

September 15th, 2024

James 3:1-12 “Can I Take That Back, Please?”

Good morning! It's week three in our study of the Book of James. Don't worry if you haven't been here. Every week is a standalone lesson, and I recap anything we've already covered that's helpful to know. This isn't like a series on Netflix where you're lost if you haven't seen the other episodes. This is more like *Law and Order* than *Yellowstone*. This is a special week though. In fact, this is the week that anyone who is familiar with James has been waiting for, because it's the only passage in this book that some preachers give any attention to. We preachers *love* chapter three. In the study Bible that I received as a graduation gift, the section heading is called, “The Power of the Tongue.” The Life Application Bible lists it as, “Taming the Tongue.” The Contemporary English Version is brutally straightforward – it's called “The Tongue” which sounds like some old 1950s horror movie. I think part of the reason why this passage is so popular with preachers and congregations alike is that it lays things out simply, but it also has an edge to it. It has some good hellfire-preacher words in there like, “judge” and “strictness” and “curse.” But it's also a passage people can relate to. Verse 8 says, “No one can tame the tongue.” Ain't that the truth? We all know how hard it is to manage our words. Words have the potential of doing a lot of damage. I think we can all recall early memories of when people have said hurtful things to us and how the impact of those words carry on throughout our lives and affect the way we respond to situations. I'm sure we can think of occasions where we've used words that are hurtful to others and wished we could take them back, especially when we see the damage those words inflicted. My favorite Vacation Bible School teacher, Eldora Flick ... yes, the Rice Krispy Treat lady ... had a great lesson about how dangerous our words can be, and I've passed it down to a lot of kids at camp, and youth events. She'd hand us a small paper plate, a toothpick and a little travel-sized tube of toothpaste. Then she'd say, “Let's have a contest to see how fast we can empty these tubes of toothpaste!” And this is back when the tubes weren't plastic. They were

tin, so we would roll up the tube real tight to squeeze out every little bit of toothpaste onto the plates. Then Eldora would say, “Okay, now take your toothpick and let’s see who can get the toothpaste back in the tube first.” We’d say, “Wait, we can’t do that!” She’d say, “I don’t see why not. Someone had to put the toothpaste in there in the first place. Use your toothpicks!” And so we’d unroll those little tubes and try our best to get the paste back in, but even the little bit that we could get in there wouldn’t stay. And God bless Eldora, she let us work at it for quite a while. She wanted us to fully experience the frustration and futility of this exercise. Finally, she’d say, “This is what it’s like when we say something mean or hurtful to someone. It doesn’t take any effort at all to let those words come out of us, but it’s impossible to take those words back, and it always leaves a big mess.”

The first lesson we learned in our study of James is that words matter. The second lesson we learned is that our actions ... our deeds matter even more. This week the lesson is all about the consequences of being careless with our words. Since this is a fairly simple lesson, let’s treat it as a “top-ten list.” Preachers love doing “top-ten lists,” and it helps that James lists 10 examples of how we misuse our words, so let’s just launch into it, shall we? Let’s do a countdown instead of a count up.

10. *Slander and Lies*. This is an easy place to start because, let’s face it, slander and lies seem to be rather fashionable these days. It’s like an avalanche. Once the trend gets started, everyone wants in on the action. Pretty soon it becomes the expectation, and people who don’t use slander in their verbal arsenal are seen as “weak.” But here’s the thing – slander is the ninth “thou shalt not” in the Ten Commandments. “Thou shalt not bear false witness.” James puts it another way later in this book when he says, “Let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no.” Yet hearing the commandment and actually carrying it out are two different things.

9. *Gossip*. Here’s one that I think has always been fashionable because I think it’s rooted in our subconscious somewhere. We love to gossip, and sometimes we aren’t even aware of when we’re doing it. Gossip

magazines are one of the few magazines that haven't gone completely digital. You cannot get a printed copy of *Wired*, *National Geographic* or the *Atlantic* anymore, but there's always copies of *People*, *Star*, *Us Weekly* and the *National Enquirer* available in the grocery store checkout line. "After all, inquiring minds want to know." We want to know the latest dirt on Prince Harry and Meghan or the ongoing battle between Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, or who Taylor Swift's next ex-boyfriend will be. Sometimes we just can't help ourselves! Maybe we think our own lives are too mundane, so we get our kicks from other people's drama. Maybe it's schadenfreude. We talked about that earlier this summer. It's the pleasure we get at the expense of other's misfortune. It's no surprise that this was an issue in the church James was addressing in this letter. Church people are awful when it comes to gossip. Want to take a guess what word church people use in the south as a substitute for "gossip?" "Sharing." Talk about re-branding something!

8. *Insults*. You know the old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me?" We all know this isn't true. Words cause harm and the bruises can last a very long time. Next week, starting on Saturday is the beginning of "United Against Hate" week. The Chico Area Interfaith Council received a grant last spring to launch a prevention and intervention program that addresses hateful speech and actions. There are a lot of populations that find themselves on the receiving end of hateful words. There are religious organizations here in town like Congregation Beth Israel, Chico Islamic Center, Bethel AME Church, Chico Havurah and others who have not only been victims of hateful words, they've had their property defaced and threats made to staff and congregation members. Minority groups including Black, Hispanic, Asian, Middle Eastern, Native American, Sikh, and the LGBTQ community are all too familiar with hateful words and actions. People with physical and mental disabilities are treated poorly too. People are even treated badly because of their vocation. Ask first responders like police officers and firefighters, medical workers, social workers ... even PG&E employees after the 2018 Camp Fire. Words definitely hurt, but sometimes insulting words evolve into violence.

Remember, the theme of James so far has been, “Words matter, but actions must accompany words or else the words don’t mean anything.” Unfortunately, that’s also the case when it comes to bad words. Bad words often turn into bad actions as we see every day in this dangerously divided world we live in.

7. *Grumbling and Complaining*. This one cuts right to the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Remember, the most common description of Christians in the first two centuries of the movement was, “See how they love one another.” Even when critics made fun of them for some of their unusual beliefs and practices, they said, “But they sure do love each other!” Over the centuries, however, Christians have developed a reputation of being complainers too. And I don’t get this. Jesus calls us to be a people of joy and enthusiasm and hope and gratitude. Yet it’s so easy to let our words and our actions suck the joy out of life and the world around us. There is no room for that in the body of Christ.

6. *Speaking Rashly*. This is one of James’ most vital pieces of advice. He says, “Everyone must be quick to listen, but slow to speak and slow to become angry.” The principle here is simple: try listening more. In each of our conversations, particularly ones that get tough or heated, listen first. Hear the other person out. It’s amazing how much more sensible and more productive one’s responses will be when we simply pause to think and reflect before we speak.

5. *Cursing*. Okay. I have a confession. Sometimes a naughty word or two comes out of my mouth. For emphasis I may let a few colorful descriptive terms or metaphors slip out. But James uses the word “curse” which I believe has a different meaning. Cursing is when you use words to wish harm on another person, or to demean and belittle them. In the ancient world, people often used gestures to cast curses on other people. “Oh, that’s weird.” Really? I think anyone who has even driven a motor vehicle in California has been on the receiving end of a curse that’s accompanied by a gesture. That’s what James is talking about here.

4. *Not Using Encouraging Words.* I'm going to borrow some words from the Apostle Paul who in his letter to the Galatian church wrote, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Gal 6:2). Then in Romans 12:15, Paul writes, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." Yet how many times do we put our own selfish desires and fickle feelings before others?

3. *Not Practicing Patience.* Being in control of our words must be rooted in the spirit of patience. Often we are quick to let our emotions take over, and then we pay the price for the words that spill out like toothpaste on those little paper plates. When our kids were growing up, anytime we said the word "patience" and paused, the kids would say, "Is a virtue." Am I not right Cameron?

2. *Hypocrisy.* This was Jesus' most common accusation against the religious leaders of his time so it's no surprise that James picks up on it too. For James, hypocrisy goes beyond, "Too much talk, and not enough action." Hypocrisy is when your words and actions don't even match. Hypocrisy is when you teach about the law, but then you turn around and break the law. For the church, this might mean saying, "All are welcome," but then you close your doors to people who aren't like you. As the old saying goes, "Your walk talks, and your talk talks, but walk talks louder than your talk talks."

Finally – 1. *Not Speaking the Truth in Love.* This is a little different because taming the tongue is more than just keeping your mouth shut when you feel like saying something you shouldn't. It also means saying something you don't want to say but needs to be said. Our speech can be used to speak the truth to others, even when the truth hurts. Sometimes it is costly to do so, and it can be very painful. But when done in love and genuine concern for other people, in the long run, speaking the truth is for the benefit of all involved. May we recognize the power of our words, and may we use them to bless rather than to curse.