GREAT POWER**.
    3. **AND... GOD** CAN **USE** OUR **TONGUES** TO **DIRECT** **OTHERS** TO THE **WAY** OF **LIFE**, AND EVEN TO **DELIGHT** THEM IN THE **TRIALS** OF THEIR **LIFE**.

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4. ULTIMATELY... THE CHOICE IS OURS: ENCOURAGING WORDS OR DISCOURAGING WORDS.

**B. PRAYER SUGGESTION:**

1. GIVE GOD YOUR TONGUE AND YOUR HEART AND GIVE HIM YOUR WILL... EVERY DAY.
2. AND... ASK HIM TO USE YOU TO BE A BLESSING TO OTHERS... EVERY DAY.