

FAITH THAT HELPS US

CONTROL OUR TONGUE



Main verse:

"If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are only fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless!" James 1:26

When you type the words "Picture of person with zipped lips" into the internet, you get a variety of options; most of which the person is not looking happy!

The problem is most pictures depict a person being silenced. Someone is not allowing them to voice their opinions, comments or beliefs. We've all been in situations where this is the case, and we know how horrible it feels.

So, when I saw a picture of a person zipping their own lips, I knew it was the right one!

I'm sure we've been in situations where we've said something hastily, without thinking, and we end up regretting what we'd said. Then, we wish we had the ability to zip our mouths shut, due to the damage our words caused. Am I the only one, who's said to themselves, 'Zip it!' Or 'Hold your tongue, don't say anything right now, silence is best in this situation'?

Although we recognise that some people struggle with controlling what they say more than others, it really is a basic human struggle. And that's why James deals with it in his letter.

We've heard James give us really practical advice on how we can know our faith is genuine and how we can ensure our faith will work no matter what life throws at us. But what we may not have noticed is that one of the major themes that runs through James' letter is 'self-deception'. James confronts the way we lie to ourselves. And none of us are immune to this. We all have a tendency to rationalise things in a self-excusing kind of way. We tell ourselves rational lies, to convince our minds what we know in our hearts is wrong.

This is a theme James deals with repeatedly, because he knows that you and I can't be all God calls us to be until we are honest with ourselves. The most common form of self-deception is in the way we talk. We think we are doing well spiritually, but our words betray us.

That's why he said, right back in the first part of his letter,

"Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless." (v26) 'Strong words, James!' we may say.

But James doesn't let us stop there. As he moves on, he goes into great graphic detail about what God thinks about what we say.

I encourage you to open the Bible in your pews to page 1723. We're now in chapter 3.

James starts with a warning, especially to people like me, who teach and preach the word of God. Those who stand in a pulpit like this one are going to have a harder judgement when we stand to give an account of our lives before Christ (v1).

But, then in verse 2, James makes a statement that is probably one of the most well-known, even by those who've never read the Bible, "*We all stumble in many ways.*" Or another translation says, "... *we all make many mistakes.*"

'You're right there, James!' However, James identifies that one of the greatest areas where we stumble is in what we say.

"Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check." (v2b)

He illustrates his point by saying just like we can control the direction of a horse by using a bit in its mouth; or change the direction of a huge ship using only a tiny rudder; or cause a huge fire by just a little spark, even though the tongue is pretty small, it can do enormous damage (v3-5).

And this damage spreads not just throughout our own lives, but also the lives of those around us (v6).

One little hurtful word can damage a person for the rest of their life.

One or two criticising comments can cause a person to take their life.

One short argument can end a marriage.

One sentence of self-criticism repeated over and over in our mind can change the course of our life, even if that self-talk has no basis in truth.

That's why James tells us, "*the tongue is a restless and evil, full of deadly poison*" (v8b)

With our mouths we praise God, but we also curse people, those who have been made in God's image (v9). James says, "*This should not be.*" (v10)

In many ways, we can pinpoint the tongue as the part of our body which makes us most vulnerable to sin. Sins like backbiting, lying, threatening, cursing, deceiving, boasting, ridicule, slander, false witness, hypocrisy, criticism, flattery, fault finding, judging, gossiping, filthy language ... all come from our mouths. Although we tend to sanitise these sins, God talks more about these sins than any other. Now James has already told us that the tongue is so powerful, it is impossible for us to control on our own. (v8)

So, what's the solution? How can we develop a faith that helps us control what we say, when we've just read it's impossible for us to do?

We find the answer in James' next illustration.

In verses 11 and 12, James uses an argument that, I believe, he took out of his own brother, Jesus', sermon library. "*Can both fresh water and saltwater flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*" (v11-12)

Where does Jesus use this same language?

In teaching about how to discern the difference between true godly teachers from false ones, Jesus said, "*by their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?*" (Matthew 7:15-20)

And in another place Jesus said, *"A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of."*(Luke 6:45 and also see Matthew 12:34)

In Jesus words lies the solution to our tongue problem. The truth is our deeper problem isn't actually our tongue. It's what we've chosen to store in our heart.

I love it when something in our world clearly reflects a spiritual reality.

Think about when you go for a health check-up. What helps your doctor make a diagnosis? You're asked to stick out your tongue. An analysis of your tongue indicates the health of your entire body. Well both James and Jesus say it's the same in the spirit areas of our life.

If we want to discern our inner spiritual health, we'll see it by what pours out of our mouth. Our words show who we think we really are. Our words reveal how spiritually healthy or how spiritually sick we really are. The person who has a harsh, accusing tongue, is revealing an angry and hurt heart. On the other hand, the person who has a gentle, kind tongue, reveals a heart that is filled with the compassion, grace and mercy of God. I've included more of what our words reveal in the discussion and reflection questions at the end.

If we want wise and humble words to pour from our mouth, we need to invest time storing up God's treasures of wisdom, truth, grace, mercy and humility in our heart. Only then will these godly characteristics flow through what we say, and how we live our lives.

That's why James connects what's going on in our hearts with how we can be known as a wise person. He continues, *"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."*(v13)

He's saying, 'you show your wisdom by how humbly you live, how you treat and speak about others, and also how you speak about yourself, to yourself.' In contrast, *"if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts"*(v14), and boast that you're wise, you'll be 'denying the truth' or lying to yourself. That's not wisdom, James says, *"its earthly, its unspiritual and it's inspired by the devil."* (v15)

Application | So, how can we develop a faith that helps us filter what we say?

Everyday, we need to do two things:

First, we need to decide to spend time investing in nurturing our heart with God's medicine.

Think of it this way, at some stage most of us here have had a heart transplant.

When we asked Jesus to fill our heart with the Holy Spirit, our old sick sinful heart was removed, and a new clean healthy heart was put in its place.

However, just like physical heart transplant recipients need to take medication to protect their new heart for the rest of their lives, we need to do the same.

Our daily spiritual medicine for heart health is to invest in storing up the good treasures God has made available to us through His Word, His promises and His Spirit.

Secondly, we need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us manage our mouth. In Psalm 141 David prays, "Lord, help me control my tongue; and help me be careful about what I say." (Psalm 141:3)

And as we grow the fruit of self-control will produce wisdom in our lives. Amen.

PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are ways James illustrates the power of the tongue in 3:1-12? What are some of the ways our tongue can be used for good or bad?
3. Read Prov. 10:19; 13:3; 17:27; Ps. 39:1. Why is restraining our tongue so difficult? Why is it a necessary discipline? How do we do this by God's grace?
4. When has another person encouraged and built you up through their words?
5. Pause and reflect on ways you might be guilty of gossip, discouragement, lying, stretching the truth, self-defence or self-justification, sarcasm, tearing people down, boasting, seeking to control others, immoral joking, being judgmental, or expressing anger or pride in how you use your tongue.
6. To grow by God's grace in using your tongue to build up rather than tear down, what habits, practices, or acts do you need to put off and put on?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think would be "good fruit" for Christians when it comes to our words?
2. Read Proverbs 21:23; Eph. 4:29; 1 Peter 3:10; Col. 4:6. Why are our words such a powerful tool, both to tear down and sin but also to build up and give life?
3. Why is controlling our tongue or our words such a hard thing?
4. What are ways the Spirit might help us or that the Bible equips us to use our words for good and not for evil? In other words, how do we battle the tongue in God's power?
5. What are some specific, realistic ways you can fight sinning with your words but also start using your words to build up others and glorify God more?

SELF-DIAGNOSTIC TONGUE RELATED TRUTHS:

1. Someone with a harsh tongue, reveals an angry heart.
2. Someone with a negative tongue, reveals a fearful heart.
3. Someone with an unfriendly tongue, reveals a hard heart.
4. Someone with a critical tongue, reveals a bitter heart.
5. Someone with a bragging tongue, reveals an insecure heart.
6. Someone with a filthy tongue, reveals an impure heart.
7. Someone with a judgemental tongue, reveals a guilty heart.
8. Someone with an overactive tongue, reveals an unsettled heart.
9. Someone with an encouraging tongue, reveals a happy heart.
10. Someone with a gentle tongue, reveals a loving heart.
11. Someone with a controlled tongue, reveals a peaceful heart.