

TAMING THE TONGUE

LESSON SCRIPTURE: JAMES 3:1-12

FOCUS SCRIPTURE: JAMES 3:1-12

Key Verses: *From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. James 3:10*

James 3:1-12 (NRSV)

9 “Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

2 For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.

3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies.

4 Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!

6 And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our

members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.

7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,

8 but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?

12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

VOCABULARY

- **Bridle** – A device used to control or restrain animals.
- **Bits** – A part of a bridle consisting of a metal mouthpiece held in a horse’s mouth to control the horse.
- **Iniquity** – Great injustice or extreme immorality.
- **Tame** – To subdue.
- **Cursing** – Uttering profanity or blasphemy.
- **Blessing** – Approval or good wishes.

INTRODUCTION

“**T**ony, our summer vacation time went really fast. I can’t believe we have to go back to school on Monday.” Carla sighed as she spoke with her friend on the phone.

“I know. It did go quickly. I wish there was some way for us to delay going back. It’s still warm outside and I don’t want to be stuck in a hot classroom,” Tony replied.

“Maybe they will delay opening because of the heat. Nobody wants to be sweating on their books, messing up the pages.” They both laughed.

“I got a better idea. Somebody should call in a threat to the school. They definitely will close the school at least until the person is caught.”

“Tony, that’s crazy! I’d rather go to school than prison. Look, I’ll see you tomorrow on the school bus. Do not be late! Bye!” Carla ended the phone call.

The following morning as Carla and her siblings were getting ready for school their father came upstairs. “You can stop getting ready for school. Somebody sent a message to the school district promising to hurt students. School is cancelled until the person who sent the threat is arrested.”

Carla stood with her mouth open in disbelief. “Dad, I think I know who did it. Tony was talking about it last night. I thought he was joking.”

“Calling in threats to a school is no joking matter. Tony will not be laughing after they arrest him. Okay, let’s go downstairs and call the police.” After notifying the police, they investigated and Tony was arrested.

How did a joke turn into a serious matter? How can our words hurt others? Why is it important to use our words carefully? In today’s lesson, James teaches us the importance of controlling our tongues.

Bible Story

James understood the power of the tongue. We have to control what we say. Our tongues can wield the power to do good or bad. James warns against rushing to become a teacher. Teaching was considered to be a highly valued profession in Jewish culture and many Jewish Christians desired to be teachers. Teachers exhibit great influence on the lives of others. The job of teaching comes with tremendous responsibility. James’ warned that those who teach will be judged more strictly (v. 3:1).

The tongue is the hardest to keep under control. James stresses we all say the wrong things at times (v. 3:2). We sometimes gossip, brag, manipulate others, complain, tell lies, etc. If someone does not do such things, they are spiritually strong and able to control their body like a horse is controlled by a bit. Moreover, James uses three illustrations to show how some small things can take control: 1) the horse’s bit; 2) the ship’s rudder; and 3) the spark of igniting fire (vs. 3:3-4).

Just like an uncontrolled fire, our tongue is powerful and can cause great destruction. No one can tame the tongue (v. 3:8). But this does not mean we cannot learn enough control

to reduce the damage the tongue can do. We can ask the Holy Spirit to give us the strength to monitor and control what we say. Our speech should not contradict who we confess to be as Christians.

How can we use our tongues to bless and praise God, and then curse people who are made in God's likeness (v. 3:9; Genesis 1:26; 1 John 4:20)? This should not be happening. James shows how inconsistent this is by illustrations from nature: 1) Fresh and salty water cannot come from the same spring; 2) A fig tree does not produce olives; 3) A grapevine does not produce figs; and 4) Saltwater does not produce fresh water (vs. 3:11-12). But the tongue is always doing what is contrary to nature.

LIFE APPLICATION

“**S**ticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why? Why not?



Our words have the power to encourage and destroy people. In the speech bubbles below, on the left, write words that can destroy and on the right, write words that encourage. Discuss the most recent conversation with someone (friend, family, enemy). What words did you use?

We all have the power to encourage others. In your spare

time, take a piece of construction paper and fold it in half. On the outside of the card draw a picture or cut out a picture from a magazine to paste on the cover. Write encouraging words on the inside. Give the card to someone who needs to be encouraged.

SUMMARY

Our tongues have great power. We have to make a decision to use our words wisely. That can be difficult, so we can ask the Holy Spirit for help. We have to think before we speak. When we wisely chose our words, God can use us to help others be encouraged, transformed, and healed.

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for this day. Please give me wisdom to use my words to build up others. I ask you to forgive me for hurting people with my words. Today I promise to try to do better. Amen.

Closing Hymn: "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam" (#556 - *AME Church Hymnal*)