

SESSION 4

Faith on Display in Your Conversations



QUESTION 1:

When has your big mouth gotten you into trouble?

THE POINT

When you rely on God, your words reflect His character.

THE PASSAGES

James 3:1-5a,9-10,13-18

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

It is estimated that people spend fifty-two minutes a day talking about someone who is not present. In other words, people spend almost an hour every day engaged in gossip. Of those gossip-filled conversations:

- ▶ Ten percent are positive or flattering
- ▶ Seventy-five percent are neutral
- ▶ Fifteen percent are negative.¹

Most of the time people do not hear what is being said about them. But what if they did?

Ramona Tucker told of a situation her friend Michelle described to her. After a business lunch, Michelle and another woman went to the women's restroom to refresh their makeup. As they chatted, their small talk turned to gossip about a mutual coworker, Beth. Their conversation did not fall into the ten percent of flattering gossip; it was definitely negative. For a full two minutes, Michelle lambasted her coworker for the misery she caused their team. Then, in a moment of silence, the ladies heard the familiar sound of a bathroom stall door opening. Glancing in the mirror, they watched in horror as Beth walked out, embarrassed, angry, and red-faced. Michelle was sure tears were in Beth's eyes.

Beth never came back to work. She resigned, and Michelle never saw Beth again.² Words matter.

James 3:1-5a

- 1 Not many should become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we will receive a stricter judgment.
- 2 For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is mature, able also to control the whole body.
- 3 Now if we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we direct their whole bodies.
- 4 And consider ships: Though very large and driven by fierce winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.
- 5^a So too, though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts great things.

In our last session, James taught that our actions which prove our faith are more important than mere words. We don't just say we have faith; we show it by our actions (Jas. 2:14-26). James was not implying that our words are unimportant. On the contrary, words are important—very important. As we move into James 3, we see just how important and powerful they are.

Words are so common and so easy to speak that we can lose the importance of a single word in the sheer volume of words spoken or heard in a single day. Researchers found that average people—whether men or women—speak about 16,000 words in a day. The less chatty person, which was a man, spoke only 700 words, but the most talkative—which also turned out to be men—can come out with 47,000 words a day!³ How important can a single word be?

- ▶ Ask the father who just heard his daughter say "I do" on her wedding day.
- ▶ Ask the mother who anxiously waits for her autistic child's first word.
- ▶ Ask the patient fidgeting in an examination room, waiting for the doctor to explain the test results.

QUESTION 2:

When have you seen the power of words impact someone in positive ways?

Words matter. They can destroy or they can give hope. Our words have the power to instruct, inspire, encourage, and motivate. A teacher's words make a difference in her students' lives. The words she speaks are so important that the very act of teaching invites a stricter judgment. Teachers will give account for how they exercise that power to communicate.

Jesus also had a lot to say about the consequences teachers will suffer who lead their students astray (Matt. 5:19; 18:6). However, it is not just teachers who will be held accountable for their words; we will all be judged by our words. Jesus said, "I tell you that on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak" (12:36).

James used the examples of horses and ships to illustrate how we can control those things using instruments that are exponentially smaller than they are. A bridle bit will weigh between one and two pounds, yet by using it a rider can direct an 1,800-pound horse. A rudder is a tiny fraction of the size of the ship's hull, and yet the captain uses it to steer the entire ship. In the same way, "the tongue is a small part of the body," but we should not be fooled by the size of a tongue. Typically, a person's tongue is slightly over three inches long, weighs just over two ounces, and is all muscle; however, its power—for good *or* bad—is disproportionate to its small size. That small muscle has great power—"it boasts great things."

The small size of the tongue does not keep it from doing great damage. Words can demoralize and destroy others just as a small spark can start a wildfire that destroys a large forest. James even declared, "the tongue is a fire," and it "sets the course of life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." (James 3:6). Those are strong words indeed! Other biblical writers used powerful words to describe the tongue: "as sharp as a snake's bite" (Ps.140:3), "an open grave," and

“viper’s venom” (Rom. 3:13). We’ve surely all experienced the harsh effects of a tongue and have been on the receiving end of cutting criticism, destructive gossip, or demoralizing sarcasm. We’ve also seen the effects of lying, slander, and a careless word.

Proverbs 6:16-19 lists seven things the Lord hates; three of them are sins of the tongue: “a lying tongue, . . . a lying witness who gives false testimony, and one who stirs up trouble among brothers.” Paul also admonished his readers to avoid the use of “obscene and foolish talking or crude joking” (Eph. 5:4). Clearly, words are powerful and can destroy relationships and people’s reputations.

QUESTION 3:

When have you seen the power of words cause harm to someone?

James 3:9-10

9 With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in God’s likeness.

10 Blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, these things should not be this way.

“No one can tame the tongue” (Jas. 3:8), which we can use for good or evil. James showed just how impossible it is to tame the tongue by pointing out how inconsistent we are with our words. We use the same tongue to bless God yet curse the people He created in His image.

James’s teaching is discouraging and may even sound beyond hope to some. So, what do we do? Do we simply give up and give in to every temptation to lie, sow discord, curse, or gossip about others? Of course not, and that was exactly James’s point. “My brothers and sisters, these things should not be this way.”

Because we are always tempted to do evil with our tongues, we must be on our guard and constantly submit this temptation to the Lord. Relying only on our own self-control is not the answer. The only way we can use our tongue consistently for God's good purposes is to submit to God's control in our lives. In verses 11-12, James pointed to nature. A spring with a good water source does not give both good water and bitter water. You will never find olives growing on a fig tree. The type of tree determines what fruit grows on it. Neither does "a grapevine produce figs." Again, the source determines the fruit.

Words that inspire and bring hope come from the mouth of a wise, God-controlled person. However, if God does not control us—if we do not submit to His lordship—we will gossip like everyone else. Considering the statistics given previously, if we spend fifty-two minutes a day gossiping, and fifteen percent of that time we talk negatively about others, that translates to about eight minutes a day, or nearly two full days in a year! One of the reasons we're tempted to gossip is because tearing others down can make us feel better about ourselves. This "moral rationalization," produces a "feeling of glee to learn that someone else is worse than we are."⁴ It does not have to be this way. We do not have to indulge in this destructive behavior. When God is the source of our identity, He is directing our tongue, and we will not use it to destroy others.

Sarcasm can be as destructive as gossip. When a person makes a sarcastic remark, he says one thing that, if taken at face value, has the exact opposite meaning than he wishes to convey. For instance, he may say, "nice going," when someone makes an embarrassing blunder. While some may view such a practice as a light-hearted way to take the edge off a criticism—a way to encourage others to laugh at their mistakes—it can come across as mean-spirited, intending to cut and inflict pain. The sarcastic person hides behind his humor to rationalize what he said. To say, "I was only joking," does not excuse the negative words (Prov. 26:18-19). Instead of indulging ourselves with sarcasm—the short-lived satisfaction

of unleashing our fury disguised as wit—we should pause and think. Think about the things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, and praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8). Yes, that might create an awkward silence for a moment, but feeling awkward for a few seconds is far better than spending hours shifting through relationship rubble created by our destructive words.

Beyond thinking, we should pause and pray. Ask God for His strength in the moment to overcome the temptation to cut someone else down. Submit to His control. Whether we need to get a grip over negative gossip or succeed in stopping hurtful sarcasm, we will be wise people who gain victory when we give control of our tongues to the Lord.

QUESTION 4:

How has technology amplified the power of words in recent years?

ENGAGE

Listed below are some words that have the potential to cause harm. Mark the words that need to be removed from your vocabulary. Add any words that aren't listed but have been spoken by you.

Words can be deadly. Jesus taught that insults can murder a person's character (Matt. 5:22).

Idiot	Stupid	Dumb	Airhead
Fool	Slacker	Jerk	Good for nothing
Other:			

Words can be helpful. Who in your life needs a good word? Identify someone in your life who needs a kind word from you.

James 3:13-18

13 Who among you is wise and understanding? By his good conduct he should show that his works are done in the gentleness that comes from wisdom.

14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't boast and deny the truth.

15 Such wisdom does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice.

17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense.

18 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.

KEY WORDS: **The fruit of righteousness** (v. 18)—A biblical expression that combines a desirable trait (righteousness here), linked to God, with the idea of its reproducibility in His followers.

Earlier, James promised that God will give wisdom to those who ask in faith (1:5-6). He now returned to the theme to show how wisdom can benefit us and how godly wisdom impacts our words and conduct. Merely doing or saying the right thing is not enough. Even a legalistic Pharisee can outwardly do and say good things. When we are guided by God's wisdom, our right actions and words are undergirded by the proper attitude and motivation. Our words and actions come from a gentle, wholesome, and meek spirit.

We need God's wisdom in the ongoing battle to control our untamed tongue. When we are tempted to let our tongue wreak havoc in our relationships, we must pause, think, and pray, seeking God's wisdom. We cannot let conventional wisdom—what James called “bitter envy and selfish ambition”—guide us. James did not use the phrase *conventional wisdom*, but he described it using three escalating concepts: “earthly, unspiritual, demonic.”

- ▶ **Earthly**—this is close in meaning to conventional wisdom, it is human activity in contrast with divine activity.
- ▶ **Unspiritual**—this term builds on the previous but goes a step further; it is self-centered wisdom and void of godly influence. “But the person without the Spirit does not receive what comes from God’s Spirit, because it is foolishness to him; he is not able to understand it since it is evaluated spiritually” (1 Cor. 2:14).
- ▶ **Demonic**—this word escalates the language substantively. This wisdom is specifically directed away from the things of God.

If we allow “wisdom” that is “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” to guide our thoughts, we will act and speak from a bitter, selfish heart. We will look out for number one, step all over other people to get ahead, and seek to win at all costs. We’ll do whatever it takes to get ahead, even if that means we need to destroy other people’s character through gossip or demeaning them and crushing their spirits with bitter sarcasm.

By contrast, God’s wisdom—“the wisdom from above”—is characterized by actions, words, and attitudes that are:

- ▶ **Pure**—without moral defect
- ▶ **Peace-loving**—free from inner turmoil, seeking the best for others
- ▶ **Gentle**—gracious and patient with others
- ▶ **Compliant**—reasonable, agreeable
- ▶ **Full of mercy and good fruits**—displaying kindness and goodness
- ▶ **Unwavering**—steady, resolute, impartial
- ▶ **Without pretense**—genuine and sincere

God’s wisdom empowers speech and conduct that honor Him.

QUESTION 5:

What are some practical ways we can apply God’s wisdom to what we say and do?

LIVE IT OUT

God's wisdom is available to help you gain control of your speech. What will you do to rely on God in your speech?

- ▶ **Memorize Philippians 4:8.** "Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is anything praiseworthy—dwell on these things."
- ▶ **Keep a gratitude journal.** A study from the University of Central Florida found that keeping a gratitude journal for two weeks decreased gossip in the workplace.⁵ Spend a few minutes each day writing about people you are grateful for.
- ▶ **Apologize to someone you know you have hurt through gossip or sarcasm.** Remember Michelle and Beth? Michelle knew she hurt Beth and she hurt her own witness to Beth, who is not a believer. Michelle wrote Beth a letter of apology.⁶ Do what you can with a letter, phone call, or face-to-face meeting to seek forgiveness for words you have spoken.

END NOTES

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