

James 3:1-12 ~ An Unruly Tongue ~ Leader's Guide

1. In Verse 3:1, who was James warning about becoming a teacher? And why?

Teaching was a highly valued and respected profession in Jewish culture and many Jews who embraced Christianity wanted to become teachers. James warned that although it is good to aspire to teach, the teachers' responsibility is great because their words and example affects others' spiritual lives.

2. Does James' observation about judging teachers more strictly apply today? (Luke 12:48b)

Yes. Those who wish to teach others ought be judged more strictly than those following other professions. Of those who have much, much is required.

Luke 12:48b – From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

3. Would a similar warning apply to becoming a substance abuse counselor or a mentor?

Yes. Most definitely.

4. In Verse 3:2, James says, "if anyone makes no mistakes in what he says, he is a perfect man." Is anyone a perfect man? If not, what is James implying here?

No, Jesus was the only perfect man. However, what James seems to be saying is that since the tongue is so difficult to control, anyone who controls it perfectly gains control of himself in other areas of life as well.

5. Why is James emphasizing being perfect in Verse 3:2 and also back in Verse 1:4 ("be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing")?

We know that we are incomplete and imperfect now, but this is not where we are going to remain. God is taking us to perfection that is full and complete. His clear purpose is that we become his fully mature children, fully able to participate in a relationship of love with Him, where we will have a deep sense of satisfaction in all of our life. A perfect relationship with God overflows into perfection in our relationships with one another and with ourselves. Trusting in God for our life and our identity frees us from trusting those who have power or wealth. We are freed to care for others and receive from others, to bless others and allow ourselves to be blessed by those that God brings into our lives.

6. How can we move closer to perfection? (Psalm 140:1-3, Psalm 55:17, Colossians 4:2)

To participate in our own perfection that God wants for us, we must turn from those things that encumber us and turn from false idols and must trust in God and hand more of our life over to Him. And one way God intends to transform us is in what we say.

Psalm 140:1-3 – ¹Rescue me, O Lord, from evil men; protect me from men of violence, ²who devise evil plans in their hearts and stir up war every day. ³They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent’s; the poison of vipers is on their lips.

Psalm 55:17 – Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice.

Colossians 4:2 – Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

7. In Verse 3:2, is James talking about what we say or what we don’t say?

Both. Proper speech is not only saying the right words at the right time, but it is also controlling your desire to say what you shouldn’t.

8. James gives four examples of a small thing controlling or overpowering a large one. What are they?

Bit controls a horse. Rudder controls a ship. Spark sets a forest on fire. Tongue corrupts whole person.

9. Why does he emphasize the negative example of the fire so much more than the positive examples of the horse’s bit or ship’s rudder? (Matthew 15:11, 18-19)

The bit and rudder have a positive influence and one’s tongue can also have such an influence. If a horseman or sailor is careless, he can get into trouble by being thrown off the horse or running the ship aground. But James seems to feel that the tongue’s wickedness has its source in hell itself. Satan uses the tongue to divide people and pit them against each other. Hateful words are damaging because they spread destruction quickly (like a fire) and no one can stop the results once they are spoken. We dare not be careless with what we say because even if we apologize later, the scars remain (as with a forest fire). A few words spoken in anger can destroy a relationship that took years to build. Secondly, he feels that like a fire, the tongue is extremely difficult if not impossible to control (Verses 7-8).

Matthew 15:11 – What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’

Matthew 15:18-19 – But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

10. What are some examples of an untamed tongue? (Proverbs 12:18-19, 13:3, 16:27, 17:7, 18:8, 25:18, Matthew 7:15)

Gossip. Putting others down. Bragging. Manipulating. False teaching. Exaggerating. Complaining. Flattering. Lying. Boasting. Ridicule. Sarcasm. Praising evil deeds.

Proverbs 12:18-19 – ¹⁸Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. ¹⁹Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.

Proverbs 16:27 – A scoundrel plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire.

11. There's an old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Is it true?

NO.

12. If no human being can control the tongue (Verse 8), why bother trying?

As we've seen, your tongue guides your whole person. First you lash out at someone in anger. You complain about him. Then you tell someone else about this creep, spread a little gossip. Then you start exaggerating the story and boasting about it. And maybe it makes you feel like you have some power. And you like the feeling of power, so you start boasting and manipulating things to get some more. Don't forget, Satan is helping you every step of the way. And before long, this becomes a way of life. Putting other people down. Power. Evil.

So why bother trying to control your tongue. Just because it IS guiding your whole person. Even if we can't achieve perfect control, we can still learn enough control to reduce the damage that our words do. It is better to fight a fire than to go around setting new ones. And remember, you're not fighting the fire alone. The Holy Spirit will give you increasing power to monitor and control what you say. So when you are offended by someone, the Holy Spirit will remind you of God's love so you won't respond in a hateful manner. Or when you are criticized, the Holy Spirit will heal the hurt so you don't have to lash out. Remember what we studied earlier, God is taking us to perfection and this is one of the steps.

13. Have you ever said contradictory things as in Verses 9-10? Which speech pattern represents your true identity?

Actually, the tongue gives us a picture of our basic human nature. We were made in God's image but we've fallen into sin. God wants to help us and has given each of us the gift of the Holy Spirit. When you open your heart to the Holy Spirit, you'll have the self-control so you'll speak the words that are pleasing to God.

14. How is the power of words used by the Holy Spirit within a person of faith?

Real faith uses the Spirit's power in words to build others up, to speak the truth in love, to compliment, forgive, and comfort. And, as James wrote earlier, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (1:19-20). Real faith knows when to hold its tongue.