

## **Week 9: James: The Tongue**

### **Hook**



**Main Point: A heart full of God's love will speak truth, love and blessing.**

A 2024 survey found that 66 percent of U.S. households owned a pet. Can your LifeGroup name the most popular pets?

Here are the most frequently owned pets in America:

8. Saltwater fish (2.2 million)
7. Horse (2.2 million)
6. Reptile (6 million)
5. Bird (6.1 million)
4. Small animals (6.7 million – hamsters, gerbils, rabbits, guinea pigs, chinchillas, mice, rats, and ferrets)
3. Freshwater Fish (11.1 million)
2. Cat (46.5 million)
1. Dog (65.1 million)<sup>1</sup>

**Q: Which of these animals do you think make the best pets?**

Unlike the animals above, there are some creatures that cannot be truly domesticated, try as we might. The list of animals that humanity has tried and failed to tame include zebras, elephants, bison, tigers, wild boars and pandas.<sup>2</sup>

**Q: If you could tame/domesticate any animal, what would it be?**

**Transition:** Today we will discuss something that no human has ever tamed – the tongue.

**RECAP:** So far in our study of James, we have learned that James is wisdom literature – applied wisdom which gives practical advice for real everyday situations from a Christ-centered perspective. In chapter 1, James touched on some of his main ideas – wisdom, trials and temptations, true religion, and being doers of the word, which he will later come back to in more detail throughout the letter.

In chapter 2, James started going into more detail on some of these topics. First, he taught that showing partiality to the rich was a sin because it was not loving the poor as ourselves. Then he talked about the difference between the law of works-righteousness and “the law of liberty” and why we should choose grace. In the last lesson, James circled back to the idea that faith without works is dead and use examples from the Old Testament to show us how. In this lesson, James will go into more detail talking about the dangers of the tongue and how difficult it is to control our tongues.

## **Week 9: James: The Tongue**

### **Book**

**Main Point:** A heart full of God's love will speak truth, love and blessing.

**James 3:1 and 1 Timothy 1:3–7; 3:1–7 [Read]**

**Talking Point 1:** Teachers will be judged more strictly by God.

**Q: Why might God judge teachers/leaders more strictly?**

**Q: What are the biblical standards for those who want to be in church leadership?**

This section of James (3:1–12) will be about our tongues, but James opens that discussion with this quick little one-liner about the higher standard to which the Lord holds teachers. It may seem somewhat out of place, like a sidenote, but it fits if you think about it. He is about to talk about one of the hardest things to do in the Christian life – keep control of your tongue. He even says it's impossible for *any* human being to tame the tongue. Yet he is still telling us to make every effort to do it. James was admitting that this is an impossibly high standard. But he says, Christians *are* held to a high standard – our standard is Christ Himself! We know we can't actually meet that standard this side of heaven, but Christ is the perfect standard which we are pursuing and pressing toward (Philippians 3:12–14; Hebrews 12:1–2). The standard is impossibly high, and James is opening this up by telling us that those who want to be a teacher will be held even more strictly to that impossible high standard than the people.

Why? Because people follow their leaders. It's very simple. Being in a position of authority in the Church is a huge responsibility because it can be so easy for you to lead a whole bunch of people astray, even by accident. So when you are a leader, you are not only responsible for your own theology and practice, you are responsible for all those who follow you. Not if they go astray from where you lead them, but if you lead them astray, you are responsible for it even more than they are. This is why it's so important for church leaders and teachers to study God's Word so carefully, to do our absolute best to handle God's Word correctly (2 Timothy 2:15).

In 2 Timothy, which was written near the end of his life, Paul described to Timothy how some who wanted to be teachers had swerved from sound doctrine into vain discussions of myths, genealogies and speculations, and making confident assertions about stuff they didn't really understand (1 Timothy 1:3–7). Have you ever met anyone like that? Someone who says things so confidently that you believe him or her, until one day something is said that you *know* isn't true from your own study or experience and

you realize this person doesn't really know what he is talking about, he just says everything very confidently. This happened often with people who wanted to be teachers of Scripture in the early church, and unfortunately it happens with some who want to be teachers and church leaders today.

This is why we have to be careful to check everything a teacher says by God's Word. Some people want to be in a leadership position, which comes from good intentions of wanting to help people come to know Jesus, but they're so excited to get started, they don't take the time to study God's Word and prepare for leadership first. Even the well-known evangelist Billy Graham said he wished he would have spent more time studying God's Word before teaching it to others – "One of my great regrets is that I have not studied enough. I wish I had studied more and preached less. People have pressured me into speaking to groups when I should have been studying and preparing. Donald Barnhouse said that if he knew the Lord was coming in three years, he would spend two of them studying and one preaching."<sup>3</sup>

Wanting to be a teacher of God's Word is a noble calling, and we are so thankful for those who want to do so. We're especially thankful for all those who have so graciously given their time as teachers at Prestonwood! We must take it seriously and realize what a huge responsibility it is. It's not something to get into lightly.

**Q: Share any experiences you have had with a really great teacher who handled God's Word correctly and opened your eyes to the truth of sound doctrine.**

**Q: How do Christians determine whether a lesson or sermon contains false doctrine?**

**Q: How can we support, encourage, appreciate, and pray for our teachers?**

**James 3:2–8 and Proverbs 18:21 [Read]**

**Talking Point 2:** The tongue is a small thing, but it can cause major damage or major healing.

**Q: Which one of the illustrations about taming the tongue found in these verses resonate most with you?**

**Q: How does controlling the tongue control the whole body?**

**Q: If no human being can tame the tongue, why should we even try?**

James opened this section by admitting that we all stumble in many ways – not one of us is perfect, even our teachers and church leaders. The use of the word "stumble" is intentional here. It gives the imagery of our walking along the right path, but

occasionally tripping and falling. This isn't willful disobedience or intentionally living in habitual sin. It's being honest about the fact that all of us, even those committed to following Jesus down the narrow path, make mistakes sometimes. Not just here and there, but "in many ways." It may feel discouraging to us that no matter how hard we try to follow Jesus, we find ourselves stumbling in many ways. But it should be encouraging to us to know that we are not alone – we *all* stumble in many ways.

James had already introduced this theme of bridling the tongue in chapter 1, when he said that anyone who thinks he is religious but doesn't bridle his tongue is deceiving himself. His religion is worthless (1:26). These are very strong words considering that in this chapter, James tells us that no human being can tame the tongue – it's impossible (3:8). James says that if anyone could control their tongue perfectly and never stumble in what he says, he would be a perfect man (3:2). But we know that no one who has ever lived has been perfect except Jesus. We all stumble in many ways. Yet, we still are called to do our best to bridle our tongue, not because it's the religious thing to do, but because of the damage it causes when we don't.

James used the illustration of a wildfire to talk about how damaging our tongue can be and how quickly it can cause damage, from even the tiniest little spark. Like the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, which started from a lantern that was knocked over in family's small barn, but eventually killed 300 people, destroyed 17,450 buildings, left a third of the city homeless, and caused more than \$4 billion (in today's value) worth of damage.<sup>4</sup> Just from one lantern. We may think that one small bit of gossip isn't a big deal, but gossip spreads like wildfire. It can get out of control so fast, and grow bigger and bigger each time it is repeated.

Proverbs tells us that the power of life and death are in the tongue. We can either speak life and healing over people or damage and death. Just like a fire – when it is contained in a fireplace, it can bring warmth, gives us light and a place to cook food. But when it gets out of control, it can destroy a whole city in just a day. We may think the negative or sarcastic comment we made wasn't a big deal, but we don't know the damage it could have caused. In the same way, we might not realize just how much healing, joy, confidence and self-worth a small positive comment can bring to someone's life.

James also used the illustration of a horse and a bridle and a boat and a rudder to tell his people that if they could just control their tongues, they could control their whole bodies. The tongue is so hard to control that if we can learn to control our lying, crude jokes, and unkind comments we will be able to control worry, lust, anger, etc. But as we said before, this is not done by our own power, by just trying harder. Self-control is a Fruit of the Spirit. It's something the Spirit grows in your life as you walk with Him and

abide in Christ. No human being can control his tongue, but the Spirit can. The key to self-control is abiding in Christ.

**Q: What are some ways to tell that you are taming your tongue (Hint: look at James 1:19)?**

**Q: In what situations is it hardest for you to control your tongue and why?**

**Q: How can we help each other to abide in Christ and walk by the Spirit every day?**

**James 3:9–12; Ephesians 4:25–32; Matthew 12:33–37 [Read]**

**Talking Point 3:** Only blessings should come from the mouths of believers.

**Q: What does the metaphor of the fresh spring water tell us about our mouths?**

**Q: What do our words reveal about us? Why does that matter?**

James used yet more illustrations to explain why believers should only speak blessings on other people, not curses. A spring does not pour out fresh and salt water and a fig tree doesn't produce olives. Those who have the Holy Spirit living inside them *should* only speak kindness and love because the Holy Spirit is only kindness and love. Yet, we have both the Spirit and the flesh battling against each other inside our hearts (Romans 7:17–23), so sometimes we speak blessing and sometimes we speak curses. We do not always do what we should do.

Jesus said that our mouths speak what is in our hearts. If our hearts are full of bitterness, anger and jealousy, that is what will naturally come out of our mouths. The way we speak about others reveals what is truly in our hearts. The way to control what comes out of our mouths is to focus on our hearts – filling our hearts with the love of God. When we are filled with God's love, we will love others the way He does. We will speak the way Jesus did. We will build other people up instead of tearing them down. We will speak grace, love, kindness, truth and blessing.

But James said that our mouths are a "restless evil." This word "restless" means unstable or inconsistent. The inconsistency is that with our mouths we bless God, but we curse people, who are made in the image of God. James explained it this way, emphasizing that people are made in the image of God, to show us that any time we curse people, we are actually cursing God Himself. This is inconsistent. We can't praise God and curse His image at the same time. Yet we do it all the time. We praise God in church and then gossip about the person in the next pew after the service is over. We

attack those we disagree with on social media with ridicule and even condemnation. We even speak of entire groups of people with disdain.

We can do this because we forget that human beings are made in the image of God. Even those who have not yet come to know Jesus and don't have the Spirit dwelling in them yet have inherent value because they are created in the image of God. Jesus said whatever you do to even the least of these, you do it to Me. Including when you call your brother-in-law an idiot or the person the person who cut you off in traffic evil. Because no matter how much you disagree with them or even dislike them, these are human beings made in His image.

James tells us this ought not to be so – we shouldn't curse human beings with the same mouth we bless God. If we love God, we shouldn't be cursing human beings *at all*. We should be building other people up. Always. Even if we disagree with someone, we can speak the truth in love in a way that builds up that person and honors him or her rather than tearing down and slandering that person (Ephesians 4:15,29). There are ways to disagree with someone respectfully. When we do it right, it is a healing, positive, growth experience, not a negative experience at all. As believers, every word that comes out of our mouths should be truthful and kind. Every word should build others up, not tear them down. Every word should speak the truth in love. Every word should be seasoned with grace (Colossians 4:6). Every word should come from a heart of love and a humble desire to help others grow to be more like Jesus, no other motivation.

**Q: Why are people in our culture so quick to speak “curses” over others?**

**Q: Describe a time in your life when you confronted someone by speaking the truth in love, seasoned with grace. How did you do it? What was the result?**

**Q: When have you had to take responsibility for not exercising control over your tongue? What happened? How did you restore that relationship?**

**Q: What difference would it make in our community if Christians always spoke the truth in love? How could we impact the world around us?**

## Week 9: James: The Tongue

### Took

**Main Point: A heart full of God's love will speak truth, love and blessing.**

As you prepare for this lesson, take time to prayerfully ask the Lord to bring to mind one or two individuals who could use an encouraging word. Reach out to them, whether through a call or text, to uplift their spirits. Without naming names, share how the Lord directed your tongue for good this week. Then, challenge your LifeGroup to follow suit, spreading encouragement with intentionality. In your closing prayer, ask the Lord to guide your conversations, that they may serve His glory and bring good to those on the receiving end.

### CHALLENGES

**THINK:** In what specific ways do you struggle to control your tongue? Is it gossip? Is it arguing with people and always needing to be right? Is it making sarcastic comments or saying hurtful things without realizing it? Or something else? Ask God to reveal to you ways that you sin with your words that you may not even realize. How can you grow in self-control when it comes to your words?

**PRAY** for the heart of God for other people. Pray for the vision to see them the way that God does, as precious children made in His image. Ask Him to help you control your tongue. Ask Him for supernatural wisdom and self-control when you feel the urge to say something hurtful or damaging and to give you words of healing, restoration and hope instead.

**ACT:** Bless someone. Choose one or two persons in your life this week who may need some extra blessing spoken over them. Speak words of healing and positive encouragement. Tell them why you love and respect them, how they have impacted your life, and/or what your hopes are for their future. Share words that will lift them up and help bring them closer to Jesus, even if it's a hard truth spoken in love, seasoned with grace.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/pet-insurance/pet-ownership-statistics/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.readersdigest.ca/home-garden/pets/untamable-animals/>

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Billy Graham, *Christianity Today* (Sept 23, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.history.com/articles/great-chicago-fire>