

Pastor and commentator, Warren Wiersbe, tells the story of a friend of his who is also a minister. There was a lady in his friend's congregation who was a notorious gossip. Not only that, but she would say the meanest things about people and her words were like poisoned darts. One day, she came to the minister and said, "Pastor, the Lord has convicted me of my sin of gossip and of my poisoned tongue. In fact, my tongue is just getting me into too much trouble." Now, this wasn't the first time that this lady had made such a confession to him. She had gone through this same routine before. And so, her sincerity was somewhat in doubt. Nevertheless, the pastor asked, "Well, what do you plan to do about it?" The woman looked him right in the eye and with her most pious religious fervor answer, "Pastor, I want to put my tongue on the altar." To which the pastor replied, without missing a beat, "Mam, there isn't an altar big enough for that." And he turned and slowly walked away, leaving her to mull it over.<sup>1</sup>

Do you know anyone like that—someone who just can't seem to control their tongue? I know someone like that because I have to look at him each morning when I am shaving. Oh, the times that I have let my tongue fire out words, only to wish that I had some kind of "**evil word net**" that I could use to snatch back those words and throw them in a trash can. I think we could all "fess up" to that. And when I say that our tongues issue "**evil words**," I'm not only referring to vulgarities. Sometimes the most vile words of all that come from a person's tongue don't contain any vulgarities at all. And yet, they are hurtful words that cut, stab and forever wound the person that they are directed to. The sad thing is that those harmful words are sometimes hurled into the ears of loved-ones and friends like spears, and they do all kinds of damage.

"Words" fired from the tongue—they have great power. Their effects can linger for a very long time. The ancient Greek poet, Pindar, rightly said: "**Longer than deeds liveth the word.**" And not only do words have staying-power, they can be powerfully good, or powerfully evil. Someone wrote that: "**A word spoken at a solemn moment may be a mightier force for good or ill than any bodily act whatever.**" And what inspiring words the tongue can produce: The closing lines of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address has inspired generations of Americans. Winston Churchill's "**blood, sweat, and tears**" speech so lifted the morale of the British people that they rose to the occasion and persevered the bombing of Hitler's air force.<sup>2</sup> Of course, on the other end of the spectrum, Hitler's own evil words bedazzled an entire German nation into doing the most horrible of things. It is estimated that for every word in Hitler's hate manual, *Mein Kampf*, a book of about 720 pages of fine print, there were about 125 lives

lost in World War II. Now while our own tongues may not have produced words that have caused international conflict, they do have the potential to break hearts and ruin reputations. Worse yet, they can poison your own soul in a way that sends you to a terrible place in eternity forever outside the presence of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Now, you'd hope that someone would warn us about the dangers posed by an uncontrolled tongue. State it in a way that would help to avoid the evils of the tongue, and to use our tongues for the betterment of God's Kingdom in a way that gives us and others hope. And we know that God never leaves us without hope because there is always hope in His Word.<sup>4</sup> And so, we have been blessed by God that He inspired the Apostle James to provide us with words of hope and guidance in the ways of the tongue and the power of our words. Listen carefully now, as this is what James has to tell us about this important subject: <sup>2</sup> "Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way. <sup>3</sup> We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. <sup>4</sup> And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong. <sup>5</sup> In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches. But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. <sup>6</sup> And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself. <sup>7</sup> People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, <sup>8</sup> but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup> Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. <sup>10</sup> And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! <sup>11</sup> Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? <sup>12</sup> Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty spring."

James 3:2-12 (NLT2)

James uses a lot of imagery here. For example, the tongue is compared to a little bit that can control the actions of a very large horse. Or, it's like a relatively small rudder that dictates the course of a huge ship. Notice that in both examples, there are outside forces that are working counter to the bit and the rudder. The wildness and great power of the horse wants to cause it to buck and whirl its body in ways that will dismount its rider and cause him or her to go crashing down to the ground. The rudder of a ship has to contend with the strong forces of wind and storm. If the rudder just flaps back and forth any which way, the ship will go crashing upon a reef and sink. It takes a strong hand on the bridle to make that bit work, just as it takes a steady hand on the rudder to safely guide the ship. James is telling us that that is exactly how it is with your tongue. If you let your tongue go uncontrolled and spout out

just anything, you'll end up experiencing the same crash as a careless horseback rider or an inattentive helmsman on a ship. There are forces within us that seek to prevent us from controlling our tongues—they are the forces of sin that dominated our lives before we came to Christ. They are the forces of our old nature that constantly try to throw us off course—throw us off that straight and narrow path that Jesus directs us to follow, and entices us to follow that broad highway of the world that eventually leads you over a cliff.<sup>5</sup> So where do we find that strong hand on the bridle that keeps the bit tight in the horse's mouth, and that steady hand upon the ship's wheel guiding the rudder? We find that strength and steadiness only in the person of Jesus Christ. When Jesus truly controls the tongue, its words can't help but be beautiful, positive and uplifting. King David understood this and prayed that it would be so.<sup>6</sup> David prayed: <sup>3</sup> "Take control of what I say, O LORD, and guard my lips. <sup>4</sup> Don't let me drift toward evil or take part in acts of wickedness." Psalm 141:3-4 (NLT2) <sup>14</sup> May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Psalm 19:14 (NLT2) Those thoughts need to find their way into our prayers as well, in order that our tongues may build up and encourage others, not oppose them and tear them down.

But adopting that kind of mind set is not easy—and it is certainly not our natural inclination. All of us know how hard it is to stay on a diet. We know how hard it can be to keep certain foods from ***going into our mouths***? But, it's a hundred times harder to keep certain words from ***coming out of our mouths***. But, if you want to be in control of your direction in life, a good place to start is with those words that your tongue utters. And we need to do this not only for our own well-being, but also for the well-being of others. That is what James is referring to when he says that the tongue is like a little spark of fire. So, how bad can a mere spark of fire be? Well, in 1666, the Great Fire of London started in the tiny bakery of Thomas Farriner and spread to destroy over 13,000 houses, 87 churches as well as St. Paul's Cathedral.<sup>7</sup> In 1871, Mrs. O'Leary's cow reputedly kicked over a lantern in Chicago that killed approximately 300 people and devastated over 3 square miles of the city, leaving over 100,000 people homeless.<sup>8</sup> The New York Times reports that at least one of last year's devastating wild fires in Northern California ***"was caused by a spark set off by a man with a hammer, working on a fence post in a field of dry vegetation."***<sup>9</sup>

The tongue is the instrument that sends those sparks flying. Hurtful words burn and destroy people. That is the way hurtful words are. Producing the spark that ends up creating a wild fire really doesn't take much effort and very little thought. The same is true for half-truths, falsehoods, rumors, gossip, sarcasm, words said in anger that cut like knives—they are all sparks that end up burning up family relationships, torching marriages, destroying work-place morale, and incinerating long-term

friendships. King Solomon gives a simple, yet effective, solution to hold the tongue in check and prevent those sparks from catching fire. He says: <sup>20</sup> “Where there is no wood, a fire goes out, and where there is no gossip, contention ceases.” <sup>21</sup> Like charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious person to kindle strife.” Proverbs 26:20-21 (NET1) What he’s saying is that we need to discipline ourselves to remove contentious and hurtful words from our vocabulary. If we can do that, then there’s nothing that will serve to ignite those sparks of the tongue. But, if you can’t do it then maybe you are an addict—no different from a drug addict or alcoholic—except that you are addicted to harmful words. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, the author of a book entitled, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, comments on such addicts as it relates to James’ message. While on his lecture circuit around the country, he asks members of his audience if they are able to refrain from saying any unkind or hateful words about another person, or to another person, for at least twenty-four hours. Of course, some people claim they can do that without any problem. But others laugh and say that there is really no way that they could actually keep from using such words for any extended period of time, especially for as long as 24 hours. To which Telushkin offers a response that sounds as if James might have issued it himself: ***“Those of you who can’t answer yes must recognize that you have a serious problem. If you cannot go twenty-four hours without drinking liquor, you are addicted to alcohol. If you cannot go twenty-four hours without smoking, you are addicted to nicotine. Similarly, if you cannot go twenty-four hours without saying unkind words about others, then you have lost control over your tongue.”***<sup>10</sup> If you have lost that control, don’t remain an addict to hurtful words—find the cure. Take a tip from Paul, replacing those unkind words with something else. Paul says: “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer everyone.” Colossians 4:6 (NET1) Just as a rider’s will controls a horse by that small bit in its mouth, so too must we say ***“whoa”*** to our tongue before we allow it to fire out those lethal words so hastily.<sup>11</sup>

Now, the last thing that James refers to are things that the people of his day valued greatly—***water to drink*** and ***food to eat***—because at times both were scarce in the hot, dry climate of Palestine. And so, James makes an observation that everyone in his audience would have readily agreed with. He remarks that any spring of water could either be cool, pure and refreshing, ***or*** it would be a spring with bitter water that no one could bear to drink from. This may sound strange to us, but springs around the Dead Sea area were sometimes very salty-tasting, whereas farther north, the springs typically yielded refreshingly pure water. But, never did a single spring produce both kinds of water. The spring was either completely salty or it was completely fresh.<sup>12</sup> The same is true for the grapevines and fig trees that farmers tended all along the Palestinian countryside. Each provided only one product—a grapevine

yielded grapes, and a fig tree produced figs. You'd never find a cluster of grapes hanging from a fig tree, nor a fig hanging on a grapevine. What is the point James is making here? Is he giving us a lesson about agricultural diversity and the value of water conservation? Not hardly. He is giving us a lesson in **spiritual conservation**. And the point is that you cannot be a Christian whose speech is pure and pious one minute, but cruel and condescending the next. You cannot curse your fellow man with one breath and bless him with the next. *"Oh, I never curse"*—someone might say. *"I never use the Lord's name in vain."* But, you don't have to use God's name in vain to be guilty of cursing. Do you ever call someone an *"idiot"* or a *"worthless fool"*? Have you ever told someone to *"drop dead,"* or used that ever popular directional tip and told them to *"go to Hell"*?<sup>13</sup> If you ever have, then within the context of what James is talking about, you used your tongue to utter what was certainly a curse.<sup>14</sup> You used your tongue to cut and kill, and not to heal and restore—that's a sure sign of an untamed tongue.<sup>15</sup> Yes, we all need to repent, for our tongues, as James teaches, need taming.

So how do we tame them? Sometimes we make the excuse that our tongues can't be tamed because they seem to engage before our brains get a chance to crank up. But, that really isn't true. It isn't so much a problem with the tongue or the brain as it is a problem of the heart. Not the heart as the organ that pumps blood, but the *"heart"* that is the basic substance of your being—the *"heart"* that is the very core and essence of your soul where your intellect, thoughts, desires, attitudes, emotions all coalesce to make up your very being. In the Beatitudes, Jesus said: "A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart." Luke 6:45 (NLT2) When Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their evil tongues, He warned them: <sup>34</sup> "You brood of snakes! How could evil men like you speak what is good and right? For whatever is in your heart determines what you say. . ."<sup>36</sup> And I tell you this, you must give an account on judgment day for every idle word you speak.<sup>37</sup> The words you say will either acquit you or condemn you." Matthew 12:34, 36 (NIV)

Clearly, Jesus isn't messing around here. These are harsh words, and rightly so. They were directed to the Pharisees of Jesus' day, but they are equally applicable to those here in our country who utter such hate-filled, contentious and/or filthy, vulgar words. Jesus is talking to our news media. Jesus is talking to Hollywood. Jesus is talking to our countries leaders—both Republican and Democrats. (Quite, frankly I cannot believe the profanity-laced, *"locker room"* language that has poured off the tongues of members of Congress lately.<sup>16</sup> They scream profanities with untamed tongues, but their own tongues impeach themselves from the Kingdom of God.) And yet, Jesus isn't just talking about them. He is certainly talking to you and to me as well. There are a lot of tongues that need taming.

But, it is useless to think that we are capable of taming the tongue. We are the ones who have so willingly allowed it to go wild. Rather, our tongues will only be tamed to the extent that our hearts are transformed by Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup> The tongue will never be tamed unless the heart is transplanted and you allow God to give you a new heart. And He will if you will let Him. God declares, “And I will give you a new heart—I will give you new and right desires—and put a new spirit within you. I will take out your stony hearts of sin and give you new hearts of love.” Ezekiel 36:26 (TLB) Only then will those tongues sing new songs of praise to God.<sup>18</sup> For God proclaims that then, “Every knee will bend to Me, and every tongue will confess allegiance to Me.” Isaiah 45:23 (NLT2)

When you allow Jesus to make that heart transplant, you get a tongue transplant all in the same bargain. And it's such a better tongue. It's one that knows much better words, words like: ***“Please,” “thank you,” “I’m sorry,” “forgive me,” “I forgive you,” “I’m praying for you,” “I love you,”***<sup>19</sup>—***Words that, at one time, your tongue had a very hard time saying.*** You see, that pastor I mentioned earlier didn't have it quite right. For those who are truly willing to submit to His will, there is no tongue too large, or too untamed, to place upon the altar before Jesus Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God longs to give you a whole new spiritual vocabulary for a tongue tamed by a new heart—a heart that has surrendered to Jesus Christ. Jesus said: “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” Matthew 12:34 (ESV) When your heart speaks, what do the words reveal about your spiritual state? May it pour forth words of God's goodness, His encouragement, His healing and hope expressed by a tongue tamed by the love, mercy and grace of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church  
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Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor  
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<sup>1</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary – Be Mature (James)*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2003), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 357-358.

<sup>2</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Bible – Volume 12*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 48.

<sup>3</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary – Be Mature (James)*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2003), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 360.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 119:81 (NET1) I desperately long for your deliverance. I find hope in your word.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 7:13-14 (NIV) <sup>13</sup> Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. <sup>14</sup> But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

<sup>6</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary – Be Mature (James)*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2003), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 358-359.

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia.

<sup>8</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 3". See also Wikipedia.

<sup>9</sup> Kirk Johnson, "What Started the California Fires? Experts Track the Blazes' Origins," New York Times, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com), November 18, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Rick Ezell, *One-Minute Uplift* (July 21, 2006), reported in Craig Brian Larson's and Phyliss Ten Elshof's, 1001 Illustrations that Connect, Illustration No 898, Zondervan:Grand Rapids (2008), p. 487.

<sup>11</sup> Gary Holloway, *The College Press NIV Commentary – James & Jude*, ed. Jack Cottrell, Ph.D. and Tony Ash, Ph.D., (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Co., 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 79.

<sup>12</sup> Holman New Testament Commentary, 305.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 5:22 (TEV) <sup>22</sup> But now I tell you: if you are angry with your brother you will be brought to trial, if you call your brother 'You good-for-nothing!' you will be brought before the Council, and if you call your brother a worthless fool you will be in danger of going to the fire of hell. [OR:] Matthew 5:22 (NLT2)

<sup>22</sup> But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

<sup>14</sup> "James has in mind the personal curse that displays hatred toward the brother, as in Jesus' warning that calling a brother "fool" is as punishable as murder (Matthew 5:21-22)." Gary Holloway, *The College Press NIV Commentary – James & Jude*, ed. Jack Cottrell, Ph.D. and Tony Ash, Ph.D., (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Co., 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 83.

<sup>15</sup> Proverbs 12:18 (NLT2) Some people make cutting remarks, but the words of the wise bring healing.

<sup>16</sup> Amy B. Wang, "Rep. Rashida Tlaib profanely promised to impeach Trump. She's not sorry." The Washington Post, [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) (January 4, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> John 6:63 (NLT2) The Spirit alone gives eternal life. Human effort accomplishes nothing. And the very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

<sup>18</sup> Psalm 40:3 (NLT2) He has given me a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see what he has done and be amazed. They will put their trust in the LORD.

<sup>19</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary – Be Mature (James)*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2003), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 361-362.