



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Taming the Tongue
(*The Letter of James*,
pp. 30-37)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Taming the Tongue

The things that we say or fail to say serve as a barometer of our Christian character, according to James. The ability to master our words is both a metric for and a mark of spiritual maturity.

Prayer

O God, your word to us is the good news of Jesus Christ. Yet too often our words to others are not good news.

We use your gift of speech to boast about our accomplishments.

We use our words to speak harshly and to criticize. We put down other people who are different.

Forgive us, O Lord. Help us to choose our words carefully and faithfully, and to use them for the good.

May our words be like fresh water from a spring that gives life, health, and joy. Amen.

Scripture Reading: James 3:1-12

Reflection

To underscore how central to James's ethical instruction is taming the tongue, Todd Still notes "some forty-six of the letter's one hundred and eight verses – an arresting forty-three percent of them! – touch upon 'speech matters' in one fashion or another." If anyone childishy believes "sticks and stone may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," James begs to differ.

Believers must be "quick to hear" and "slow to speak" (1:19), and should back up their careful chosen words with deeds. The famous teaching on faith and works begins: "What good is it...if you *say* you have faith but have not works?" (2:14, italics added).

The letter of James has much to teach us about what we say to one another and how we say it. Still highlights three passages as forming the core of James's speech ethics.

- ▶ *James 4:11-12* warns believers against speaking condemning words of judgment about or to one another. "To do so, James reckons, is tantamount to speaking evil against and judging the law, which in turn places one in the tenuous and untenable position of judging the law as opposed to doing it," Still notes. Rather, believers are to love their neighbors (2:8) and show mercy to them (2:13).
- ▶ *James 5:12* calls for believers to speak truthfully. The dramatic language echoes Jesus' own instruction (Matthew 5:34-37; cf. 2 Corinthians 1:17). The point, Still explains, is "Straightforward truth-telling renders unnecessary verbal props and additional assurances. What is more, it safeguards believers from incurring divine (eschatological) judgment" (cf. James 3:1 and Matthew 12:36-37).
- ▶ *James 3:1-12* is "the most protracted and arresting" instruction regarding speech in Scripture, Still writes. It features three memorable analogies: taming the tongue is necessary for faithful actions just as a bridle is required to control a spirited horse, a rudder is needed to steer a mighty ship, and merely a spark can control (in this case consume) an entire forest. How important, then, is careful teaching within the community (3:1)! Still summarizes, "The tongue (i.e. one's words), James figures, is an exten-



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sion of one's person, a microcosm of one's character. Herein lies the problem: pure lips require pure lives, but we—like the prophet Isaiah of old—are of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5)." The situation, according to James, is dire: "no one can tame the tongue" (James 3:8).

Still notes that "James regards duplicity in general (note his critique of being 'double-minded,' or literally 'two-souled' [*dipsychos*], in James 1:8 and 4:8) and duplicitous speech in particular to be deplorable. That believers would use their tongues to 'eulogize (*eulogeō*) the Lord and Father' on the one hand and to 'curse those who are made in the likeness of God' on the other (3:9) scandalizes him."

Loving and truthful speech is central to the life of discipleship. "Even as a single spring cannot produce both sweet and bitter water, nor salt water become fresh, and even as a fig tree cannot yield olives, nor a grapevine grow figs (3:11-12), neither should those who have received the 'implanted word' (1:21)...seek to bless God and curse others," Still concludes.

Study Questions

1. According to James, how should our love for a generous God lead us to value loving and truthful speech?
2. How do we "speak evil against another" (James 4:11) within congregations today? Discuss whether we speak more or less harshly against people outside the congregation?
3. Why is it difficult for individuals to tame their tongues by themselves? What is the role of the community in fostering truthful, loving, and wise speech?
4. Who are the teachers in your congregation and what influence do their words carry? How can you help them speak with wisdom and love?
5. Discuss the advice for teachers that Todd Still distills from Romans 2:31, Luke 12:48, and Matthew 23:8-10. How does that advice apply to all believers?
6. Consider how Carolyn Winfrey Gillette's hymn "O Lord, May All We Say and Do" reflects James's instruction on speech. How is it an instance of such speech?

Departing Hymn: "O Lord, May All We Say and Do" (vv. 1 and 3)

O Lord, may all we say and do
reflect the faith we have in you;
for faith is meant to change the way
we live our lives from day to day.

Just as a spark can start a fire,
our words can damage or inspire;
we pray for wisdom from above
to speak and act in gentle love.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2012)
Tune: TALLIS'S CANON

Taming the Tongue

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To see why loving, truthful, and wise speech is central to discipleship, according to James.
2. To consider the difficulty in monitoring our own speech practices and the role of the community in fostering rightly ordered speech.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Letter of James (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn 'O Lord, May All We Say and Do' locate the familiar tune TALLIS'S CANON in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

"When former Utah governor Jon Huntsman announced that he was 'suspending' his campaign for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, he called upon the remaining Grand Old Party contenders vying for the chance to challenge the sitting President to abandon their 'current toxic form of political discourse,' maintaining that it 'does not help our cause,'" Todd Still recalls. "Truth be told, contemporary presidential hopefuls do not have a corner on the market of 'rancorous rhetoric.' If careless, unsavory, slanderous, and hostile speech all too frequently typifies political campaigns, it also weasels its way into Christian conversations and congregations" (*The Letter of James*, 29).

If we struggle to control our speech—and who does not?—then we will be glad to hear James's good news of the resources that believers have in the Church. 'Chaste speech,' Still notes, 'is a gift to the community.' But like all good gifts from God, it requires that we welcome it and work to appropriate it in our lives.

Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer responsively. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 3:1-12 from a modern translation.

Reflection

One way to uncover the unity of a biblical text is to track an important theme through its teachings. In this study we follow Todd Still in tracing how the letter of James sees truthful, loving, and wise speech as an indicator of "perfection" or "maturity." The letter returns to issues of speech so often that it seems to be more than just an instance of its call for integrity in faith and works; such speech is an essential structure of the faithful community that James envisions.

Study Questions

1. James sees loving and truthful speech practices as part of our loving response to God's generosity. Since God's likeness is in the people we are speaking to, we should speak blessings rather than curses to them (3:9). Furthermore, the motivations for speaking evil against others, speaking boastfully about ourselves

and denigrating others, and so on, are inconsistent with our having received “the wisdom from above” (3:13-18). How can such hurtful, boastful, hypocritical, harshly judgmental, discriminatory words come out of a person who has received the “implanted word” (1:21)?

2. Ask members to list general categories of “speaking evil against others” but avoid describing particular cases. They might list things like harshly criticizing ministers or lay leaders’ beliefs or actions, gossiping about members’ moral failures, unfair politicking for congregational offices, refusing to acknowledge others’ gifts, and so on. None of these practices qualify as the mutual correction in the context of love that James commends (5:16, 19-20).

Ask members to consider whether they are more likely to speak harshly about people outside the immediate congregation—e.g., political candidates, community leaders, people at work, outcasts in the community, members of certain other congregations or denominations, non-Christians, people with opposed political opinions, and so on. Are they sometimes tempted to use church members as sounding boards for their rants against others? How should members respond when they hear another member “going off” on someone outside the immediate congregation?

3. Still writes, “Communion with and faith-filled deeds offered to God do not (only, or even primarily) occur in isolation. According to James, interaction with other believers, not to mention outsiders, should shape one’s sensibilities and commitments. Chaste speech is a gift to the community and a mark of spiritual maturity.”

James says we are often driven by “envy and selfish ambition” to be “boastful and false to the truth” (3:13) and not “willing to yield” (3:17). We may be blinded about or ashamed of what we are doing. If we cannot identify our own base motivations, or we refuse to acknowledge them, we need loving and wise friends to help us know and take responsibility for what we are doing. James commends mutual correction in the context of love (5:16, 19-20). If we have developed bad habits of gossiping, retaliating with harsh words, intimidating others with our speech, and so on, we need friends who remind us what is at stake (4:11-12) and guide us toward speech practices shaped by “the wisdom from above” (3:17).

4. The first congregational teachers we think of are ministerial staff members and leaders in biblical and discipleship study groups (for children, youth, and adults). But, members might think of other “teachers,” such as the artists who decorate the church sanctuary and chapel, the musicians who select and interpret congregational and choir songs, lay persons who lead in worship (by offering prayers, leading children sermons, etc.), those who lead worship in a nursing home or counsel shut-in members, those who visit in the hospital, and so on. Encourage members to reflect on “teaching” in an appropriately wide sense. Discuss how members can encourage, support, and correct one another in their teaching ministries.
5. Since Christian “teachers can lead others astray through that which they say,” Todd Still commends humility and self-criticism (Romans 2:21), seriousness and caution about the mission of teaching (Luke 12:48), and self-understanding of their role (Matthew 23:8, 10). Still writes, “disciples who serve as teachers do well to remember that there is truly but only one teacher and instructor, namely, the Christ...and... take every necessary precaution not to place a stumbling block in the path of other believers, especially the so-called ‘little ones.’”
6. The first verse of Gillette’s hymn announces James’s theme of the integrity of faith and works; the third verse focuses on speech ethics. Expanding on the analogy of the spark which highlights the damage of a forest fire (James 3:5-6), the hymn says “our words can damage or inspire.” The prayer for “wisdom from above” (3:15, 17) is consonant with James’s admission that “no one can tame the tongue” (3:8). The phrase “to speak and act with gentle love” describes speech behavior born of God’s wisdom (3:13, 17) in contrast to the condemning judgment that characterizes much of our speech (4:11-12).

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.