



Session 5: Speak Up



Controlling the words that come out of our mouth is one of life's greatest challenges.

Our words can build up and tear down. They can bring life or they can bring death. When it comes to centring our lives on Jesus, we often talk about 'walking the talk' – we have to also learn how to 'talk the walk'.

Previous session review

- Recap on your experience of the previous challenge. How did it go? Was it helpful?
- If you weren't able to try the challenge, explore the question: Where and how did you experience God last week?

Read

Read the passage several times through, slowly and prayerfully. It might help to use your imagination to picture the scene. At the end of the text you will find helpful background information in our 'Setting the Scene' section.

As you read, look out for shockers and blockers.

Shockers – a phrase, word, image or something from the text that resonates, stands out or connects with you.

Blockers – something from the text that raises questions for you.

James 3.1-12

My friends, we should not all try to become teachers. In fact, teachers will be judged more strictly than others. All of us do many wrong things. But if you can control your tongue, you are mature and able to control your whole body. By putting a bit into the mouth of a horse, we can turn the horse in different directions. It takes strong winds to move a large sailing ship, but the captain uses only a small rudder to make it go in any direction. Our tongues are small too, and yet they brag about big things. It takes only a spark to start a forest fire!

The tongue is like a spark. It is an evil power that dirties the rest of the body and sets a person's entire life on fire with flames that come from hell itself. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures can be tamed and have been tamed. But our tongues get out of control. They are restless and evil, and always spreading deadly poison.

My dear friends, with our tongues we speak both praises and curses. We praise our Lord and Father, and we curse people who were created to be like God, and this isn't right. Can clean water and dirty water both flow from the same spring? Can a fig tree produce olives or a grapevine produce figs? Does fresh water come from a well full of salt water?

Setting the scene:

- Teaching was an important role within the early church, probably because of the high regard in which rabbis were held within Judaism.
- James wants to emphasise the importance of teaching, and the closer scrutiny of our lives that inevitably comes with that responsibility. The main tool for this ministry is the tongue. Most of us, not just teachers, struggle with controlling our tongues.
- Control is the emphasis in verses 2-4. If the tongue is not restrained, then the whole person is likely to be uncontrolled and undisciplined.
- James uses imagery of his day – horses, boats and the dry Mediterranean forests that could so easily catch fire – to convey the danger of an uncontrolled tongue.
- Blessing and cursing are opposites. Cursing in this culture was not simply swearing but the expression of a desire that the cursed person be cut off from God.
- James sees a person's speech as a barometer of their spirituality: a pure heart cannot produce false, bitter or harmful speech.

Reflect

After you have all had time to read the text, pause and be still to listen to God through the Scriptures.

Begin your reflection time by each naming your shockers and blockers. Listen carefully to each other, share your thoughts and reflect on this passage together.

You might also like to explore these questions:

Q1. 'A person's speech is a barometer of their spirituality' – would you agree?

Q2. What examples can you share of ways you've seen words used to bless or to destroy?



'The reason a dog has so many friends is that he wags his tail more than his tongue.'

(Anon)



Respond

Speak Up Challenge: this session invites us to explore the topic of speech. As a group, create a challenge to help you to control the words and language you use this week or choose one of the following.

Challenge ideas:

1. Listen Up

Earlier in the book of James, we read of his advice to be 'quick to listen and slow to speak' (James 1.19). This week, pay more attention to the conversations you have with your family, friends, work colleagues and children and intentionally try to listen harder. This focus on 'listening' is not just about words; observe body language and tone of voice. In your conversations, be slower to respond and think more carefully about the words you will use.

2. Final Word

You may want to practice the discipline of not always having the last word. Sometimes we are too intent on getting across our point of view or opinion or showing off our knowledge or competence or even trying to prove ourselves. This week try allowing the last words to rest with other people in your conversations.

3. Stop the Gossip

Gossip is a form of judgement – usually negative comments about someone when they are not present. We are all prone to gossiping. This week, intentionally focus on refusing to gossip and walk away or stop others around when they do. Try to focus on speaking well of everyone you know.

Group Prayer

You might like to commit to praying for each person in the group this week as you look to overcome tendencies to talk too much and instead to try to honour God with our speech.