

Taming (Controlling) the Tongue



SABBATH—NOVEMBER 8

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: James 3:1–12; Deuteronomy 6:6, 7; Luke 9:51–56; Proverbs 16:27; Matthew 7:16–18.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘By your words you will be found guilty or not guilty’ ” (Matthew 12:37, NlrV).

WORDS HOLD GREAT POWER. “The right word at the right time” (Proverbs 25:11, NlrV), such as praise, poetry, and stories, can influence lives in deeply moving and lasting ways. What we say may have an effect for days or even years. For example, children absorb words like sponges. That is why they soon speak very well whatever language they grow up hearing. It is also why the messages they hear about themselves may influence their future success or failure. For better or worse, the communication style of parents is repeated and amplified (made stronger) in their children.

The written word is powerful, and even more lasting. Most powerful of all is God's Word. Consider: “Your word *is* a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105, NKJV; emphasis added); and “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11, NIV). Jesus directed the attention of the disciples away from short-term blessings to something much more important: “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63).

Words can bring comfort or poison. How often have you said something you wished you could take back?

This week James has some important words about, well, words.

ACCOUNTABILITY¹ (James 3:1)

Read James 3:1. What important point is he making here about accountability?

Teachers in the church and in Christian schools have a very important responsibility because they influence minds and hearts in ways that will continue for years. The more we know, the more responsible we become for making use of, and sharing, that knowledge with others.

There is a plaque at the entrance to the Tyndale House library in Cambridge, England. It reminds every reader who enters there: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). Man is not the measure of all things. God is. All true education begins and ends with Him. Unfortunately, as knowledge grows, people forget their dependence on God. For example, it is often taught that science works independently from God. Some teachers of religion try to get honor and glory (praise) for their work. So, they may use methods that leave little or no room for faith. As a result, faith can slowly get squeezed out of the minds and hearts of both teachers and students. With eternity in mind, learning will be an important and worthy goal for both teachers and students.

Paul understood this responsibility. For this reason he trained and ordained leaders in the churches he raised up (Acts 14:23; compare² Titus 1:5). He even gave instructions to Timothy to guard God’s flock from inexperienced and unwise shepherds (read 1 Timothy 1:3–7; 1 Timothy 3:2–6; 1 Timothy 6:2–5; 2 Timothy 2:14, 15). Paul’s warning was that some are “always learning. But they never come to know the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7, NIV).

Parents carry a heavy responsibility in teaching their children. In turn, the children influence others. All of us, by the example we set, can have a deep influence on those around us. How important it is that we receive God’s wisdom, which He has promised us (James 1:5)! We do so that we might model His ways and have a godly influence. This is because we all, for good or for bad, do have influence over others.

Think about those who have influenced you in a positive way. What did they do? How did they influence you? And, most important, how can you do the same for others?

DEFINITIONS

1. accountability—being required to explain actions or decisions to someone.
2. compare—show how two or more things are the same or different.

WORD POWER (James 3:2)



It is important to bathe our thoughts in God's Word early in the day.

DEFINITIONS

3. focus—main purpose or interest.
4. consequences—things that happen as a result of a particular action or set of conditions.
5. bit—a piece of metal that is put in the mouth of a horse. It is part of the device (called a bridle) that is used to control the horse.
6. bridle—a device that fits on a horse's head. It is used for guiding and controlling the horse.
7. underestimate—to think of someone or something as being lower in ability, influence, or value than that person or thing actually is.

“We all make many mistakes” (James 3:2, NLT). What an honest confession! James says this even though he has a strong focus³ on behavior! Still, this confession should not dim our belief in God's ideal for us as His representatives on earth.

“Suppose someone is never wrong in what he says. Then he is a perfect man. He is able to keep his whole body under control” (verse 2, NIV). In the Greek language, this verse is even stronger in explaining that it is possible to not use the wrong words. Using the right words is very important. Thoughts lead to words. Words, in turn, lead to actions. Words also give support to what we think. So, they influence not only what we do but also what others do. We are interconnected with people through language.

This week's verses hold several examples of the power of the tongue. The first three examples show how something small can have huge consequences:⁴ a bit⁵ and bridle⁶ can turn a horse. A rudder can steer (control) a ship. And a spark can destroy a forest in flames.

What positive kinds of “word power” do we find in the Bible? Read Deuteronomy 6:6, 7; Deuteronomy 23:23; Psalm 40:3; Proverbs 10:20, 21; Proverbs 12:25; Malachi 2:6, 7; Luke 4:22; and Romans 10:6–8.

Young children remember well what they learn. But, like trees that grow stiffer and more fixed, children resist (fight against) change more as they get older. In a way we are all teachers, whether in the home or in the church. Our words have so much power. For this reason, it is important to bathe our thoughts in God's Word (the Bible) early in the day. After all, what feeds our thoughts and words: God's Spirit or another source? We must not underestimate⁷ the great changes that are possible through God's Word (Psalm 33:6; compare 2 Corinthians 4:6).

Words are so powerful that, with just a few sentences, you can cause damage or harm to a person, perhaps for the rest of his or her life. But positive words can uplift someone, perhaps for just as long.

If you had dynamite in your hands, how careful would you be with it? What should your answer tell you about how you should deal with words, which are even more powerful than dynamite?

“LITTLE” THINGS ARE THE BIG THINGS
(James 3:3–5)

Read James 3:3–5. What do the two examples have in common, and how do they relate to the tongue?

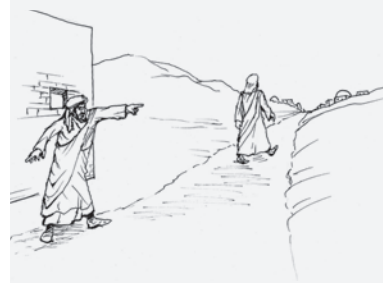
Both the bit in a horse’s mouth and the rudder of a ship are very small compared to what they control. But, with very little movement of the hand, the direction of the horse or the direction of the ship can be completely changed. In the same way, “the tongue is a small part of the body. But it brags a lot” (verse 5, NIV). In other words, a word or even a look or a gesture⁸ might seem small. But each can change a friend into an enemy or change a bad situation into something good. “A gentle [kind] answer turns anger away. But mean words stir up anger” (Proverbs 15:1, NIV). Think about a horse running or a ship sailing through the water at full speed, both headed in the wrong direction. The faster something runs, the farther away it goes. The best course is to stop and turn around as soon as possible. The same is true of our words.

Read Luke 9:51–56. What was Jesus’ answer to the suggestion of the disciples? What was the result? And what lessons might this story have for us?

The disciples had a Bible example for their suggestion (2 Kings 1:10, 12). But Jesus refused to accept the suggestion. His scolding greatly changed the situation. The story ends by saying that “they went to another village” (Luke 9:56). Jesus turned being rejected by a Samaritan village into a learning experience for His followers. When feelings become heated and we burn with the desire to defend ourselves, we can remember the example of Jesus, and we move on “to another village,” so to speak.

“As drops of water make the river, so little things make up life. Life is a river, peaceful, calm, and enjoyable. Or it is a troubled river, always throwing mud and dirt.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *That I May Know Him*, page 209.

There may be some “little” things in your life. But when you think more about them, these “little” things might not be so “little” after all. What are they, if you have any? And why may they really be bigger or more important than they seem?



When angered, we should do as Jesus did and move on “to another village” (Luke 9:56).

DEFINITIONS

8. gesture—a movement of your body (especially of your hands and arms) that shows an idea or a feeling.

DAMAGE CONTROL (James 3:6)

We have all experienced it. Something we said gets bigger and bigger than it really is. Sometimes it may get so big that we do not even recognize it anymore. As James says, “Think about how a small spark can set a big forest on fire” (James 3:5, NIV).

Read prayerfully and carefully James 3:6. What is James saying about the power of our tongue, of our words, to “defile [spoil]” everything about us? Why should this verse make us think twice before we speak?

When used as a symbol, fire can mean cleansing (Isaiah 4:4; Zechariah 13:9). But more often, it means destruction (read, for example, Joshua 6:24; Joshua 11:9, 11; 1 Samuel 30:3; Matthew 7:19). Wrong words can cause a lot of damage (Proverbs 16:27; Proverbs 26:21).

A large fire can start from a spark. It can also cause much damage quickly. In the same way, words can destroy friendships, marriages, and reputations. They can sink into a child’s mind and spoil his or her self-worth and future growth.

Sin started on earth with a seemingly innocent question (read Genesis 3:1). It began in heaven in almost the same way. Lucifer (Satan) “began to suggest and spread doubts about God’s government in heaven.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs [Forefathers and Leaders] and Prophets [Special Messengers]*, page 37. So, it is no lie to say that the tongue is “set on fire by hell” (James 3:6, NKJV).

Words once spoken are gone forever, and we cannot fully undo what we have said. But we should do all we can to lessen the damage and correct what we can. Taking steps to make things right will also help us not to repeat (do again) the same mistake.

“No man can tame [control] the tongue” (James 3:8, NKJV). But we are warned to “keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies” (Psalm 34:13, NIV). Only the Spirit of God can help us control our words (read Ephesians 4:29–32).

Read James 3:6–8. Why should the thoughts in these verses make us be so careful with what we say? How can we learn to keep under control the power for good, or evil, that is in our mouths?

BLESSING AND CURSING (James 3:9–12)

Read James 3:9–12. What truth does James show, using the examples of the fountain, the fig tree, and the grapevine?

The idea of both blessing and cursing coming out of the mouth of a Christian is upsetting to think about. What about watching swearing on television programs or in the movies during the week and attending church on Sabbath to hear the Word of God? What about someone who speaks the truth and wonderful words about Jesus; but then he is heard telling a dirty joke? These images should be spiritually disturbing because we know they are not right. *The same mouth that praises God later tells a dirty joke?* What is wrong with this picture?

James uses the example of a spring. Water quality depends on where it comes from. The water and the root make the fruit what it is (read also Matthew 7:16–18). In the same way, if God’s Word is implanted in us, its work will be seen in our lives. Understanding this truth frees us from the burden to “prove” our faith. Pure religion rooted in faith will naturally show its purity. In the same way, a pure water spring needs no proof of its quality other than the water that flows naturally from it.

But one could ask, “What if we were to take a ‘snapshot [photo]’ of faithful followers of God at low points in their experience? (For example, Moses murdering the Egyptian or David sleeping with Uriah’s wife [Bathsheba]). Then would we not have the right to question their faith?”

God’s will is that we do not sin (1 John 2:1). But, since the fall of Adam and Eve, God has arranged forgiveness for us if we do sin, based on faith in the promised Sacrifice (read also Psalm 32:1, 2). But the fact remains that sin brings sadness while obedience brings blessing. Moses spent 40 years taking care of sheep to unlearn the training that led him to kill. And David suffered the death of his child that he had with Bathsheba. He also experienced a divided household that threatened his kingdom to the end of his life. Sure, we can be forgiven of our sins after we do them. But the problem is that so often the results of those sins can remain, often with terrible results not just for ourselves but for others too. How much better it is to pray for the power of victory than for forgiveness and for the damage to be brought under control.



For 40 years Moses took care of sheep to unlearn the training that led him to kill.



It is much better to pray for victory than to ask for forgiveness.

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read about the power of speech in “Talents,” from the book *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pages 335–339, by Ellen G. White and share the points that impressed you with your Sabbath School class.

“When in the company of those who are involved in foolish talk, it is our duty to change the subject of conversation if we can. By the help of the grace⁹ of God we should quietly change the subject to help turn the conversation to more positive things. . . .

“We need to speak of the important chapters in our experience. We should speak of the mercy and loving-kindness of God and of the greatness of the Savior’s love. Our words should be words of praise and thanksgiving. If the mind and heart are full of the love of God, this will be shown in the conversation. It will not be a difficult matter to share that which enters into our spiritual life. Great thoughts, noble ambitions, clear understandings of truth, unselfish purposes, desires for purity and holiness, will bear fruit in words that show the character [thoughts; feelings; actions] of the heart. When Christ is shown in our speech, it will have power in winning souls to Him.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pages 337, 338.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① The problem with words is that they come out so quickly and easily. So often they come out before we even have a chance to think about what we are saying. Because this is true, how can we learn to think carefully before we open our mouths?

② Think about the power of your words on your own life. Do this experiment: talk to others as much as you can about what God has done in your life. Talk about how He has blessed you and how He has gotten you through trials. Do this for only a day or so, and then ask yourself, *How has this influenced my faith?*

③ How do you think your words show others what goes on in your heart? Will they tell others more than you want them to know? If you recorded all your spoken words in a single day and then played them back, what would they tell you?

DEFINITIONS

9. grace—God’s gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.