

# Explore the Bible: With Control

October 24, 2018

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Nov. 11 focuses on James 3:1-12.*

While discussing Christian maturity, nothing will likely “sting” each believer more consistently than this teaching on speech. The topic of quality and transformed speech is neither a favorite table conversation, nor a well-practiced standard. *Why is this a touchy subject?*

We read the summary statement (“Believers demonstrate godly maturity by controlling their speech.”), and retort with an inquisitive: “Oh really? Do they? I haven’t seen that.” It is clear that Christians need to see James’ teaching as more than an ideal; it is an imperative expectation.

In James 2, we are told faith and action are meant to prove one another. In this discussion, James does not address the work of the hands, but the words of the mouth. *Why does James first address taming the tongue? Are words really actions that prove our faith?*

## When Teaching the Truth (James 3:1-2)

In dissecting this “taming the tongue” section, it would seem we are only discussing a portion of the Christianity community, because not all Christians are teachers. This is only partially true because it is an example of the impact of words. The teacher’s main instrument is his or her words, and those words form and direct pupils and listeners. So, literally all—teachers and students—are impacted.

Since it is mostly teachers who are reading this commentary aid, you need

to realize this is speaking to each of you. Because you are in a teaching role, God will hold you to a higher accountability for your words. *Why is this?* You are influencing others. When your influence misdirects people from God, God will judge you for that.

*Should this cause a tremor of fear in the teacher?* Yes, in both the sense of “scared” and in terms of “awe and respect.” Consider Matthew 18:1-7 and how causing people (especially children) to stumble results in harsh judgment. We should be careful that our words are directed by God’s words, not our own.

## **When Influencing Others (James 3:3-6)**

As a group, discuss varying examples of the impact of something so small, such as the tongue. This is where James’s creativity as a teacher stands out, showing his exhaustive desire for the reader to grasp this powerful point. Your little tongue is capable of so much.

This returns us to an understanding of the teacher’s role: “It is the captain who steers the ship with the rudder. Likewise, it is the teacher who influences the student through what they teach” (Jim Samra, *James, 1 & 2 Peter, and Jude*, 39). *Ask your group to recall memorable things their teachers said. Why do they remember certain statements? How did those statements shape them?*

Consider the influence of speeches. George W. Bush is remembered for saying, “I can hear you; the rest of the world can hear you,” when he visited the site of the 9/11 massacre. Martin Luther King Jr. is known for his “I have a dream” speech. These are positive examples. With the same power, consider Adolf Hitler’s statement, “If you tell a big enough lie and tell it frequently enough, it will be believed.” For good and for bad, words are fully capable of being influential.

# When Offering Praise (James 3:7-12)

Verses 7-8 focus on the fallen reality of the human tongue. Even more, the fallen reality of the human tongue is tied directly to the fallen nature of the human heart. Compare James 3:8 to Jeremiah 9:8 and 17:9. *How does an untamed heart direct an untamed tongue? Why is it that creatures can be tamed, but one part of the human body cannot be tamed?*

In parable language, verses 10-12 illustrate the silly hypocrisy of the Christian's mouth to prove a point: it makes no sense to use a part of your body for *both* praise and cursing. This is essentially "talking from both sides of your mouth," which is neither acceptable nor appreciated.

There also is a deeper element to notice in the comparison of praising God and cursing humans. To curse the image bearers of God is also to curse God, just as loving your neighbor and loving God are the same. *Why do we try to justify cursing people?* Be sure to point out the object of your improper words is not the issue; rather, it is that you would ever justify using improper words. This simply does not reflect maturity.

## Conclusion

As a closing exercise, consider reading Ephesians 4:29-32, discussing it as a reinforcement to today's text. *How do we guard our words and tame our tongues? How does God react to our misuse of the words he created for us to use? What do kindness, compassion, and forgiveness have to do with taming the tongue?*

James clearly responded to the verbal actions of our fallen tongues by saying, "My brothers and sisters, this should not be." We should not justify or allow our tongues to be immature. Instead, we should seek to only glorify God and edify others with our words.

An interesting point relating the heart to the tongue comes from my personal experience with sleep apnea. My doctor pointed out to me that when the fetus develops, his or her tongue muscle grows upward out of the heart itself, which is a neat physical connector to our spiritual lesson. Our words grow up out of our heart, so to change our tongue, we have to change our hearts.

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