

# Taming the Tongue

You can count on James to tell the truth. This is not a contrast between “absolute truth” and “alternate truth.”



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This is a truth that shapes our daily living and clashes with all the twisted methods and self-serving phrases we so often use to win an argument or put others in their place. This short epistle focuses on the practical side of faith in Christ, how we are to live in this world of conflicts.

The great German reformer, Martin Luther, rejected James as an “epistle of straw” because it does not focus on the evangelical gospel. If we value the Apostle Paul as a great missionary and master of theological exposition, we may also value James as the teacher who always calls us back to the power of living out the teachings of Jesus. James 2:18 challenges all believers: “But someone may say, ‘You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works’” (NASV). James is a practical theologian.

Today’s text focuses on the potential disaster the human tongue can create when a Christian fails to temper his/her words with the grace of God and the guidance of God’s Spirit. Why does James focus on the tongue as “set on fire by the flames of hell” (v. 6)? Had arguments between Jewish and Gentile converts to Christ in the Jerusalem church threatened their witness to the world? Were there angry debates and accusations building walls that drove some away? Did James fear the life-changing power of the gospel would be reduced to theological arguments and power struggles in which the miracle of the cross and resurrection would be buried? James has a critical message for our day if we who consider ourselves the modern church desire to communicate God’s gift of life.

Commentator Wayne Proctor breaks this text into four clear points:

1. Teachers will be judged more strictly, so they must think carefully and measure their words

2. Although the tongue can be a powerful tool for truth, it can easily turn to a weapon of devastation

3. The tongue is a “restless evil” (v. 8) that can cause irretrievable damage to others

4. Believers in Jesus Christ should speak words that are consistent with the words and actions of our Savior

James, leader of the Jerusalem church and respected teacher, had seen the change Jesus made in the life of the Apostle Paul, in Simon Peter’s support for Gentiles’ full membership in the church, and in the spread of the gospel to the other provinces of the Roman Empire. He recognizes the power of spoken words, backed by a pure heart. James points out that a powerful horse can be controlled by a simple bridle and bit. A large ship can be steered by one man controlling the rudder, delivering the valuable cargo to the right destination. A flaming fire may start as a small spark, but it contains the power of hell to destroy a life, marriage, future and even nations. His images are as large as the danger of the tongue.

Of all the body parts, James says the tongue is the hardest to control. People can manage and tame every kind of wild animal, but the human tongue is a “restless evil, full of deadly poison” (v. 8).

Then James confronts our failure to control our words, to speak responsibly. He uses the obvious difference between salt water and fresh, noting both cannot pour out of the same spring; yet some Christians can speak graciously one moment and then turn to ugly, vindictive and embarrassing words in the next moment.

He also points to the simple idea that a Christian using shameful or ugly language in regard to others should be as uncharacteristic as expecting an olive tree to produce grapes. Jesus compared the Christian life to a grapevine and its branches (John 15:1-8). Without the vine (Christ), the branches (followers) cannot live or bear any fruit. A believer’s words must be shaped by the vital faith connection to our Savior.

All of these comparisons point to the basic truth that those who profess faith in Christ must live and speak out of

## Formations

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Scripture: James 3:1-12

that faith. Words have little value if they violate our Savior’s example and are not shaped by God’s love and grace. This brings us face to face with the past year of political campaigning and the present moral climate of the United States. The idea of what it means to be a Christian or believe in God has been twisted and supplanted by so many conflicting words that the truth of God is often missing. What is “alternate truth”? When does a lie become the truth simply because someone says it is? Is it acceptable to claim to believe in God while committing character assassination? Is it Christ-like to describe your opponents as less than human, liars, thieves, murderers, rapists? Is racism Christian?

Tragically, these hateful words have not come from a few political figures but from various people and groups across our country, even from some who profess to be “Christian” leaders. I understand that politics is a harsh arena and that in our country we protect free speech. But if the church or those who profess to be God’s redeemed people choose not to live by the words or example of Jesus, then we shame God and we dishonor the One who died on the cross for us.

The Epistle of James has always been a tough read! We blanket our world as never before with televisions, computers and cell phones. We all have the power to say whatever we please to the world. Every day I begin by clearing my “gadgets” of unwanted advertisements, pornographic ideas, offensive videos and political promotions. The human tongue is no longer a “small flame of fire,” it is a raging conflagration that seeks to consume us all. Each of us must choose daily to measure our words, speak the hope of God’s love, offer a different way of thinking and live out the grace of God. Taming the tongue means controlling your thoughts and your living.

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