

SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

COFFEEHOUSE FIVE CHURCH

JAMES

TAMING THE TONGUE

JAMES 3:1-12

05/28/2017



MAIN POINT

We need to control our tongues so that we can build one another up, not hurt one another with gossip and slander.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What is “trash talk”? In what areas does it often take place?

What is the goal of “talking trash”? What effect does it have when used successfully?

“Trash talk” is a common part of competitive sports like football, basketball, or soccer. The goal is to get into the head of the other player and make it harder for him to focus on what he should be doing. But all words have power on and off the court or field. The way we use words reflects our heart and demonstrates what we believe to be true about other people and God.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 3:1-6.

According to James, what does the tongue reveal about our hearts and our minds?

The tongue says only what the mind tells it to say. What you say reveals what you are. Speech is like a thermometer; it shows a person’s spiritual temperature. Spiritual transformation produces transformed behavior. And transformed behavior involves new speech, speech that reflects the nature of the One who indwells believers. James said that the tongue has such great power to control that if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a mature man.

What do our words have to do with being a mature person?

The Greek word translated “mature” can mean perfection or being without error or flaw. The word also can mean “complete” in the sense of maturity. That’s how James used the word here. Believers can never be perfect as Jesus is perfect, including perfection in speech. However, they have a spiritual heart that expresses itself in honorable speaking and teaching. In other words, believers who are grown up spiritually control their tongues with God’s help. James went on to say that the Christian who controls his tongue is also able to control his whole body. The word “body” here likely refers to a person’s whole being. The point is that if we control our tongues, then controlling all

else follows. If God's Spirit has firm control of our tongues, which are so powerful, then the rest of our lives are more susceptible to His control as well. When the believer speaks God-glorifying, Christ-honoring words, the rest of his or her life is more spiritually healthy too.

How do rudders on ships and bits in horses' mouths relate to the tongue? What is James doing with this analogy?

How have you experienced your tongue making a big impact, either positively or negatively?

James used two analogies to emphasize the tongue's power to control. James said that speech is like small bits in the mouths of large and powerful horses. A horse obeys the rider's commands because of the bit in its mouth. With the bit attached to the bridle and to the reins, the rider makes the horse obey. Controlling the mouths of horses controls their heads, which gives the rider power to guide the whole animal. In a similar way, believers need their tongues to be in submission to God. Then everything else can follow in submission as well.

James also likened the control of speech to a small rudder that turns a large ship. Compared to the overall size of a ship, the rudder is small, yet has the power to steer the much larger vessel wherever the will of the pilot directs. Like the bit in the horse's mouth and the rudder on a great sea-going vessel, the tongue has great power to control the rest of the body.

Describe the dangers that our tongues can get ourselves in.

How can our tongues lead us to do good things?

In verses 5-6, James focused on the tongue's great power to corrupt and to destroy. The tongue's power is pervasive; whatever subject the tongue speaks about can be perverted and destroyed. Just as a match can set ablaze a whole forest, so the tongue can cause great harm.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 3:7-12.

Why do you think James considered the tongue uncontrollable by our strength alone?

What does it look like to turn to God for the controlling of our tongues?

James' point in verses 7-8 is that the human tongue is uncontrollable without God's help. As James put it, no man in his own power can tame the tongue. The tongue is undisciplined and savage. It wars against every effort to gain control over it.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What ways can the tongue be used to hurt or curse others?

How can the tongue be used to help others?

Under what circumstances are you most likely to let your tongue harm yourself or others?

Do you need to use your speech in a positive way in order to reconcile with someone you spoke harshly against? Make the effort to reconcile with that person today.

PRAY

Spend some time in prayer, reflecting on the truths of this passage and how you have experienced the dangers of the tongue. Ask God to help us control and tame our words so that we can bless Him and build one another up.

COMMENTARY

3:1. James was deeply concerned about sins of speech. He referred to them previously in the book and will do so again. Evidently, there were many believers who wanted to teach, but not all were qualified or equipped. Some selfishly may have wanted the prestige, recognition, and honor the teacher's role afforded. James warned against allowing believers to become teachers simply because they wanted such a position. He knew they first needed a firm grasp of the gospel's contents and applications for living.

3:2-3. His words apply specifically to teachers, but also generally to all Christians. He declared all believers stumble. Note he included himself. The Greek word translated "stumble" means "to make a false step," thus "to commit error." It can have the stronger ideas of offending or transgressing. Here it has the sense of sinning or failing in speech. "In many ways" means "often" or "many times." James declared that a person who can continuously avoid sinning in speech is a mature man. Being careful in what we say and in how we express ourselves shows we are maturing as believers. In verse 3 James moved to the first of three illustrations that stress the power of speech. The bits enable riders to guide the whole animal. James's point is that small bits could control large, powerful animals. Bits have power out of proportion to their size.

3:4-6. James next used ships that were very large to present the disparity between size and power. When huge ships encounter a storm and are driven by fierce ("stiff," "harsh") winds, the ships' pilots use very small rudders to guide the vessels in the desired direction. The tongue is a small part of the body but has tremendous power and influence of speech—for good or bad. James pointed out a small fire could start a raging inferno that engulfs a huge forest. In the same way, uncontrolled speech can be almost unlimitedly destructive. The Greek word translated "corrupts" means "stains" or "soils" and has the further sense of contaminating. The tense conveys continuous action: Uncontrolled speech goes on contaminating the whole body—the total personality. Also, such speech sets the course of life on fire. The phrase "the course of life" (literally, "the wheel of life") likely refers to a person's span of life from birth to death. Uncontrolled speech cuts a path of destruction throughout a person's entire lifetime.

3:7-8. Though humans have tamed or domesticated all kinds of creatures, we still have trouble taming the tongue. James described the tongue as a restless evil. "Restless" conveys the sense of instability. It has the idea of impulsiveness, unpredictability, and inconsistency. Though not evil in itself, the tongue (or our speech) is capable of great evil (see v. 6). In fact, it can be death-dealing. "Deadly" literally is "death-bringing." Poisonous speech strikes with venom comparable to that of the world's deadliest viper.

3:9-12. James presented a devastating contradiction to emphasize believers' deadly misuse of speech. Christians continuously verbalize praise to God, who is Lord and Heavenly Father. The Greek term for "praise" gives us our word eulogy—"a good word." James's scathing indictment is that believers turn from the highest use of speech—praising God—to the lowest—cursing people. In verse 11, James drove home the necessity of believers' maintaining consistency of speech. His first illustration from nature concerned water, a precious commodity. A spring gushing out of a fissure in the earth does not produce both sweet and bitter water, does it? His second illustration concerns food-producing plants. These plants produce after their kind, do they not? Fig trees produce figs, never olives. Grapevines produce grapes, never figs. As a third illustration, James returned to the subject of water. A spring produces one kind of water. A saltwater spring, such as those in the Dead Sea area, could not yield fresh water—always at a premium in the promised land. James focused on nature's consistency to emphasize that believers' speech needs to be consistent with their new nature in Christ and not inconsistent with it.