

### Watching Our Words

1. What kind of speech generally tumbles out of your mouth? Think about your speech over the last week. Mark each speech pattern below that you recognize in your life.

arguing\_\_\_\_\_

critical\_\_\_\_\_

passing on rumors\_\_\_\_\_

being sarcastic or cutting\_\_\_\_\_

shading the truth\_\_\_\_\_

flattering\_\_\_\_\_

complaining\_\_\_\_\_

encouragement\_\_\_\_\_

wisdom\_\_\_\_\_

praying\_\_\_\_\_

speaking truth in love\_\_\_\_\_

righteous\_\_\_\_\_

prudent\_\_\_\_\_

joyful\_\_\_\_\_

*The tongue reveals who we are in a unique way.* Reflect on this statement as you study this week.

**Prepare Your Heart:** “God, I ask that my speech be a source of life and blessing rather than a cause of destruction and despair. Speak to me mightily now through Your Word, I pray.”

In the section before us James picks up a subject he mentioned in 1:19 and 1:26. He now develops it more fully—exploring the powerful influence and perversity of the tongue.

2. **Read** James 3:1-12 out loud. *Allow each word to penetrate your soul.* Note one phrase or sentence that really grabs your attention. Write it down and memorize it.

We are all going to feel the rebuke of James' words as he instructs us on practical matters of speech. He begins by addressing a significant group that touches the entire Christian community.

3. a. Why do you think James sends a word of caution to aspiring teachers (verse 3:1)?

b. Why are teachers particularly vulnerable to failures in speech?

c. What might be some reasons for stricter judgment of teachers in the church?

In the synagogue and in the early churches there was considerable freedom to speak. This led to some confusion and disorder. There was widespread abuse of the teaching privilege. Some engaged in teaching without adequate preparation and for unworthy motives. -Hobbs

4. From verse 2a what do you learn about James himself—his own heart attitude?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Before James goes further he makes an insightful statement in 3:2b. Ponder this phrase and discuss the meaning of this remarkable claim.

*The word “perfect” in James 3:2 comes from the same Greek word as “mature” in 1:4 and “complete” in 2:22. We may not reach that goal in this life but we should be growing toward it.*

To reinforce his point in 3:2b James offers two well-chosen examples to demonstrate the power of this small member of our body.

6. **Reread** James 3:3-4. How is the tongue like:  
a horse’s bit?

a ship’s rudder?

7. a. How does the realization of the tongue’s power humble you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. How does it encourage you to use your tongue wisely?

In the images of the bit and rudder James is speaking primarily of the extraordinary power of the tongue. In James 3:5-12 however, he begins to describe the evil that the tongue is capable of. **Read** through this sobering section of Scripture again from several translations.

In verse 5 James switches his focus of comparing size with outcome to the comparison of size with the potential for destruction.

8. How do the words from verse 5 speak to you personally?

9. From James 3:6 list the insights we are given about the tongue's *character*, its *influence* and its *allegiance*. (Consult several translations.)

When James writes about the tongue being set on fire by hell (James 3:6) he uses the Greek word *gehenna*—a translation of a Hebrew phrase meaning “Valley of Hinnom.” This valley was situated southwest of Jerusalem and originally had been the site of pagan child sacrifices. In the New Testament era it was the site where garbage and bodies of dead animals and executed criminals were dumped and continually burned. Jesus used this graphic image to symbolize the place that is set apart for eternal punishment and torment. James felt strongly enough about the wreckage that results from careless words to evoke the same image.

10. How does James' teaching about the tongue alter your perspective about the powerful effect of our words—not only here and now—but for all eternity? (See also Jesus' reference in Matthew 12:36-37.)

James 3:7 begins with the word “for” in the NASB. This shows us that he is explaining what he just said in verse 6. Thoughtfully **reread** James 3:6-8 to grasp the flow of these verses.

11. What thought-provoking points are made in verses 7-8?

12. Why can we not decide by a resolution of the will to control the tongue? (See Romans 7:18 and Galatians 5:17.)

James does not solve the problem of our speech in this passage. He lets his teaching dangle without the kind of resolution we like. His conclusion that the tongue is hopelessly inconsistent is illustrated in several ways in James 3:9-12. *Review and carefully consider the poignant truths in these verses along with the speech patterns that were noted at the beginning of the lesson.*

13. a. Whom do we ultimately address in both blessing and cursing?

b. What have you learned about how our words can reveal what is in our soul?

James 3:1-12 gives us the strongest and clearest teaching about the tongue in all of Scripture. James' passion to help us understand the true relationship between what we say and the rest of our lives is clearly evident.

14. Take a few moments for quiet reflection. Are there speech patterns in your life that God has convicted you about? *Growth often begins by “seeing” ourselves as God sees us.* Write a prayer below inviting God to do His transforming work in your life ... word by word. Finish by reading 1 John 1:9 and praising God for the work He is accomplishing in you!