



James

Controlling the Tongue

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church
----------------------------	------------	-----------------	--------------------	--------	----------------	-----------------------	-------	--------	------------------	-------------------	--------



Introduction

We have all heard it said, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” While this phrase is learned as a child, the opposite is realized at every stage of life. The truth is that words can hurt, even kill if not used responsibly. Sirach 28:17 says, “The blow of a whip raises a welt, but a blow of the tongue crushes the bones.”

James illustrates the power of the tongue by drawing on two analogies: the horse’s bit and the ship’s rudder. In both images we learn that the direction of a horse and ship are determined by steering a small bit and rudder. James teaches us an important principle, if you control what you say, you can control the rest of what you do, hence the direction of your entire life.

James warns us that the tongue is a fire capable of far reaching destruction. Unlike an ax or chainsaw, the tongue can land one blow that’s destructive repercussions spread beyond the initial act. The whole course of one’s life can be affected by one statement. Teachers should take special care as they will be judged with greater strictness. As a result, James admonishes us to be disciplined and consistent in the area of our speech. We must not allow both blessings and curses to flow from our mouth.



James 3:1-12

1 Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness. 2 For we all make many mistakes, and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses that they may obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4 Look at the ships also; though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. **5 So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!** 6 And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue -- a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish? 12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.





Catholic Scripture Study



Questions on the Text

Have you ever...

1. Have you ever been devastated by something someone said about you?
2. Have you ever spoken ill of someone and later wanted to take it back?
3. Have you ever experienced the joy of a loving compliment?

Homework

1. Sirach 5:13 says, "Glory and dishonor come from speaking, and a man's tongue is his downfall." Think back to a time when you found yourself embroiled in controversy. How did your tongue play a role?
2. Once we speak, the tongue sets a goal for us to fulfill. Have you ever said something that you wished you had not, yet felt obligated to live up to your word?
3. Have you ever been a party to gossip? Why do you think it is so difficult to resist being a part of a gossip session?
4. James points out the important responsibility of a teacher, then speaks of the dangers of the tongue. Can you remember a time when a teacher had either a positive or negative impact on you based on what they said?
5. Can you recall an example from the popular culture, politics or the media that illustrates how the tongue, when used improperly sets up a chain reaction of destructive events?
6. Have you known people who, like the forest, have spent years cultivating a friendship and with one misspoken word burned the whole forest down? Why is so much damage done with just a few words?



Questions for Reflection

1. One common misunderstanding of Catholic teaching is the notion that the Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sin is "unbiblical" and that all sin is equal. James himself is sometimes called as a witness to this assertion due to his statement that "whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (James 2:10). However, Jesus himself distinguishes between greater and lesser sins (John 19:11) and his Apostle John does the same (1 John 5:16). Moreover, so does James. For he tells us that those who teach shall be judged, not equally with everyone else, but "with greater strictness" James 3:1. Why is the criterion of judgment more severe for teachers?
2. The Catechism reveals (no. 2143) that when we introduce the name of the Lord into our own speech it must be to bless, praise or glorify. How does our handling of the name of the Lord express who we are and what should be our response when we hear others take the name of the Lord in vain?





Questions for Reflection (cont.)

Catholic Scripture Study

3. The Catechism teaches that “the chaste person maintains the integrity of the powers of life and love placed in him. This integrity ensures the unity of the person; it is opposed to any behavior that would impair. It tolerates neither a double life nor duplicity in speech.” Discuss ways that our speech is related to a chaste life.
4. Isaiah 55:11 says, “So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” What does this text say about the power of words?
5. The word that James uses for “hell” is gehenna. Gehenna is the Greek form for the Hebrew word Hinnom. The Hinnom Valley was just south of Jerusalem where they first sacrificed children to Molech; and later used the valley for the burning of garbage and trash. The New Testament writers came to use the Hinnom Valley as the place where the devil resided. How can we avoid our churches becoming a garbage pit of gossip where lives are sacrificed?
6. Jesus said in Matthew 15:11, that it’s “not what goes into the mouth [that] defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.” He went on to explain that “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart” (Matthew 12:34). How does St. Paul help us in Philippians 4:8 to determine what goes into our heart?
7. Because of its enormous power, James sees peculiar danger in the tongue and warns us of it in the most strenuous terms. James 3:6-8 calls it “a fire”, “an unrighteous world among our members”, and tells us it is “set on fire by hell.” Can you think of ways in which the tongue has done the work of hell in our world?
8. Sometimes we flatter people with our speech for the purpose of personal gain. The Church teaches us (CCC No. 2480) that “every word or attitude is forbidden which by flattery, adulation, or complaisance encourages and confirms another in malicious acts and perverse conduct. Adulation is a grave fault if it makes one an accomplice in another’s vices or grave sins. Neither the desire to be of service nor friendship justifies duplicitous speech. Adulation is a venial sin when it only seeks to be agreeable, to avoid evil, to meet a need, or to obtain legitimate advantages.” How will these understandings of flattery or adulation change the way you relate to others?
9. There are times when we need to simply speak the truth. What does St. Paul say in Ephesians 4:15 about the way we should speak the truth?
10. Just as he insists that “faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:26), so James insists that the same tongue cannot praise God and “curse men, who were made in the likeness of God.” Like John, James believes that, “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). How can we use our tongues to love God in our neighbor?





Catholic Scripture Study



Questions for Reflection (cont.)

11. James 3:12 asks, "Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives, or a grapevine figs?" That is, James implies, like the rest of the New Testament, that to change what we do we must first change what we are. It is not the nature of the fig tree to yield olives. Only olive trees do that. Likewise, it is not the nature of fallen man or woman to produce holy speech. But it is the nature of man and woman filled with the Holy Spirit. How can we seek the help of the Holy Spirit in our weakness in order to change, first who we are, and then the way we act?

12. James 3:8 speaks of the tongue as a "restless evil". Have you ever found yourself talking restlessly simply to fill up silence? What happens if you face the silence without talking?



Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder

Sins of the Tongue

An important fact to note concerning the epistle of James is how often he uses the word "brethren." The letter is studded with that word and it is a constant reminder to us of who James is talking to. He is not speaking to non-Christians but to members of the family. And James knows that among brothers and sisters in families the weapons which hurt the most are not guns, knives, or bombs. They are words. In families, the greatest damage is done by back-biting, gossip, and slander.

Many people forget that gossip does not necessarily involve falsehood. Gossip is usually the act of speaking truth that, at best, does not build up and, at worst, destroys. Paul speaks of "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Well, there is also the reality (and sin) of speaking the truth in malice and James solemnly counsels us to therefore speak only those truths that build up and nothing that tears down another person. In addition, James reminds us that there is a supernatural perspective to the way we use our tongues. For in the Hebraic Tradition the tongue taps the very power of God. Blessing and cursing aren't just empty words to the Jewish mind, they release divine authority. And so James warns us that we are "playing with fire" (James 3:6) when we hypocritically "bless the Lord and Father" and simultaneously "curse men, who were made in the likeness of God" (James 3:9).

The Power of the Tongue for Good

James 3: 1-12 describes the tongue in terms of its enormous power. Again and again, the smallness of the tongue is contrasted with its colossal impact. It is, variously, the small bit used to govern the brute power of a horse, the little rudder that determines the course of the great ship, or the flickering flame that can burn down a whole forest. We rightly tend to fear great power because its abuse can destroy so much. But we wrongly assume at times that great power is therefore somehow intrinsically evil. James does not make this mistake. He warns us of the enormity of the tongue's power, not so that we will refuse to ever use it (which is impossible), but so that we will use it wisely.

Power, like all of God's creations, is fundamentally good and is ordered to his glory. Indeed, in the Catholic Tradition, the right use of the tongue is as essential to our salvation as the right use of all of God's other gifts. The supreme instance of this is that massively huge example of the right use of the tongue called "Sacred Scripture". Without it, we could not know the revelation of God. He and Scripture itself gives us plentiful examples of ways in which to use the power of the tongue in blessing, praising, singing, rejoicing, teaching, exhorting, and even rebuking. To praise God is not, of course, something God needs, as though he suffered from low self-esteem. Rather, our praise of God is itself a gift to us from him. It brings us into contact with reality -- the reality of who God actually is, and it reminds us of the truth of his love, goodness, and might. Singing our praise of God is another powerful use of the tongue for good. In the words of St. Augustine, "He who sings well prays twice."





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)



Catholic Scripture Study

Similarly, we are called to bless our neighbor. And this really does do our neighbor a great deal of good, as well as giving us an opportunity to be a means of grace to our neighbor. If this seems strange, think of the people you know whose parents or husband or wife can never find a single good thing to say about them. They will tell you how critically important simple words of blessing can be.

Yet another way the power of the tongue can be exercised for good is in teaching and exhorting. It is here that James focuses his words of caution because it is here that we can lead people astray by false teaching or by urging them to do something stupid or sinful. But the fact that there are false teachers does not negate the fact that there are true teachers as well and that, as Proverbs 25:11 says, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver." So while we do well to remember James' caution to those who recklessly fancy themselves teachers, we also do well to remember St. Paul's homage to the right use of the tongue when he tells the Romans, "How are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?"

In fact, St. Paul links the use of the tongue to the saving gift of baptism. This is why he writes, "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved" (Romans 10:9-10). In fact, all the sacraments depend in part upon the use of the tongue. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the sacrament of reconciliation, where it is above all our tongues which God uses to free us from the effects of our sins by the grace of Christ and power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer, of course, is another example of the power of the tongue. Later on in his epistle, James will tell us (James 4:2) that we do not have because we do not ask. In other words, our prayers really matter and Jesus was not kidding when he said, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you" (John 15:7). In the words of Blaise Pascal, "God has instituted prayer in order to lend his creatures the dignity of being causes."

In short, the tongue has enormous power for good or evil, depending on how we use it. But the fact remains that God has given us tongues to share in his work of redeeming, sanctifying, and bringing order in beauty to the world.

Catechism Connection

Referenced from the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

No. 2143 "The Lord's name is holy...He will not introduce it into his own speech except to bless, praise, and glorify."

No. 2151 "Human speech is either in accord with or in opposition to God who is Truth itself."

No. 2338 "The chaste person does not tolerate duplicity in speech."

No. 2485 "Lying is condemned as a profanation of speech."





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)

Family Devotions

Sacrament of Penance

James tells us that we all make many mistakes. Sins of the tongue will certainly result in pain and a lack of peace in one's life. God has given us the wonderful sacrament of Penance, which will restore us to God's grace and join us to him in intimate friendship. If one has a contrite heart, reconciliation will usually result in peace and serenity of conscience. Take advantage of this great family gift, the sacrament of Penance. It is there in the confessional that you can receive God's grace to bridle your tongue and use it as an instrument of righteousness.

Rome to Home

A papal quote relating to the lesson:

"The action of the Holy Spirit is that of 'bearing witness.' It is an interior, 'immanent' action in the hearts of the disciples, who then bear witness to Christ externally. Through that immanent presence and action, the transcendent power of the truth of Christ who is the Word-Truth and Wisdom, is manifested and advances in the world. From him, through the Spirit, the apostles obtained the power to bear witness according to his promise: 'I will give you a mouth of wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict' " (Lk 21:15).

~Pope John Paul 4/24/89





In this lesson, we observed that:

When you're tempted to use your mouth in a sinful way and you feel like people are trying to drag information out of you, just remember that it's not the wind but you that determines the direction of the ship. Your tongue can either stir up the storm or calm the storm. It is from the heart of a man that the tongue derives its life. The spiritual condition of a man can be ascertained by listening to his modes of speech and the topics he discusses. Our tongues express our priorities hidden deep within our hearts. If we speak more of sports, TV, movies or politics than spiritual matters, then we reveal misplaced priorities.

James expects Christians to exercise discipline in the area speech. We have already been told that we can ask for the grace needed, for God gives good gifts (James 1:17) and gives them generously (James 1:5). Make Sirach's prayer your prayer, "O that a guard were set over my mouth, and a seal of prudence upon my lips, that it may keep me from falling, so that my tongue may not destroy me!" (Sirach 22:27)

A Message from the Authors

Are you enjoying our study? Would you like this important service to continue? If so, please be aware that Catholic Exchange is a non-profit charitable organization totally dependent on your financial support to maintain both our website and our groundbreaking Catholic Scripture Study. So please make an on-line donation with your credit card at www.catholicexchange.com, call 1-888-477-1982, or mail as generous a donation as possible to:

Catholic Exchange
P.O. Box 231820
Encinitas, CA 92023

Thank you for making the Word of God available to anyone who wants it anywhere in the world.
God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle

