

February 11
Lesson 11 (NIV)

A DISCIPLINED

FAITH

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 34:1-14

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 3:12

JAMES 3:1-12

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ² We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

³ When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵ Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.



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KEY VERSE

But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.—James 3:8

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List James's metaphors about speech.
2. Explain one or more of those metaphors in light of a personal experience.
3. Identify a specific problem in his or her life regarding harmful speech and write a prayer for God's help in correcting it.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Chemistry, Character, or Something Else?
- B. Lesson Background

I. Lack of Control (JAMES 3:1-5a)

- A. Issue of Qualification (vv. 1, 2)

B. Issue of Relative Size (vv. 3-5a)

Weighing Our Words

II. Result of Failure (JAMES 3:5B-8)

A. It Burns (vv. 5b, 6)

Open Mouth, Insert Foot

B. It Poisons (vv. 7, 8)

III. Lack of Consistency (JAMES 3:9-12)

A. Problem Observed (vv. 9, 10)

B. Problem Illustrated (vv. 11, 12)

Conclusion

A. Think Twice Before Hitting “Send”

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Chemistry, Character, or Something Else?

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, more and more advocates of the “It’s not your character; it’s your chemistry” school of thought have emerged. This is the next round of the old “nurture vs. nature” debate, also known as “environment vs. heredity.” The question is why we behave as we do. One side says behavior is learned (this is the character/nurture/environment side). The other says behavior is hardwired from birth (this is the chemistry/nature/heredity side).

This issue has profound implications. For example, researchers on the chemistry side of the debate argue that most addictions are caused by a deficiency in dopamine, a natural “feel-good” brain chemical. Therefore the preferred treatment, they say, is to change one’s chemistry rather than build one’s character.

The issue is complicated, and there is evidence for each position in various contexts. But the idea that behavioral issues do not stem from a lack of learned self-control tends to lessen responsibility for doing or saying what we should not. But James points to another, deeper cause.

B. Lesson Background

The background to last week’s lesson applies to this one as well, so that information need not be repeated here. But since today’s lesson draws heavily on figures of speech, some background information in that regard is in order.

Figures of speech add interest and excitement to writing, and chief among these are metaphors. A metaphor takes an idea and imposes it on an unrelated but familiar idea to help explain the qualities of the original. An example from the ancient world is the assertion “Achilles is a lion.” This does not mean the Greek hero literally had a shaggy reddish-orange mane, sharp claws, large teeth and walked on all fours. It means, rather, that Achilles was a brave, courageous warrior in battle.

Metaphors abound in our speech, so much so that we don’t always notice them. Rather than refer to a particular car’s color as “gray,” we might say it is “battleship gray.” This does not mean the car has any of the size or armament of a warship. The use of the word *battleship* as a metaphor for a shade of gray helps us visualize how the car appears: it is neither nearly black nor nearly white (two possibilities for gray). An emotional element is also present, as *battleship gray* suggests drabness.

James uses a variety of word pictures, including metaphor. These are drawn from life experiences shared with his readers. This style of writing is vivid, and James chose his figurative language carefully to help the readers better understand the urgency and importance of his topic.

I. Lack of Control

(JAMES 3:1-5A)

A. Issue of Qualification (vv. 1, 2)

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

James is addressing the topic of teachers. With the use of *we* he includes himself in this group.

James warns that the role of teacher should be considered soberly, because teachers are under great scrutiny. We see the importance of the words *more strictly* when we realize that teachers’ thoughts and ideas are made public. Good teachers are not simply relayers of correct information, they are also interpreters (compare [Titus 1:10-2:1](#); regarding degrees of judgment, see [Luke 12:47, 48](#); [20:47](#)).

Teachers in the first-century church had two primary responsibilities. First, they were to teach the fundamentals of the Christian faith ([Jude 3](#)); these were truths they had learned from other teachers ([2 Timothy 2:2](#)). Second, they were to interpret the Old Testament Scriptures from a Christian perspective ([Acts 17:2](#)). Since James wrote in a time when teachers did not have all the New Testament (because not all its books were yet written and compiled), the teaching function was especially subject to error and misinterpretation.

HOW TO SAY IT

Achilles Uh-kih-leez.

Corinthians Ko-rin-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

Ecclesiastes Ik-leez-ee-as-teez.

Gehenna Geh-hen-uh (*G* as in *get*).

Molek Mo-leck.

The teaching function in the church today is easier in one sense: we have the completed New Testament. But the era of the Information Age makes the teaching

function more difficult in another sense: faster communication means faster communication of error and ridicule. That fact may tempt us to embrace an old saying attributed to Abraham Lincoln: “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.”

This humorous but cynical view should not intimidate Christian teachers into silence. The church needs the spiritually mature to open their mouths and impart godly teaching and wisdom to others. But be forewarned: you will be judged by God.

² We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

The word *stumble* gives us a word picture of careless use of the tongue (*in what they say*). The phrase *we all stumble* means all of us make the mistake of using speech that offends. The person who is never guilty of verbal miscues does not exist. The hypothetical person who achieves perfection in speech would, by extension, be able to control every aspect of his or her life. That is, he or she is able to *keep their whole body in check*. The Greek verb used here also occurs in [James 1:26](#), where it is translated “keep a tight rein on.” The following verse develops this idea.

B. Issue of Relative Size (vv. 3-5a)

³ When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.

A bridle usually includes a bit, a metal device inserted into the mouth of a horse. The bit results in uncomfortable pressure, causing the horse to respond to the pressure of the reins attached to the bridle. If the rider pulls back on both reins, the horse will slow until the pressure from the reins is released. If the rider pulls the right rein, the trained horse will turn right until the pressure from the bit is relieved.

This is an amazing thing for James, that a metal bit that fits in one’s hand can control such a large animal! The analogy is how the human tongue (the symbol of speech for James) has an influence out of proportion to its size.

⁴ Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.

The next metaphor is drawn from the world of sailing ships. Such vessels may be large and strong, able to withstand the pressure of mighty winds. Despite this bulk, the ship can be turned by a *very small rudder*. This steering mechanism of ancient ships is something like a large oar fastened to the side of a ship. If the end of the steering oar is pushed to the right by the *pilot* (helmsman), the ship goes to the right and vice versa.

Like the bridle and bit illustration, the point is that a small device can turn a mighty ship. With the tiny tongue, a small lapse in judgment that is spoken can have an enormous influence on one’s life or the lives of others.

WEIGHING OUR WORDS

One trip to the pediatrician involved my daughter at the tender age of 13. Girls at that age think a lot about appearance, a problematic issue in the development of self-image. Because of a rapid growth spurt that year, it seemed that every bit of food my daughter ate went to getting taller. As a result, she appeared almost skeletal.

At one point in the exam, the doctor said to her, “Your weight is much higher than most girls your age.” As the doctor paused, my daughter looked at me with large eyes.

Dismayed that the doctor would say something that would be taken so wrong by a teenage girl, I exclaimed, “Yes, but that’s because she is much taller than most girls her age. Look at her! She’s so thin, she almost looks unhealthy!”

“Oh yes, of course. I was going to say that,” the doctor added. Unfortunately, the damage was done. For several months after that, my daughter asked me if she really was overweight like the doctor said, and she examined herself daily for extra pounds. We might say that the pediatrician’s words carried weight.

What we say can affect others for months or years to come. That’s just as true today as it was in the first century AD.

—L. M. W.

^{5a} Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

James personifies *the tongue* as a pint-size fellow who makes boasts far out of proportion to his size (compare [Psalm 73:8, 9](#)). But we know it is not a little muscle in the mouth that is making ill-advised boasts, it is the person who owns this tongue. The tongue is only a tool for boasting; vain claims of glory start in a person’s heart and mind.

What Do You Think?

What safeguards can we adopt to protect friendships from the negative effects of boasting?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In terms of attitudes

In terms of prayer

In distinguishing between godly and ungodly boasting ([2 Corinthians 10:12-18](#); etc.)

Considering the warning of [Psalm 12:3, 4](#)

II. Result of Failure

([JAMES 3:5B-8](#))

A. It Burns (vv. 5b, 6)

^{5b} Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

James moves to another metaphor: the phenomenon of *fire*. Big fires start as small fires. We know that a single spark can result in a fire that burns down a *great forest*. Likewise, a few unwise words spoken carelessly can cause permanent, life-changing damage. Reputations—either those of the ones speaking or those of the ones being spoken about—can be ruined. Most of us have had the experience of changing our opinion of someone after hearing unwise words spoken in an unguarded moment. “The words of the reckless pierce like swords” ([Proverbs 12:18](#)).

What Do You Think?

How do (or should) methods of reconciliation change, if at all, after damage caused by the tongue becomes enormous?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In the workplace
- In family life
- In the church
- Other

6. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

What is implied in the previous verse is explicit here: the uncontrolled tongue not only causes widespread external damage, it also ends up being suicidal. James pictures this self-destruction as being a *life on fire*, a life that is fueled as though *set on fire by hell*. The word *hell* translates the Greek word *Gehenna*, which itself derives from the Old Testament's *Hinnom*. This is the name of a valley used to burn garbage in James's day; it is located just south of Jerusalem.

Traced further back, this valley gained a terrible reputation because of babies burned there in sacrifice to the false god Molek (see [2 Kings 23:10](#); [Jeremiah 32:35](#)). It was seen as a place of fire, and *Gehenna* becomes a metaphor for the eternal fire of the last judgment, the implication here. The person who ignores the need to maintain control over his or her speech is risking eternity. This is serious business.

We should stress before moving on that James's figurative, metaphorical use of *Gehenna* is much stronger than a literalistic understanding would be. The latter sense would see *Gehenna* as referring only to the valley outside Jerusalem, not to the place of eternal destruction into which both body and soul can be cast ([Matthew 10:28](#)).

OPEN MOUTH, INSERT FOOT

I was about 17 when it happened. I had known my friend Leah (name changed) my whole life. We had done many things together, and I considered her one of my best friends.

In youth group one night, Leah wanted to know how it was possible for people who had been married for 20 years suddenly to claim they had "fallen out of love." In youthful overconfidence I smugly replied, "They must not have been in love to start with, because people don't just fall out of love. Love is a commitment." I remember Leah's hurt expression, and I saw one of the leaders take her aside afterward to talk. I wondered what was up.

A few weeks later, I found out that her parents were divorcing after 20 years of marriage. Recalling my unsympathetic words, I felt terrible. I apologized to her right away; she forgave me and graciously acknowledged that I didn't know what was going on. Even so, my arrogant words must have stung.

Leah and I grew apart after that, in part because of what I had said. As James says, "The tongue . . . is a fire." It can incinerate relationships.

—L. M. W.

B. It Poisons (vv. 7, 8)

7. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind,

James now begins a comparison from another setting: that of humanity's taming of various creatures. He divides these into four categories: land *animals*, *birds*, *reptiles* and *sea creatures*. By *tamed* James does not mean that humans have made pets or farm animals out of all these creatures (compare [Job 41:1-5](#)). The idea of taming is closer to the command of [Genesis 1:28](#) for humankind to "rule over" all creatures. In blunt terms, this means there is no creature that humans have not been able to conquer and kill. Humans exercise dominion over all earthly creatures, whether for good or bad.

8. but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Animals can be tamed, but can the tongue? No one truly brings his or her tongue into full submission. As we ponder this, we should be careful not to take this verse out of context. It would be wrong to conclude, "James says no one can tame the tongue, so why even try? It is a futile waste of time." Those who accept that argument should read the previous verses again. Although no one is able to keep his or her tongue perfectly controlled, we must make the effort since uncontrolled speech destroys. James's word-picture of *deadly poison* brings to mind [Psalm 140:3](#): "[Violent men] make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's; the poison of vipers is on their lips" (compare [Romans 3:13](#)).

What Do You Think?

What counsel would you offer someone who is looking for help to tame his or her tongue?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In terms of spiritual disciplines to practice
- In terms of friendships to cultivate and avoid
- In terms of biblically sound resources
- Other

III. Lack of Consistency

([JAMES 3:9-12](#))

A. Problem Observed (vv. 9, 10)

9, 10. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

Having used many comparisons to show the destructive power of the tongue, James now turns to the paradoxical nature of much of our speech. We have only one mouth, and we use it both to *praise* God and to *curse* others. This makes no sense! It makes sense to use our tongues to praise God. But after doing so, why would we then use *the same mouth* to curse people, who are *made in God's likeness* ([Genesis 1:26, 27; 5:1; 9:6](#))? Because of that likeness, cursing people is perilously close to cursing God himself!

We might apply this to a modern situation this way: How can we use the same social media both to post messages of witness for Christ and personal attacks against those who rub us the wrong way? The bottom line is that we cannot successfully live this double life. Mouths that easily bless God should also offer godly and encouraging words to others. We must have consistency in our speech and let it be controlled by the impulse to use our words to praise and bless the Lord.

What Do You Think?

What specific steps can we take to uphold the image of God in others when we're tempted to vilify them instead?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding those of differing political views
- Regarding those of differing doctrinal views
- Regarding those who have vilified us
- Other

B. Problem Illustrated (vv. 11, 12)

11, 12. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

James ends this section with a flurry of word pictures. These illustrate the inconsistency of praising God and then abusing others with the same mouth. In this, he continues the lessons of the creation account in [Genesis 1](#). There, the author notes the nature of created plant life to be that everything reproduces according to its kind ([1:11, 12](#)). The fruit a plant bears reveals its inner nature, since fig trees do not produce olives and grapevines do not produce figs.

We have no trouble whatsoever declaring what is and is not an olive tree, what is and is not a grapevine, etc. The reason we have no problem in this regard is that we know for certain that this morning's olive tree will not become this afternoon's grapevine. But we humans do something directly contrary to this model when we hear a person praising God on Sunday, and then cursing his boss and coworkers on Monday. What is that person's true nature?

The illogic of this inconsistency is reinforced by the bookends that begin [verse 11](#) and conclude [verse 12](#): comparisons with the quality of spring water. In James's territory, the area around Jerusalem, springs or natural fountains of water are highly prized, for they provide a year-round water supply. Not all springs are of the same quality, though. Some are brackish or salty; others are fresh. But the quality at any given location does not change minute to minute. A salty spring consistently yields a brackish, unsatisfying product; the fresh spring consistently produces potable water. Our speech should be like the latter, not only in its refreshing nature, but also consistently so.

The logic of James's argument is airtight: we must not settle for mixed patterns of good and evil in our talk. Speak well of others. Speak consistently well. This will improve relationships in the church. It will also encourage your own heart and spirit.

What Do You Think?

How do you go about using your tongue in a way that you would want others to emulate?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- When around unbelievers
- When around fellow believers

Conclusion

A. Think Twice Before Hitting "Send"

At the beginning of my ministry, a wise associate and friend told me that when I wanted to unload on someone verbally out of frustration, I should write that person a letter. Then I should put the letter in my desk for several days. After that, it would be best to destroy the letter and move on. In my hotheaded youthful days, I actually did this several times. To put it as a double negative, I have never regretted not sending those hurtful letters!

Today I am more likely to rehearse a conversation I want to have with a thorn-in-the-flesh person I think I need to confront. These conversations often happen in my car as I drive alone. They are often quite loud and intense, but once I have said my piece to my ever-listening automobile, I am done and can move on. I'm not sure if James would fully approve of either practice, but they have often kept my tongue from uttering hurtful and malicious words.



Sheet 6—Winter 2017, *Adult Resources*, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum

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Visual for Lesson 11. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, “How have you found this to be true personally?”

Social media postings cause great problems for many today. Hot-tempered messages result in lost jobs and irreconcilable breaches in relationships. An often repeated word of advice is “think twice before you hit ‘send.’” When you rethink the fiery, flaming posting, think strongly about hitting “delete” instead of “send.” You may be controlling your fingers rather than your tongue, but I think James would approve.

On a scale from 1 to 10, how do you rate on how well you have tamed your tongue? This further counsel from wise Solomon may help:

Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. (Ecclesiastes 5:2).

We will never regret harsh or hurtful words if they are never spoken.

B. Prayer

Father, we claim you as Lord of our lives, but too often we withhold one area from your control. We have hurt others, disappointed you, and embarrassed

ourselves in our speech. Give us the strength and wisdom to control our tongues so that you are pleased with every word we say, type, or text. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Problems of the tongue are
problems of the heart.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

As class begins, ask learners to participate in a short game of Simon Says. After a few rounds, say, "This is a simple children's game, but we know that doing the right thing is not always so easy. In real life, self-control gets a little trickier."

Ask volunteers to share examples of things they might have a hard time making themselves do. (Possible responses: *housework, exercise, etc.*) Be prepared with an example or two of your own. Then ask volunteers to share examples of things they might have a hard time resisting. (Possible responses: *unhealthy foods, certain luxury expenses, etc.*)

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "What's Your Excuse?" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually or in small groups.

Follow either exercise by saying, "We usually want to do right, but far too often we do or say what we should not. Does the problem lie more in the area of failing to learn self-control, or is it more an issue of how we're 'wired'?" Use this discussion and the lesson Introduction as a transition.

Into the Word

Divide the class into three groups, giving each group pen and paper and one of the writing assignments below. Groups are to read their assigned portions of today's text and answer questions as they believe James would. Do not distribute the anticipated responses, which are in italics.

Group 1—James 3:1-5a

Dear James: I want to serve the Lord as a teacher. I really have my life together and would be a great Christian leader. What do you think?

Be careful! Presenting yourself as a perfect person is an invitation for others to point out where you are not. A perfect person has perfectly controlled behavior. Let's look at behavior that only you can control—your speech. I have yet to meet anyone who is not tripped up by his or her own words now and then.

Group 2—James 3:5b-8

Dear James: My life slogan is "Sticks and stones can break bones, but words will never hurt me." Not bad, huh?

Not bad—TERRIBLE! Words poison relationships, topple governments, and destroy people from the inside out. History is often witness to the fact that it is words that lead to "sticks and stones."

Group 3—James 3:9-12

Dear James: I love Jesus through and through, but people at work don't get it. How can I get them to see the real me?

Maybe they ARE seeing the real you! Think about it. How much "Jesus talk" does it take to counteract those angry words to a colleague or that bit of gossip you passed along? Just as an apple tree can only produce apples, the one controlled by the Spirit does not spew ungodly words. Concentrate on who controls you, not on how good you think you are!

Allow groups to report after they have completed their responses.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Control" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Allow learners several minutes to work in groups of two or three. Then invite volunteers to share their discoveries, jotting findings on the board.

Into Life

Write this question on the board:

Where should we start in our attempts to control our tongues as God would have us?

After a few minutes of small-group discussion, ask volunteers to share thoughts with the class. (Primary response you are after: *problems with the tongue begin in the heart.*)

Close by saying, "As James says, no one is capable of controlling his or her words perfectly. But that's still the goal to shoot for." Close with the prayer on page 207.