

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR MOUTH

Years ago, there was a lawyer who loved to attack his opponents through scathing letters printed in newspapers. In 1842, he ridiculed the wrong man. James Shields did not take kindly to the attack against him in the Springfield Journal. Mr. Shields tracked down the attorney who had publicly embarrassed him and challenged him to a duel. The lawyer was a writer, not a fighter, but he could not get out of the duel without losing his honor. He was given the choice of weapons and chose swords in hopes of using his long arms to his advantage. He stood little chance of winning as Mr. Shields was an expert. On the appointed day they met on a sandbar in the Mississippi River. At the last minute a friend of his intervened and convinced the men to stop the duel. The lawyer returned to his practice a changed man. Never again did he openly criticize anyone. The man's name was Abraham Lincoln. In fact, years later when he heard his wife criticize the south during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln said, "Don't criticize them; they are just what we would be under similar circumstances."

Lincoln learned to control his tongue. When was the last time that something that you said got you into trouble? Today we are continuing in our series on the book of James and we come to chapter 3. Today we are going to be looking at how to manage your mouth.

James 3:1-12 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his 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 person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, 8 but no man 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 men, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

The average person has about 30 conversations a day. If you're a man you speak an average of 20,000 words a day. If you're a woman you speak about 30,000 words a day.

I heard a story of two men who were talking to each other. The one guy asked, "Do you resent the fact that your wife always has to have the last word?" The friend replied, "No, I'm just really glad when she finally gets to it!"

Our mouths get us into a lot of trouble. James begins by saying "We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check." What he means is that learning to control what you say is a sign of maturity.

When you go to the doctor and say that you are not feeling well, one of the first things he may do is have you stick out your tongue. Your tongue reveals what's going on inside of you, not just physically but spiritually.

James says that learning to manage your mouth is important. You have got to learn to tame your tongue. Why is this so important? Three reasons;

1. My Tongue Directs Where I Go

The words we speak have a tremendous influence and control over our life. Our words shape and direct us. The words that we speak, especially the things we say about ourselves, form our identity and direct our lives. Even though the tongue is small, its influence is great.

James 3:3 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.

Consider a bit in a horse's mouth. You've got a huge stallion, 2,000-3,000 pounds, and a 95-pound jockey on his back. The jockey can control the tremendous mighty horse by a little piece of metal stuck strategically over his tongue. Likewise, your tongue controls the direction of your life wherever you want to go, and a little bit of a word or a phrase can influence the total direction of your life.

An influential man in town was sitting in the barber's chair having a shave and a haircut. He saw a pretty woman who was working in the office there and started flirting with her. "You're cute! How about a date tonight?" he said to her. The pretty woman smiled and said, "I'm sorry, but I'm married." "That's no big deal!" said the arrogant man. "Call the bum up and tell him you will be home late tonight!" The woman smiled and said, "Why don't you tell the bum yourself. He's shaving you right now!" Watch your words, especially when there is a razor at your throat.

For 2 years Naomi and I lived on a ship called the Doulos. More than 300 people lived on that ship. It was 410 feet long and weighed almost 7000 tons. Yet, as you can see from this picture I took the day we first saw the ship when it was still in dry dock, it had a very small rudder.

My tongue directs where I go. Circle the word "steered". Your tongue is the steering wheel of your life. It is the guidance system. It determines your course and direction. If you don't like the way you're headed right now, change the way you talk.

There was a stock boy at a grocery store. An older woman asked him, "Can I buy half a head of lettuce?" He walked back to the manager to ask, not realizing the older woman was walking right behind him. He said, "You're not going to believe this, there's an old bag out there who wants to buy half a head of lettuce." When he turned around and saw her standing there he said, "And this fine lady would like to buy the other half."

James says that my tongue directs where I go, so I've got to learn to control it.

2. My Tongue Can Destroy What I Have

James 3:5 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 person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

James gives another illustration. Imagine a beautiful forest -- tall beautiful trees everywhere. Now imagine it in one minute up in smoke, completely destroyed instantly with a little tiny match. It only takes a spark to get a fire going.

When I was in grade 6 my brother, who was a year older brought a magnifying glass with him one day to school. He and some friends were using it to focus the sun and burn things. He ended up burning some leaves. When the recess bell sounded, they went back inside, but a small fire had started in the leaves. It ended up causing a huge fire in the backyard of the guy who lived behind the school. The fire department was called and my brother was in a lot of trouble! All from a little spark.

A careless word can destroy a life overnight. Thousands of lives. Gossip is like fire. It spreads quickly and it wrecks havoc. I wonder how many people because of a careless word have destroyed their marriage, or their career, or their reputation, or the reputation of another, or their church, or a friendship.

Proverbs 18:20-21 From the fruit of his mouth a man's stomach is filled; with the harvest from his lips he is satisfied. 21 The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

In the good news bible this verse reads "You have to live with the consequences of everything you say." That is true. Words can create a chain reaction. You can say something that you didn't mean to have any harm, but it can have devastating effects that are beyond your control.

It says here that words can corrupt the whole person, set their life on fire, and come from hell. Our words can harm. James says you've got to learn to manage your mouth, not only because it can direct where you go but it can destroy what you have. You can lose your family, your kids, your career simply by what you say.

James uses another illustration. He talks about a zoo.

James 3:7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, 8 but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

There are some animals that humans have learned to tame, but others -- not so much. When you go into African Lion Safari there is a big sign that says "Do not get out of your car. Do not roll down the window." Why? Those animals that look so tame and peaceful could rip your head off in a second. They are not tame, they are wild. That means you do not know what they will do. There are some animals that you just don't play with. Some snakes have deadly venom, just a few drops can kill.

When I was a kid, our family visited Florida and went to see an aunt. I went fishing in this little lake behind the house. My dad came out and took this picture of me. An hour later, it was getting dark and I was getting bored. I reached over and grabbed a stick that was beside me and threw it in the water. When I touched the stick, it moved. It was a deadly coral snake that I had grabbed by the tail. I dropped that fishing pole and ran. You don't mess with coral snakes.

Back in 1925 Adolf Hitler wrote a poisonous book called Mein Kampf. It has been said that for every word in that book, it cost the life of 125 people during the Second World War. Words can kill.

The tongue can be like that, filled with poison. You can assassinate somebody with your words. The tongue is a deadly weapon.

As someone once wrote, "Mistakes of the tongue have destroyed more people, ruined more marriages, and cost more businessmen their jobs and their futures than any other kind of mistake."

3. My Tongue Displays Who I Am

The words I speak reveal my real character. It tells what's really inside of me. James points out how inconsistent we are in our speech.

James 3:9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness.

We say these things out of the same mouth. We come to church on Sunday. The highest use of your mouth is to use it praising God. We sing praises to the Lord. Then we walk out, get into the car and on the way home we argue about where we're going to eat lunch. Isn't it amazing how quickly your attitude can change? In one minute, you're saying, "Praise the Lord", the next you're saying, "Shut up!" The tongue is a strange contradiction.

It's amazing how quickly it can change, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. One minute we're praising God and the next we're cursing other people. Cursing here doesn't necessarily mean profanity. It means any kind of put down.

This bothers me immensely. I think of how easy it is to hurt the people that we love. How is it possible in one minute to be talking to my kids in gentle, loving tones and the next minute I'm being mean to them? I hurt them. I am saying things that damage their self-esteem. How is that? Do you struggle with an inconsistent tongue? James says we all have it. We speak lovingly in one breath and then lash out in the next. What's the problem? Why do we do that?

James 3:10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

The point is, whatever is in the well comes out in the water. Whatever is in the tree, comes out in the fruit. What is the likelihood of an apple tree producing cherries? My problem is not really my tongue. My problem is my heart. What's inside is what comes out. My mouth eventually betrays what is really on the inside of me. I can fool you and pretend but eventually my tongue is going to catch me. It's going to let you know what's really inside.

Have you heard this excuse? Someone says something really mean or hurtful and they say, "I don't know what got into me. It's not like me to say that. I don't know why I said that. It's totally out of character. I didn't really mean it." James would say, yes, it is. It's just like you. You meant it. Quit kidding yourself. What's inside is going to come out. You don't have a spring that one minute gives salt water and the next gives fresh water. That's inconsistent. It's a natural law: what comes out of the well is what is inside of it.

Matthew 12:33-34 Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.

If you've got a problem with your tongue, it's much more serious than you think. You have a heart problem. A person with a harsh tongue has an angry heart. A person with a negative tongue has a negative heart. A person with an overactive tongue has an unsettled heart. A person with a boasting tongue has an insecure heart. A person with a filthy tongue has an impure heart. A person who is critical all the time has a bitter heart.

On the other hand, a person who is always encouraging has a happy heart. A person who speaks gently has a loving heart. A person who speaks truthfully has an honest heart. So, what can you do if you recognize you have a problem in this area?

A. Get a new heart

Ezekiel 18:31-32 Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? 32 For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!

The first step is a relationship with Jesus. If you have not accepted Jesus into your life then you do not have the power of the Holy Spirit with you. Surrender your life to Jesus today.

B. Ask God for help every day

Psalms 141:3 Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.

Ask God to help you to be wise about the words that you speak. Pray that God will heal your heart of hurts and the 'well' from which you speak will be settled.

C. Think before you speak

James 1:19 My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,

For some people this is more difficult than others. People have different temperaments. Some people are thinkers, they think about a sentence before they speak it. Other people are influencers, they do not process words internally so they really do not know what they are saying until they are speaking. People like that need to be extra careful.

As a pastor I was once told "do not let anything come out of your mouth that you would not want everyone in your life to hear." Always speak as if you are speaking into a microphone that is broadcasting what you say to everyone. Watch your words carefully. Remember the damage that they can cause.

In 1899 four newspaper reporters met by chance one Saturday night, in a Denver railway depot. The men's names were Al Stevens, Jack Tournay, John Lewis and Hal Wilshire. They represented four different newspapers: the Times, the Post, the Republican and the Rocky Mountain News. Each began to complain that they had been hoping to dig up a story for the Sunday editions but that they had come up empty. For them, no news was bad news.

One of them said that he was just going to make up a story and hand it in. The other three laughed. Someone suggested they all walk over to the local bar and have a beer. They did.

At the bar, Jack said he liked Al's idea about faking a story. Why don't each of us write a fake story and get off the hook? John said Jack was thinking too small. Four half-baked fakes didn't cut it. What they needed was one real whopper they could all use.

A phony domestic story would be too easy to check on, so they began discussing foreign angles that would be difficult to verify. China was distant enough, it was agreed. They would write about China. John leaned forward and said: The Chinese government is making plans to demolish the Great Wall; our engineers are bidding on the job. Harold was skeptical. Why would the Chinese want to destroy the Great Wall of China? John thought for a moment. They're tearing down the ancient boundary to symbolize international good will, to welcome foreign trade!

The next day the 4 newspapers carried the story. Front page. In fact, the Times headline that Sunday read: GREAT CHINESE WALL DOOMED! PEKING SEEKS WORLD TRADE!

Of course, the story was a phony, a ludicrous fabrication concocted by four newsmen in a hotel bar. But their story was taken seriously, was picked up and expanded by newspapers in the Eastern U.S. and then by newspapers abroad. When the Chinese themselves learned that the Americans were sending a demolition crew to tear down their national monument, most were indignant; some were enraged!

Particularly incensed were the members of a secret society, a volatile group of Chinese patriots who were already wary of foreign intervention. Inspired by the story, they attacked the foreign embassies in Peking, slaughtered hundreds of missionaries. In two months, 12,000 troops from eight nations joined forces, invaded China with the purpose of protecting their own countrymen.

The bloodshed which followed, sparked by a journalistic hoax invented in a barroom in Denver, became the white-hot international incident known as the Boxer Rebellion. In 1963 they made a film about it called 55 Days in Peking, starring Charlton Heston, David Niven and many others. Hundreds of lives lost, all because of the careless words of 4 men.