

## JAMES 3:1-12

### THE MOST POWERFUL FORCE MAN EVER CREATED

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

“How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.”<sup>1</sup>

**S**tronger than a nuclear bomb, more destructive than napalm, more deadly than genetically engineered microbes, more invasive than nanobots—the human tongue is the most powerful force ever created. The tongue can put steel into the spine of frightened men and women, encourage the downhearted, build nations and societies, and heal wounded hearts. However, when abused, the tongue can destroy nations and kingdoms, our fellow man, and worst of all, the work of God’s Kingdom.

James’ focus is the power of the tongue as a teaching instrument within the assembly of the Lord. There, the tongue can either honour the Master of the church, building His people and providing sound counsel, or it can destroy godly people, forever rendering them ineffective in their endeavours. His words of caution need to be heard, especially in this day when an increasing number of the professed saints of God have “itching ears” and seek to “accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.”

**THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF SPEECH** — James focuses our attention on the destructive power of the tongue; and we will do well to recognise the power inherent in our speech to destroy. James compares the tongue to the rudder for a ship or to the bit for a horse, indicating that the tongue can act similarly for us. We might well ask, “How can this be? Haven’t you said in a previous message, Pastor, that the tongue reflects what is in the heart? Now you seem to be saying that the tongue creates the problems of the heart rather than reflecting what is in the heart. Is there a contradiction in these two concepts?”

The tongue does reflect the heart. Jesus warned that “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil” [MATTHEW 12:34, 35].

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However, reading what James wrote, it becomes evident that he is cautioning us that the tongue can set the direction for our life. When we make a statement that is detrimental to another person, we position ourselves relative to that individual. Consequently, it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to retreat from our stated position. If we have appeared to attack the other person when we spoke, we put them on the defensive and they are unlikely to permit us an opening for retreat. Consequently, we have created a tension and made it almost impossible to retreat. Thus, what has been said determines the direction we will move in all future conversations concerning that individual. The tongue has become the bit for our mouth, guiding our body in a direction we may not have thought to go.

Iterating the cautionary statement Jesus made, which was cited moments ago, He also warned, “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person” [MATTHEW 15:18-20a].

When you review that list of terrible sins, every one finds its origin in the heart. However, each of these sins is manifested through some expression, usually through speech. Murder originates in hatred. Bitterness festers until it inflames the heart and expressions of malice and hatred boil forth, leading us even to murder. If you say that you would never murder another person, I warn that if your heart surrenders to anger it is astonishing what you can do.

Adultery and sexual immorality originate in the heart when an individual lusts after another person, reducing that person to an object for nothing more than personal gratification. This reduction is almost always, dare I say always, communicated through suggestive language, through seductive words, through the exaltation of the self.

Theft grows out of greed and the desire to possess what you do not otherwise have. Again, it is difficult to imagine that the desire to possess what you do not have is communicated through expressions of desire or statements of the unfairness of your own position.

False witness and slander are obviously sins of the mouth. It is possible that the tongue is abused through remaining silent when a person should be speaking, which is just as wicked a sin as speaking with malice aforethought.

The point of this quick review of Jesus’ words is to remind us that when the heart has dwelt on what is evil, once the tongue has spoken we position ourselves and make it difficult or even impossible to retreat from the position we have created.

**HOW SPEECH CAN DESTROY FAITH** — James was especially focused on warning those who imagine themselves to be teachers without benefit either of divine call or gifting by the Holy Spirit. Anyone can prepare to be a public speaker; anyone can attend a seminary and obtain a degree that indicates they have acquired a certain corpus of biblical and psychological knowledge. However, having a seminary degree does not make one a preacher.

It is a common joke that the preacher works only one hour a week. In the estimate of many people, preaching is easy work, demanding little of those who occupy the sacred desk and providing great returns. One merely needs to remind people of how to be good and avoid hurting the feelings of those listening. Of course, this is precisely the danger that James warns against.

Peter reminds us that our adversary, the devil, “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” [1 PETER 5:8]. The divine warning continues by urging us to resist the devil, being firm in the faith. If we will be successful, we must be sober-minded and watchful. The shepherd of the flock must assess the vulnerabilities of the flock and co-ordinate an effective response. The shepherd must train the sheep to be self-controlled and alert, standing firm in the Faith while resisting the allure of the culture to embrace just a little bit of evil.

Numerous studies indicate that there is little difference in behaviours and lifestyles between those in the evangelical community and those in the world. Christians are increasingly adopting the attitudes of the world, and those attitudes are infiltrating the churches. Consequently, the sheep demand that the shepherd affirm them, confine himself to pious platitudes designed to make sheep feel good about themselves. The sheep have forgotten that sheep are vulnerable creatures; they are grazing in enemy territory [cf. MATTHEW 10:16].

Therefore, failure to “reprove, rebuke and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” [see 2 TIMOTHY 4:2] exposes the flock to beasts that will scatter the flock and injure the vulnerable. The sheep resist the healthy words, bleating out their disappointment that they are not like all the other scruffy and untended sheep they see wandering about and wonder why the shepherd will not ignore them when they graze in other meadows, little knowing the danger that may await them, both from wild beasts, from stagnant waters, or from noxious weeds.

So the sheep accumulate teachers to suit their own passions rather than heeding the shepherd whom God appoints. Then, when they are scattered, for they will be scattered, they bleat how out their complaint about unfair their situation is and wonder why God let them be scattered. Those supposed shepherds who obey the sheep rather than the Great Shepherd have so much for which they must give an answer. Failure to employ sound words leads to injury, just as Paul has written [see 2 TIMOTHY 1:13].

“If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain” [1 TIMOTHY 6:3-5].

**HOW SPEECH CAN DESTROY HOPE** — When one fails to echo the sound words of Christ Jesus our Lord, he demonstrates his own ignorance. Were that all that was done, perhaps it would not be so serious. However, because such speech can destroy faith, it also has an impact on hope. The congregation that is subjected to a diet of such slop soon accepts as normal the very things that Paul has condemned. Soon, among the membership there is an “unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words.” What is written in the constitution is more important than what is written in the Word; feelings supersede doctrine. Soon, hope dies and the people begin living for the moment rather than living in the light of eternity.

Paul continues his stern warning by cataloguing a deplorable list of evils: “envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions and constant friction.” Ultimately, the hope once resident within the congregation is transferred from the Risen Christ to earthly possessions. Thus, the Apostle concludes this dark statement of concern with the reminder that “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” [1 TIMOTHY 6:10]. Hope in the markets is doomed to disappointment, as is hope in the government, or any institution other than Christ the Lord.

This is not to imply that all the members of the flock, nor even most of the members of the flock, are engaged in these wicked pursuits; however, there is no restraint on these activities and no censure when they infect the flock. Words that are at variance with what Christ has taught destroy the evangelistic spirit and thus hinder the salvation of the lost. The errant teacher works more woe than merely destroying the faith of those who listen. This is the point of Peter’s encouragement to be always “prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” [1 PETER 3:15]. Hope dies; and evangelism ceases.

**HOW SPEECH CAN DESTROY LOVE** — Unsound teaching destroys hope, and it also destroys love. Paul reminds Timothy that he was left in Ephesus so that he could confront particular individuals, warning them against teaching different doctrine. Such unhealthy teaching would only promote “speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith.” Paul continued by reminding Timothy that “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” [**1 TIMOTHY 1:4,5**].

Our culture is terribly confused about love. We are so focused on how we feel that when we do not feel good we imagine that we are unloved. Listening to much of the talk about God’s love heard within Christendom reveals that the focus is neither on God nor on His character; rather most often the focus is what is received and how we feel; the focus is on the gift and not on the Giver.

When one who comes to Christ having been assured that all his troubles will be over discovers that in fact his troubles may just be beginning, he begins to doubt the Saviour’s love. When one is told that she need only trust Christ and thus she professes faith, though she does not possess faith, discovers that Christ demands her allegiance, she may not feel she is loved. Consequently, many within evangelical churches are disappointed and drop out because they did not feel they were loved.

The love of God will not coddle us and leave us feeling good about ourselves. God’s love is demanding. The God of love will never desert us; however, He will not ignore our sin. He will discipline us, permitting us to pass through severe trials to inure us to hardship. The testing He permits will create patience, for there is no shortcut to attain this necessary character trait. He will permit us to face giants; but He will not desert us to the foe.

Citing a hymn that was current when he wrote, Paul noted of Christ Jesus:

“If we died with Him, we will also live with Him;  
if we endure, we will also reign with Him.”

[**2 TIMOTHY 2:11b, 12a**]

Christians can anticipate hardship requiring us to be prepared even to die for the cause of Christ. Certainly, each believer will be required to endure hardship and testing. Because God loves us, we will not be spared such pressure. However, just because we pass through deep water does not mean that God does not love us.

God is ever with His people, though He will permit them to experience difficulties. This is the testimony of the Apostle. “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” [**ROMANS 8:28-30**].

He concludes that powerful portion of the Word by affirming the love of God despite every appearance to the contrary according to the estimate of this dying world when he writes, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;  
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” [ROMANS 8:35-39].

All that has been said about the destructive power of speech within a congregation holds true in greater or lesser measure in other social units that are essential to a healthy society. Societies can be irreparably harmed through thoughtless and self-serving words. Nations go to war over ill-advised words spoken without thought of the consequences. Families can be destroyed through harsh words employed as weapons. Friendships can be torn apart as result of words flung about carelessly. Few wounds are ever as deep as those inflicted on the heart of one who loves us by cruel or insensitive words blasting past our own lips.

Though we live in a society that embraces the cult of the victim, Christians dare not lay the blame for the consequences of their speech on the devil or on the way others perceive what is said. As Christians, we must accept responsibility for our own words and determine that we will be guided by the principles of love for Christ and love for those to whom we speak. When it is brought to our attention that our words have injured another, we must be quick to seek forgiveness for Christ’s sake and for the sake of those hurt. However, this must be done without compromising the truth. As the Apostle has taught us, we must be careful to ensure that we are “speaking the truth in love” so that we may “grow up in every way into Him who is the Head, into Christ” [see EPHESIANS 4:15].

**THE CONSTRUCTIVE POWER OF SPEECH** — Though James has focused attention on the danger of an unrestrained tongue, we need to be encouraged that the same tongue that is so deadly can be wonderfully constructive. The determining factor is our own attitude and action. For a brief moment, think with me of the constructive power of speech.

Few memories are more precious to many of us than the soothing words uttered by a mother as she consoles her child when he is terrified. The choice words of a father to a child who is discouraged can create new determination to succeed at a difficult task. The encouragement of a friend who reminds us through the words of the mouth that he or she stands with us can be precisely what is needed to encourage us to stay the course. Certainly, each of us long to hear the words of a beloved spouse telling us of her or his love. Those precious words enable us to make any sacrifice to make our marriage strong.

Just as the words spoken to a spouse or to one’s children or to a friend can strengthen and encourage, so the words spoken in the congregation of the Lord can serve to build the people and to honour the Lord. Throughout the Word of God, we are reminded of the power of our words. Paul assesses the efforts of Corinthian Christians to use their tongues and insists that whatever is done must be done “so that the church may be built up” [1 CORINTHIANS 14:5]. He urges these combative believers to “strive to excel in building up the church” [1 CORINTHIANS 14:12]. His conclusion is worthy of the most serious consideration for believers. “In church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue” [1 CORINTHIANS 14:19].

Sound doctrine encourages the people of God and lends strength to those who are weak. Titus was urged to “teach what accords with sound (healthy) doctrine” [TITUS 2:1]. As an example of healthy doctrine that is today frequently ignored, consider Paul’s instruction concerning the Rapture and the resurrection of the saints that was written to the Thessalonian Christians. In 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-17, Paul writes:

“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.” The Apostle then appends this statement that supports the power of what is said. “Therefore encourage one another with these words” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:18]. This charge aligns perfectly with the need to assess our ministry among the people of God, which is to build up the church, encourage and console [see 1 CORINTHIANS 14:3].

What is taught may encourage the people of God, giving them the strength to continue on despite hardship and opposition. His teaching here is but anticipation of what the author of the Letter to Hebrew Christians would say when he urged those believers who were considering stepping back from the hard task of living godly lives in the midst of an ungodly world. That author urged, “Let us consider how to stir one another to love and good works” [HEBREWS 10:24]. We will only benefit as we each remember and put into practise the biblical injunction to “encourage one another and build one another up” [1 THESSALONIANS 5:11].

The compelling words of the godly teacher enable those who hear to rest their faith in the power of God. In the opening words of the first Corinthian Letter Paul writes, “When I came to you, brothers, [I] did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” [1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5]. This is especially true for those who assume the sacred office of pastor.

There is a perception that pastors must be nice. How I have come to loathe that insipid word “nice!” Where is that notorious verse, “Preachers, be nice?” In fact, we have forgotten that the man of God is commanded to “preach the word.” He is to “be ready in season and out of season.” The preaching is to include reproving, rebuking and exhorting, being done with patience and teaching [see 2 TIMOTHY 4:2]. The pastor is to consider the impact of his words on fellow believers. Writing Titus, Paul observed the truthful testimony that lies and laziness were characteristics of Cretan society. Therefore, Titus would be compelled to “rebuke them sharply.” The reason for his rebuke was so that “they may be sound in the Faith” [TITUS 1:13]. Indeed, the man of God is charged to “exhort and rebuke with all authority” [TITUS 2:15]. However, the rebuke is delivered, not to injure and hurt, but to correct and strengthen.

A rebuke, delivered in the Spirit of the Lord, corrects the errant and warns the unruly, as is made clear in the Apostle’s injunction to idle believers within the Thessalonica congregation. “Such person we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living” [2 THESSALONIANS 3:12]. It is not only parishioners who are to be rebuked, but fellow elders. The man of God is instructed to rebuke elders who persist in sin, “so that the rest may stand in fear” [1 TIMOTHY 5:20]. So truthful words, confronting and correcting sin, create stamina and perseverance in the Faith and create a healthy fear of sin as the believer learns to stand in awe of God. Above all else, such speech encourages the people of God, for it brings us into a walk that honours the Master and glorifies His Name.

Our speech either identifies us as those who pursue God, or denies that relationship. Reviewing the stalwarts of the Faith, the author of Hebrews reminds us that they “acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” Then, he makes this comment about this truth. “People who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland” [HEBREWS 11:13, 14]. Those who are of the world, “speak from the world, and the world listens to them” [1 JOHN 4:5]. However, godly speech builds the people of God because it resonates with the Spirit that dwells within the child of God.

**CONTROLLING THE TONGUE** — The Bible has a great deal to say about controlling the tongue, though I dare not imagine that I will be able to exhaust the instruction provided in the short time available this day. Perhaps one of the richest sources for instruction on speech will be the words of Solomon, especially as included among the Proverbs. In PROVERBS 26:24-26, 28 is found a warning about speech that should be avoided.

“Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips  
and harbours deceit in his heart;  
when he speaks graciously, believe him not,  
for there are seven abominations in his heart;  
though his hatred be covered with deception,  
his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.”

“A lying tongue hates its victims,  
and a flattering mouth works ruin.”

False speech, deceptive speech, dishonours God and disgraces the one on whose lips it is found. Speaking somewhat more positively on the same subject, Solomon wrote:

“Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence,  
but a false witness utters deceit.  
There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts,  
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.  
Truthful lips endure forever,  
but a lying tongue is but for a moment.  
Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil,  
but those who plan peace have joy.  
No ill befalls the righteous,  
but the wicked are filled with trouble.  
Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD,  
but those who act faithfully are his delight.”

[PROVERBS 12:17-22]

In other words, focus on speaking the truth without guile, use prudent speech, and seek peace. This is, of course, the identical concept of godly speech in the New Testament. Paul writes, in EPHESIANS 4:25, “Having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbour.” Speaking truthfully honours God and ensures peace.

Undoubtedly, some listening will say that they have every intention of controlling the tongue, only to discover that they are powerless to truly rule over their speech. That is precisely James' contention in our text: "No human being can tame the tongue" [JAMES 3:8]. Because no human being can tame the tongue, it is vital that He who created the tongue controls it. In effect, this is a plea to heed the words of the Master who told us that "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil" [MATTHEW 12:34, 35]. If I wish good to be expressed through my mouth, I must ensure that good fills my heart.

A theological truth is inadvertently expressed in the saying, "You are what you eat." Though the saying is not usually meant to be a theological statement, it is nevertheless true that what you feed your spirit is revealed through your speech. If you feed on garbage, your breath will be fetid. Similarly, if your soul feeds on trash, your speech will expose you. If you spend more time watching sitcoms and soul-destroying dramas than you do in meditating on the Word of God, you will reflect the world's view. If your reading habits lead you to salacious stories and lascivious accounts of evil rather than focusing your attention on the will of God, you will grow cold concerning your responsibility to honour the Lord.

Few within contemporary churches think it important to invest considerable time in reflecting on the will of God. A tragically small percentage of professing Christians in modern churches spend time in the Word of God, and it is reflected in the resort to the methods of the world to attempt to accomplish what is perceived as the will of God. The excuse is made that the busyness of life demands such attention that we must have recreation, never understanding that the Word of God is meant to refresh the soul. We are not to treat the Word as a cage for our spirits, but as the refreshing, healthful, life-giving means for discovering the will of the Master.

Again, if we will gain control over the tongue, we need mutual accountability. God loved the church and gave His life for her. Therefore, we should not imagine that the church is a mere organisation to which we attach ourselves, but we must realise that this is the Body of Christ to which He adds us when we submit to His reign. If only we could move beyond the thought that we "go to church" and embrace the concept that "we are the church," we would transform our experience. Here, among the people of God, we are to love one another enough that we focus on building one another, gently encouraging one another "in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with [our] heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" [see EPHESIANS 5:19-21].

An example of such loving responsibility exercised within the Christian Community is provided in EPHESIANS 4:26, 27: "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil." Many people assume that Paul is giving instruction to individuals to avoid being sinful when they are angry, as though he is making a concession to human frailty. However, the setting for his charge is the assembly, as is evident from VERSE 25. The discussion is restricted to the Believing Community.

Therefore, the teaching is that we are to be angry toward sin discovered in the Community of Faith, quickly confronting the errant believer. However, this must not be an angry confrontation, being instead gentle and firm. Failure to confront the wayward believer gives the devil a foothold. As Daniel Wallace states in the NET Bible, "Entirely opposite of the 'introspective conscience' view, this text seems to be a shorthand expression for church discipline, suggesting that there is a biblical warrant for ... righteous indignation"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> NET Bible (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), Logos Electronic Version



**THE MOST POWERFUL FORCE MAN EVER CREATED**

If you are a Christian, if you have faith in the Living Son of God, the Spirit of God who dwells in you can appropriate the power to do what no man can otherwise do—tame the tongue. However, if you are not a child of the True and Living God, there is no possibility that you can accomplish this great task. Your first need is to be born from above and into the Family of God. This second birth is the promise of God to all who receive His Son as Master.

The Word of God promises, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” God has promised, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].

And that is our prayer for each of you. Believing this Word, receiving this Saviour, you, too, can enter into the joy of His salvation. You can be set free from the tyranny of the tongue. You can walk in the Spirit, enjoying the commendation of the Master and rejoicing in the fellowship of the Body of Christ. Do it today; do it now. Amen.