



## James: God of the Tongue

**Memory Verse:** James 3:5-6 "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. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."

### Background

James is the 59th book of the Bible and the 20th book in the New Testament. While the writer did not specifically identify which "James" he was, the most widely accepted author is James, the brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3). James was not a follower of Jesus during Christ's time here on earth (John 7:3-10). However, James, having seen and believed in Jesus post-resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7), soon became one of the pillars of the church in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:9). As an important person in the early church, James played a significant role at the Jerusalem Council in 49 AD, supporting the decision, along with Peter and Paul, that the gospel message should be taken to the Gentiles (Acts 15). Although some scholars place the writing of James in the early 60s AD, many believe it was written a few years prior to the Jerusalem Council between 45-48 AD, because it is addressed to Christian Jews "scattered among the nations" (1:1) with no mention of Gentile Christians. Sometimes referred to as the "Proverbs in the New Testament," the book of James is filled with wisdom and practical help to live out a life of faith.

### The Short Story

Authentic faith is shown in a person's good works.

### What's the Big Idea?

Paul made it very clear in his New Testament letters that believers are saved by grace through faith, and not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9). James, in this letter, clarifies that good works follow authentic faith. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (2:14-17). For James, faith was not something abstract, but something that could produce real change in the life of the believer and that would be visible to others. James gives many straightforward and practical examples of what real faith should look like. Faith perseveres in the midst of trials and asks God for wisdom when needed (1:2-12). Faith gets rid of moral filth and evil in one's life, humbly receives the Word of God and obeys it, looks after orphans and widows, and does not show favoritism (1:19-2:13). Faith is evident in money matters, patience during suffering, and gives one the ability to resist the devil and to humbly draw near to God (4:1-10; 5:1-12). Finally, faith allows a believer to restrain their tongue. James writes, "All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." (3:7-8). Even so, James expects believers to be careful with their speech. "Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless." (1:26). While James realized that even believers stumble (3:2), he still called them to pursue a life of holiness in keeping with their faith.

### So What? Why is this book so important? What was God's purpose for the book?

James doesn't mince words as he stresses the necessity for believers to live out their faith in every aspect of their lives. It is not enough just to believe in God. "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." (2:19). True faith should produce good fruit, touching the lives of others in a positive way. "Our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" is our example and our inspiration (2:1). As we obey God's Word, producing good works in keeping with our faith, we can trust the promise found in James 1:25, "But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do."

*\*Material taken from various sources.*

## Teaching Text

**James 3:5-6** “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. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”

## Sermon-Based Discussion Questions

- Besides a spark that sets a great forest on fire, what other metaphors does James employ in James 3 with respect to the power of the tongue? Which one do you relate to most? Why?
- James says in verse 9 that “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings...this should not be.” What does it say about our theology? What does it say in the culture?
- Look up Proverbs 18:21. How have you found this to be true?
- Look up Luke 6:45. What do our words say about the condition of our heart?

## Practical Application

- How has the power of the tongue altered the course of your life in important ways?
- What examples can you think of where **your words** have been especially powerful to build up or tear down? Likewise how have the **words of others** been powerful in your life for good or bad?
- Where is the Lord challenging you to harness your words under the control of the Holy Spirit?
- Who do you need to ask for forgiveness for your words? Who do you need to bless with your words?
- How have you seen your words taint or enhance your blessing or witness for Christ?

## Hitting the Highpoints

- 1:2-4 “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds..”
- 2:17-19 “In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.....”
- 4:8 “Come near to God and He will come near to you. ...”
- 4:17 “If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them. “
- 5:16 “...The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. “

## Bonus Features—The Power of Tongue

“We are taught to dread an unruly tongue, as one of the greatest evils. The affairs of mankind are thrown into confusion by the tongues of men. Every age of the world, and every condition of life, private or public, affords examples of this. Hell has more to do in promoting the fire of the tongue than men generally think; and whenever men's tongues are employed in sinful ways, they are set on fire of hell. No man can tame the tongue without Divine grace and assistance. The apostle does not represent it as impossible, but as extremely difficult. Other sins decay with age, this many times gets worse; we grow more forward and fretful, as natural strength decays, and the days come on in which we have no pleasure. When other sins are tamed and subdued by the infirmities of age, the spirit often grows more tart, nature being drawn down to the dregs, and the words used become more passionate....True religion will not admit of contradictions: how many sins would be prevented, if men would always be consistent! Pious and edifying language is the genuine produce of a sanctified heart; and none who understand Christianity, expect to hear curses, lies, boastings, and revilings from a true believer's mouth, any more than they look for the fruit of one tree from another. But facts prove that more professors succeed in bridling their senses and appetites, than in duly restraining their tongues. Then, depending on Divine grace, let us take heed to bless and curse not; and let us aim to be consistent in our words and actions.” *Matthew Henry's Commentary*

## Personal Takeaways and Notes