

LifeWay Bible Studies for Life Series for November 22: Watch your language

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What you say reveals what you are; your speech sheds great light on your relationship with God. James uses the term “tongue” to mean our patterns of speech and indicates the vast importance of what we say and how we speak. When our spiritual side controls, we speak helpful, up building and constructive words. When our unspiritual side controls, we utter destructive, unkind, harmful words that do not fit with our Christian natures. Christians should guard their speech because our words have tremendous power for good and for evil.

The tongue can speak words that encourage the desperate, comfort the distressed, correct the wandering, gladden the despondent, enable the servers, inform the mistaken, strengthen the weak, assure the anxious, build up the doubtful and embolden the timid. On the other hand, the tongue can speak words that shatter joy, overturn confidence, disrupt relationships, contribute to doubt and produce distress. God intends positive speech. Fresh and foul water do not flow from the same source.

Watch your language because words have awesome power (James 3:1-6)

James may allude to the problem of false teachers as he advises against many aspiring to become teachers. He shows God holds teachers to a higher standard or responsibility, perhaps because of their positions of leadership. James moves immediately from his warning to teachers to a more general warning. Showing the pervasive nature of wrong speech, he

declares “we all stumble” (make mistakes, go wrong or slip).

Anyone who does not make mistakes when speaking demonstrates a mature relationship with God. Such people have power to control his/her entire body, that is, his/her entire life. James proceeds to use three illustrations to demonstrate how small things can control large powers—small bits guide large horses, small rudders steer great ships, a small fire ignites an entire forest.

The diminutive tongue produces great power. First, the tongue is a destructive fire consuming everything in its path and has the power of devastating harm. Second, the tongue is the catalyst for bringing many kinds of evil in the world (a world of evil). Third, unwholesome speech corrupts, pollutes and stains the entire life. Fourth, the tongue corrupts the entire life path of the person. Fifth, the tongue has this great power because it is set on fire by Hell, by Satan himself.

As the wrongful use of the tongue results in devastating harm, the correct use of the tongue has equally beneficial results.

Watch your language because words produce both good and evil consequences (James 3:7-12)

All creatures have been brought under control (tamed); no person, however, has completely tamed the tongue. The tongue remains an intractable evil, an evil incapable of being quieted. The tongue is charged with deadly poison; it causes immense harm. How many lives have been blighted by the sin of gossip; how many persons directed in wrong passages by corrupt advice; how many controversies ignited by unwise or misdirected words?

James declares no one can tame the tongue. This teaching should be understood as no human in human power can control his/her speech. God

can, however, empower by his implanted word (1:21) to use the tongue in beneficial ways. In verses 13-18, James points to how God's wisdom is available for properly using the tongue.

James insists the tongue often produces great evil but quickly points out it can bring great good. Speech can praise God; it can curse other people. This dual nature of speech should not be. A spring cannot produce both bitter water and sweet water. A fig tree cannot produce olives and grapes. A good heart and mind will not produce harmful, disruptive, hurting speech. Christians must strive to speak so their words will produce the good and beneficial results.

Watch your language because God will provide wisdom for the proper use of speech (James 3:13-18)

Good words contribute; evil words devastate. James points to those who bridle the tongue and speak so as to bless and help. The wise and understanding will demonstrate by their good behavior and conduct that they live by the gentleness of wisdom. These people working through humility and apart from human pride and selfishness produce peace and unity among believers.

Such wisdom does not come from the world. Worldly "wisdom" is earth-bound, sensual and demonic. This worldly "wisdom" springs from bitter envy and selfish ambition. Such people care only about themselves and respond only to their own corrupted desires. To those infected by these sinful actions, James advises them to not be arrogant or prideful and speak in defiance of the truth.

Rather, James instructs us to accept the wisdom from above that God provides. God's wisdom is pure (unmixed with impure motives or moral impurity), peace-loving (avoids factions and disagreements by willingly yields to others), gentle and compliant (filled with compassion and kind

actions) and free of partiality or favoritism. The behavior that lacks God's wisdom speaks words that produce envying and party spirit and cause confusion and disharmony (v. 16). God's wisdom guides to speech that produces good works and peace.

The words of Christians are important. Words used according to leading of God's wisdom promote unity among God's kingdom. Watch your language; it shows your relationship with God.