



MERE WORDS
JAMES 3:2-8

In a nutshell

How we speak to others is a barometer of our Christian life.

Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Proverbs 12:18

**The stones from my enemies
These wounds will mend
But I cannot survive
The roses from my friends**

Ben Harper³¹

James 3:2–8

²We 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. ³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or 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. ⁵Likewise 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. ⁶The 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. ⁷All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

The presence of some in James' audience who wanted to be teachers (verse 1) gives him the perfect opportunity to discuss a theme relevant to all believers — the need to control what we say.

Who can be 'perfect'?

The expression 'never at fault' is literally '*is not stumbling*'. And the word 'perfect' does not mean scoring 10/10, of being 'sinless'. It means 'whole' or 'mature', which is how the same word was translated back in James 1:4. James is simply saying that although we all stumble in a variety of ways, those who gain control over what they say are *mature* Christians — well on their way toward mastering their entire life ('able to keep his whole body in check').

How we speak to others, then, is a gauge of the whole Christian life. It may seem like a secondary issue but, in James' opinion, speech is one of the most important dimensions of life. Jesus said much the same thing: 'For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks' (Matthew 12:34).

The power and danger of the tongue

James compares the tongue to the bit in the mouth of a horse (verse 3) and a rudder on a ship (verses 4–5). The point is not that the tongue controls our life; he simply means that a small instrument (like the tongue) can produce huge outcomes.

James then describes the tongue as a fire that sets alight an inferno (verses 5–6). An apparently small comment — a lie, an insult, a piece of gossip — can damage relationships, destroy trust and can produce a whole series of unexpected and hurtful outcomes. It can corrupt the whole person and set his or her entire existence 'on fire'. Jesus said a similar thing (Matthew 15:17–20).

As if this description weren't enough, the tongue is compared to a deadly snake in verses 7–8. James lived in a culture that had tamed lions, elephants and even deadly vipers. The tongue though, he says, remains undomesticated — a completely wild and venomous creature.

It probably goes without saying that James is using hyperbole in this passage, just as Jesus did (Matthew 5:29–30 for example). He describes things in absolute terms so as to drive home the point. It is important to realise, though, that James does not think that taming the tongue is *impossible* or that our words *only ever* speak with venom. The whole point of this section is to help us stop stumbling in what we say (3:2).

The tongue as a barometer

James describes our tongue as a kind of barometer of the whole of the ethical life: people who control their tongues are able to keep their whole body in check. What we say and how we say it are fundamental expressions of the royal law of love.

This has large implications for all of us — for the elderly church-goer who is constantly cranky with ‘the teenagers of today’; for the zealous young believer who praises God in church but knocks his mates and snipes at his mum; for the business professional who addresses employees and shop assistants as inferiors; for the wife who cuts her husband down (without appearing to do so); for the preacher who constantly admonishes his people and rarely encourages or praises them. The examples are endless, the point is the same: the tongue reveals the person.

Conversation at a party

- * How are Lauren and Steve, I haven’t heard from them for a while?
- # Yeah, they’re pretty well I think. They’ve had some issues with their youngest daughter Jessica though.
- * Really, what’s gone on?
- # Well you know she has all these learning difficulties?
- * No, what’s the problem?
- # I’m not really sure, but she can’t read and doesn’t fit in with the other kids. It’s a bit of a worry really. They’ve had a rough trot I suppose. This on top of Steve’s depression and hassles at work — it can’t have been easy.
- * Oh, I didn’t know about any of that.

- # Oh yeah, Steve has had all this stress leave — the company obviously think he's a bit of a liability and have been trying to get rid of him. He has some sort of anxiety disorder.
- * Oh no. They always seemed like the perfect couple to me. Just shows you doesn't it? Has it been going on for long?
- # Yes — it's put real strain on their marriage actually. Lauren reckons she's thought about pulling the plug completely.
- * Gee, that's terrible. I would never have guessed. Do you think they'll make it?
- # I really hope so.
- * Me too.
- # More wine?
- * Lovely.

Prayer Questions

God of grace,
forgive me for the
times I have hurt
others by what I
have said. Help me
to tame my tongue
and honour you
in all things,
in Jesus' name.
Amen.

1. Verse 2 says that the person who can control the tongue can control the whole of his/her ethical life. How so? What's the logic here?
2. Read verses 3–5 again. Is James implying that the tongue actually controls our life? Why/why not? What exactly is the point of these similes?
3. If the tongue provides a barometer of our hearts, what would the things you've said this week indicate about your spiritual health?
4. Melinda is known as a caring person but has to admit she gains a strange pleasure from passing on information about others. How could she test herself before she speaks about others to ensure what she says is not displeasing to the Lord?
5. Think of a time when your words have been 'corrupting' of yourself (verse 6), and when they have been damaging to others, or like deadly poison (verse 8). If you could rewind the clock, what would you say differently?