

Words that poison

You are hopeless.
You are worthless.
You are a failure.
You are a disappointment.
You are useless.
Idiot.
Failure.
Loser.
You're ugly. Fat. Dumb. Stupid.
You're not good enough.
You'll never amount to anything.

Has anyone ever said those things to you?
A parent. A friend. A boss. A brother or sister. A spouse.

These are not just words. These are judgments. These are words that shape us, words that mold us.
These are words that stay with us. But... verse 8:

8 *but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

Words can be poison. Evil. No human being can tame the tongue. None of us are perfect. All of us have said things that have damaged and hurt people. All of us have stumbled. All of us are guilty.
Verse 10:

10 *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.*

This should not be. But it is.

A small rudder steers a ship.
A small bit in the mouth of a horse controls its direction.
A small spark starts a large fire.
The tongue directs other people's lives. It sets lives on fire. A few words can bring depression, pain, or hurt that stays with us our whole lives.

Our tongue directs our life. Our tongue displays our personality. What comes out of our mouth has consequences for our life and the lives of others.

Where the poison comes from

So where does the poison come from? Verse 16:

16 *For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*

Envy. Selfish ambition.

It comes from envy. Wanting what others have. The desire to have something that someone else has.

It comes from selfish ambition – the desire to have more, to be more. The desire to look after ourselves first.

We put others down to make ourselves feel better. We speak harsh words because we're jealous. We speak behind people's backs because we want to feel better about ourselves. We want to direct other people's lives down a worse path so our life can be on a better path.

And we are all guilty.

No human being can tame the tongue. It's an ongoing struggle for us to control our tongue. It's something we will never master. We will never fully control. Because our hearts are, deep down, selfish and envious. We think about ourselves, and it takes over. Our own career. Our own family. Our own ambitions. Our own desires. They take us over, often at the cost of damaging the lives of others.

Where wisdom comes from

So what do we do? Where is the encouragement in this chapter? What can we do when we are helpless to control our tongue? Verse 17:

17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

The wisdom from heaven is pure. Peace-loving, considerate, submissive, merciful, impartial, sincere. These are all characteristics of humility. Characteristics of putting other people's needs first. And they are, of course, characteristics of **Jesus**. Sacrificial, humble and focused on the needs of other people. If we want to bring any control to our tongue, it will come from selflessness. It will come from thinking about others above ourselves. It will come from loving peace.

We need to consider where we have failed in this. Where is it that we have not shown the character of Jesus in talking to other people, in talking ABOUT other people?

Perhaps in words we've spoken. Maybe in gossip. Maybe in a letter, an email, a Facebook post. Not just in the words that come out of our mouth, but also in the words that we put down in writing.

III – What words have you spoken to people in the past, even this past week, that have not shown the character of Jesus? Who is the person you've said those things to? Would you go to that person, and talk about that – and even say sorry? There are times I've spoken poorly even to my own children – usually when I'm stressed about something else. I've spoken in anger that they don't deserve. Or I've spoken in a way that has not been kind. A way that wasn't considerate. And I can tell you that it makes an amazing difference when I go to them, even the next day, and say "I'm sorry. I should not have spoken to you like that. That wasn't fair. I was upset about something else and I took it out on you." Those words of apology and confession don't make us weak. They make us strong. They make us genuine and sincere.

Often, we can hear rebukes like James 3 and think about how we should NOT speak – the things we should NOT say. But we must also think of the things we SHOULD say. What SHOULD we say? How SHOULD we use our tongues? What words SHOULD we speak into people's lives? And this is where we need to really put the effort.

As children, we may have often heard that word: "No", that phrase, "Don't do that!" That constant rebuke: "You're wrong, you're a failure, you're worthless." And we remember those words because they hurt.

But what we need is also what we needed as children – the words of encouragement. Verse 10 again:

10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

This should not be. So what SHOULD be?

Words of humility. Words that put us “right”: with God.

Do you want to be right with God?

Being right with the wrong person.

In the world we live in, we are encouraged to puff ourselves up and make ourselves look good. We are encouraged to find approval from the people of this world – from people at work, from our family, from our friends and neighbours. We seek to be right with the world and to do what is acceptable to them. And at the end of our lives, we will then be able to look back and see how much the world approved of us, and how good we looked, how successful we were. Look at my life. My career. My home. My wife, my husband, my children. Look how GOOD it all is. And we cry out to the world: Accept me! Approve of my life! Give me reassurance that I’m doing well!

But James encourages to seek the approval of God. It’s what he calls the “harvest of righteousness”. Verse 18:

18 *Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.*

James reminds us that the harvest we are hoping for, the harvest of all that we “accumulate” by the end of our lives, is to be measured by God’s approval, not the world’s approval. We want our harvest to be a harvest of being right with God. What are you accumulating in your life at the moment?

Harvesting righteousness

III – Do you know that feeling you get when you complete something? That feeling of satisfaction when you’ve finished a project at work, or at home, that feeling of finishing your work at the end of the week, that feeling of finishing a race, or finishing painting a room, or finishing an exam, or that feeling when your kids grow up and they’ve accomplished something you’re proud of?

James wants us to think about that in our conversations. Every conversation we have is a work. When we talk with someone, when we speak words to someone, what do we have at the end of that conversation? What have we “harvested”? What have we “gained”? Have we gained selfish ambition? Was that conversation a conversation that was for self-gain? Was it a conversation that harboured envy? Or was it a conversation that harvested righteousness? At the end of every conversation, are we right with **God**? Are we seeking our approval from **Him**?

At the end of our life, can we look back at the times we have talked with people, can we look back at the words we’ve used and say that those words sit right with God?

James wants to encourage us to speak words that are peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Those words will bring us a harvest of righteousness.

Our tongue is such a small part of our body, but the consequences of what we say have a larger impact on us and on others than anything we will DO in our life. Today, this week, what words will you use?

James 3 New International Version (NIV)

Taming the Tongue

3 Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. **2** We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

3 When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.

4 Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. **5** Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. **6** The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, **8** but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. **10** Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. **11** Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? **12** My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Two Kinds of Wisdom

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. **14** But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. **15** Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. **16** For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. **18** Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.