



# Community Group Discussion Guide

February 4, 2024  
James 3:1-12: Humanity

## MOTIVATE

---

Starter Question:

⇒ *What is a small item, event, or phrase that had a large impact on you?*

Optional Activity: Ask the group to write down something hurtful someone has said on a scrap of paper and put them in a bowl or cup. Mix the scraps of paper up and then read a few of them aloud. Repeat the activity, but this time ask the group to write something kind about another person in the group.

⇒ *What emotions arise when hearing these different types of words?*  
⇒ *Why do our words carry such weight?*

While the author of the book of James is not certain, most scholars believe it to be Jesus' brother, James. James' letter is likely one of the earliest epistles written in the New Testament. James wrote to Christian Jews who were scattered throughout the Roman empire. These believers were struggling to live out their profession of faith. Just as in the days of the early church, our humanity often displays its sinfulness in our relationships. (See *James Overview* for additional information.)

James 3:1-12 focuses on the influence our words have as followers of Christ. James reminds us that while we are imperfect, because Jesus was perfect on our behalf we can and ought to honor Him and others with our speech. Humans are made in the image of God, so the love that we have been shown should compel us to love our fellow image-bearers even with our words.

## DISCUSS

---

**James 3:1-2** *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.*

James first spoke specifically to those eager to teach others. In the early church, teachers were important people. James lovingly reminded them of the responsibility that comes with teaching God's Word. The teachers' primary tool was speech, and its instrument was the tongue. James warned teachers to control their tongues, for they will be judged more strictly for its use.

⇒ *Why are teachers of God's Word of such influence in the church?*  
⇒ *Why are teachers judged with greater strictness?*

James confirmed that all believers stumble. As such, we need to be careful not to cause others to stumble when using our influence. James emphasized our speech as a potential stumbling block by

saying that anyone who claims to be perfect in their speech is completely perfect, because they can also control their entire body.

- ⇒ ***Why would controlling our speech be equivalent to controlling our bodies?***
- ⇒ ***How is this relevant to all of us as believers, not just Bible teachers?***

**James 3:3-5a** *If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5a So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.*

The tongue was thought of as expressing a person's true nature since speech was viewed as more than just a physical act. It was considered a part of the body that played a central role in the expression of a person's religious commitment and his or her character. James teaches us that although the tongue is small, it is powerful. Its size is disproportionate to the influence it holds and to its almost limitless potential for good or bad.

- ⇒ ***What do you believe our speech can indicate about us as individuals?***

James provided three analogies that illustrate how small things can have control over large things, relating these to the nature of the tongue.

- a. A horse's bit: Bits are placed in horses' mouths to direct and control them. Just as a rider can control a horse, so a person can control his or her tongue.
- b. A ship's rudder: Small rudders are used to guide large ships. On the open sea, and against the wind, a ship without a rudder is uncontrollable. Just as a rudder can steer a big ship, so a person can direct the impact of his or her speech.
- c. A spark in the forest: A small spark has potential for massive destruction. Just as a spark can lead to a great, destructive fire, so can a person's words reap destruction.

- ⇒ ***What are some common ways that we sin with our tongues?***
- ⇒ ***How can something so small have such an impact?***

**James 3:5b-8** *How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, 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 mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

James gives us a picture of our human nature: sin stains the whole body and affects the entire course of life. Speech is an external indicator of one's inner spiritual condition. Jesus tells us in Matthew 12:34 and Matthew 15:18 that our words flow from our heart. James says that evil speech is set on fire by hell, meaning that it comes from Satan himself. James reinforced our depravity by saying that humanity has managed to tame all sorts of animals, but we cannot tame our own tongues (Genesis 1:26; 9:2). Regardless, the tongue must be kept in check and under constant supervision.

- ⇒ ***How is sinful speech like a wildfire or an uncontrollable animal?***
- ⇒ ***How is it like a deadly poison?***
- ⇒ ***How does our speech reveal our spiritual condition?***

Not only does sinful speech affect the eternal course of our own life, but it also affects the eternal and current lives of those around us. Warren Wiersbe drives this point home by saying, "For every one word in Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*, 125 lives were lost in World War II. Our own words may not have caused wars or wrecked cities, but they can break hearts and ruin reputations. They can also destroy souls by sending them into eternity without Christ."

- ⇒ ***As followers of Christ, what responsibility do we have toward others?***
- ⇒ ***What role does our speech play in that responsibility?***

**James 3:9-12** *With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.*

- ⇒ ***How can speech that builds up and speech that tears down come from the same mouth?***

Sinful speech patterns can become so ingrained into our hearts that we don't even notice them. Think of how often we justify sinful speech with phrases like, "Sorry, I'm just venting", or, "I'm just a blunt person." With this attitude, we can begin to think that harmful jokes or passive aggressive comments are not impactful.

James accurately indicts our sinful speech for what it really is: cursing. Cursing means wishing harm and invoking evil. If we're honest, when we gossip, lie, or speak angrily, we are wishing the harm of others. James called out the hypocrisy of praising God then cursing those made in His image. The Greek word for likeness (*homoīōsis*), often translated as "image," alludes to Genesis 1:27. When God created the earth, He called creation good, but He specifically created mankind in His image. Humans, unlike other living creatures, uniquely reflect our creator.

- ⇒ ***Why does being made in God's image give all mankind dignity?***
- ⇒ ***How is sinful speech against others also a sin against God?***

As image-bearers of God, every person has intrinsic value, purpose, and equality. This should cause us to restrain our speech when interacting with fellow image-bearers. Instead of cursing others, our speech should reflect God's providential and fatherly care of His creation (Matthew 5:45).

One of our values at Henderson Hills is **Compelling Love**: *We demonstrate the love of Jesus by respecting the dignity of every person, sacrificing for our neighbors, and cultivating unity with our faith family.* Another value is **Life-Giving Hope**: *We reflect the gospel of Jesus Christ with delight by building relationships and environments infused with grace and joy.*

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can overcome the hypocrisy of speech and be like a life-giving spring or well-rooted tree.

- ⇒ ***Why should Jesus' perfect life and sacrificial death change the way we interact with others? Can you give a specific example?***

## **TRANSFORM**

---

1. Make personal application: The tongue gives us a picture of our basic human nature. We are made in God's image, but we have also fallen into sin. The tongue is powerful, so we must ask the Holy Spirit to regenerate us to speak words that please God and uplift our fellow image-bearers (Psalm 141:3-4; Proverbs 4:23; Ephesians 4:29).

- ⇒ ***What are some instances where your tongue has caused you to sin? What internal and external forces were working against you in these scenarios? (Psalm 39:1-3, Proverbs 12:22)***
- ⇒ ***What sinful speech patterns have become so ingrained in your life that it's hard for you to even notice them?***
- ⇒ ***What is one practical way you can show compelling love and life-giving hope to others through your words this week?***

2. Pray: Ask God to reveal the ways you have become calloused to sinful speech. Thank God for sending Jesus to be perfect on our behalf, in deed, thought, and word. Ask the Holy Spirit to convict you before speaking words of harm and to show you opportunities to speak life to those around you.

## **STUDY**

---

### **Resources used, compiled from, and quoted:**

- *Wiersbe New Testament Bible Commentary (2007)*, pages 848-850, 866-869.
- *NIV Life Application Study Bible (1997)*, pages 2249.
- *CSB Study Bible (2017)*, pages 1969.
- *ESV Study Bible (2008)*, pages 2628.
- *ESV Expository Commentary Vol. XII Hebrews - Revelation (2018)*, pages 257-262.
- *Blue Letter Bible Online*, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2672/esv/mgnt/0-1/>, accessed 12/31/23.
- *Shepherd's Notes, James*, pages 40-52.