Session 6: James 3:1–12

OPEN

Can you tell us about something someone said to you —anytime in your life—that was truly helpful?

It doesn't have to be life-changing, but helpful in some way. Encouragement. Good advice. Knowledge you needed. Support. **What words provided help when you needed it?**

What was so helpful about it?

Why do you think the person said it?

READ

Read James 3:1–12.

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 6: *James 3:1–12* (8 minutes).

DISCUSS

If you were publishing this passage as an article or a blog post, what title would you give it?

Why do you think James wrote this? What problem was occurring that he was trying to correct?

Remember that this is a *general* letter, not sent to a specific church, but distributed to Christians throughout the world. So this can't be an issue of a few gossips spreading slander. James must have been concerned about churches in general. Apparently there were people speaking badly—boasting about themselves, cursing others, picking fights. James tells them all to shape up.

Who is being "called out" by James in verse 1? Why do you think teachers will be judged with greater strictness?

This is a warning that each of us should take to heart—whether we're in a teaching position or not. Francis said,

> We live in a day and age when everyone wants to be the teacher, everyone wants to be the one who gives advice, everyone wants to be the expert, and James is going to argue, are you sure you want to do that? Because God is going to judge you more harshly for being a teacher.

What do you think verse 2 has to do with verse 1? Is it explaining the behavior of errant teachers, excusing them, or just generally instructing us?

PEEK AT THE GREEK

Don't get thrown off by the word *perfect*. It can also be translated "mature" or "complete." It's the same word used in James 1:4 for the person who develops patience through trials. So James is not saying that people who control their tongues are sinless. In fact, he has just said that we all stumble in many ways. It's just that the one who avoids stumbling *in speech is* apparently a mature believer.

We see the word body at the end of verse 2. That word can actually mean several different things in the New Testament. What do you think it means here?

And then how does mastery of one's speech keep the whole body in check?

The most basic meaning of *body* is our physical existence. If we read it this way, James is saying that those who control their speech are also able to control their physical actions.

But *body* is used elsewhere in the New Testament for the church, "the body of Christ." If this verse is still talking about teachers, then it might mean that those who master their speech are able to control (keep in check, literally "bridle") the *church*.

Have you ever seen a church dispute settled by a leader who spoke wisely, clearly, and kindly? How did that happen?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about false teachers in the following Bible passages.
2 Tim. 2:14–18; Titus 1:10–14; 2 Peter 2:1–3; Jude 10, 16

After reading these verses, how serious do you think the problem of false teaching was in the early church?

What sort of "quarreling about words" do you think Paul was talking about in 2 Timothy 2?

Note the emphasis on *speaking* in all these passages. **Do you think the writers are too sensitive about minor sins like grumbling and flattery?**

Look now at James chapter 3 verses 3–6. **How is the tongue like a bit in a horse's mouth?**

How is it like the rudder of a ship?

How is it like a fire?

It's like Francis said,

> Your tongue can be that little spark that can destroy so much. Where one careless sentence can destroy a relationship, can ruin someone else's life, can lead someone else into depression or into a spiral.

Do you think these comparisons make more sense regarding individual behavior or regarding leadership of a church? Or perhaps both?

Do you think it's really impossible to "tame the tongue," as it says in verse 8?

How would a person do this? If you tried to tame your speaking habits, how would you go about it?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about the importance of what we say in the following Bible passages.
Psalm 19:14; Philippians 2:14–16; Hebrews 10:24–25; Proverbs 10:31–32

According to these passages, how important is what we say?

What different "audiences" are described here? Who's listening to us?

Do you get any ideas here about how to control your tongue?

How would you describe the situation in verses 9–12?

Who is James talking about? What can we guess about these people?

Verse 9 fits with the inferences James has been making all along. He's talking to people who hear the Word of God but don't obey it. They want to be religious, and they say nice things to beggars, but they don't actually help people in need. What's more, they can't stop saying nasty things about other people. They seem slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to become angry. The opening verses of chapter 3 might suggest that some of these people are leading churches. So they're leading the songs of praise to God, but then they bad-mouth other people.

James says it clearly: This ought not to be so.

LIVE IT OUT

The tongue is a powerful force for all of us, and it affects the way we influence others. Whether you lead a church or a small group or a family, what you say will have a huge impact.

At the start of this session, we talked about helpful things that were said to us. Think about the influence those words had on you. Think of the influence your words can have on your children, your neighbors, your students, your friends. You have great power in your hands—no, not in your hands, but in your mouth. Power to do good or to do harm.

How could you help or harm people by what you say this week?

Turn on the TV or the radio or the Internet, and chances are, you'll hear someone talking. And it's even likely that you'll hear someone criticizing other people. It's easy for us to get swept into that. After all, we say, those other people are wrong! They're stupid! They're evil! They deserve our criticism! But God still loves those people, doesn't He? How can we praise God one minute and in the next minute tear down people God loves? This should not be.

Francis closed his teaching with some words that require reflection. He said,

> If all that is coming out of this mouth is negativity, slander, cursing, hurting other people, speak negatively about other people then I have to go, "Okay maybe my heart really wasn't changed. Did the Holy Spirit really enter into me? Am I really a new creation?"

It's impossible to tame the tongue. No human can do it, but God can. Ask the Lord to give you a tongue that seeks to bless Him and bless others. May the words of our mouths be acceptable to Him.

LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Memorization: Learn James 3:9–10. This isn't your normal type of memory verse, but it might prove helpful in real-life situations.

Stop-Phrase: When you find yourself speaking badly about someone, stop—in mid-sentence if you need to. Find a phrase to run through your mind in those cases. Maybe it's James 3:9–10. Maybe it's just "This should not be." Or maybe it's a more positive statement like "Bless the Lord, O my soul" or the prayer from Psalm 19:14.

Encouragement: Think of three people you can encourage this week, and do so. Be as specific as possible. Can you bolster their confidence or their faith?

Thanks: Who has encouraged you in the past? Who has spoken words into your life that truly helped you? Can you find them and thank them for that?

Media Fast: Many of us learn unkind habits of communication from talk radio, cable news, or online videos. If this is a problem for you, engage in a "fast," abstaining from those media sources for a period of time—perhaps the next seven days. Then re-evaluate.