CONTRARY HEARTS

For most people, speaking is one of the easiest actions in the world. The mouth opens, vocal cords vibrate, the lips and tongue form sounds, and, voilà: communication. Though easy to do, it’s much harder to control. When strong feelings come, it’s easy to give them expression through regrettable words and harsh tones.

This problem is not limited to non-Christians. As James aptly pointed out, “With [our tongues] we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so” (James 3:9, 10). Just because this is a common problem, that does not make it acceptable. It goes against the reality of nature: how can a spring of water yield both fresh water and bitter? How can a fig tree bear olives? (vv. 11, 12) They have to yield one or the other.

Contrary words—a mixture of blessing and cursing from the same tongue—gives evidence of a contrary heart, one that is still in need of deeper surrender, a deeper cleansing by the hand of God. Instead of focusing on the fruit of the problem (words), it is essential to yield to God the root of the problem (the heart).
Write out James 3:1–12 from the Bible translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out James 3:7–10. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
THE ORIGIN BEHIND THE WORDS

Not stumbling in word is a sign of heightened Christian maturity (James 3:2). It gives evidence of an individual’s deep surrender to the transformational change wrought by Christ Himself. The words of an individual show this because it is “out of the abundance of the heart [that] his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). Jesus also said that defiling comes from what is expressed from the mouth, because “those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart” (Matt. 15:18). Therefore, clean speech is evidence of a clean heart.

The tongue, though anatomically small, has an overwhelming impact. Just as an entire horse can be moved by its bit and a large ship by its rudder, the speaker is moved and impacted by his or her own words. Not only them, but others are impacted too. People can be built up and fortified by words of kindness, receiving them as life-giving water or sweet honey to the soul (Prov. 16:24; 18:4). Conversely, the same people can be stirred to anger and deeply wounded by a misspoken word, especially when expressed in the heat of anger (Prov. 12:18; 15:18).

Interestingly, some of Jesus’ harshest rebukes to His disciples came as a result of what they said. After trying to dissuade Jesus from going to the cross, Peter received the response, “ ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men’ ” (Matt. 16:23). Jesus clearly saw to the root of the problem: Peter was not mindful of or prioritizing the right things, which led to what he said.

Earlier, after Jesus was snubbed by the residents of a Samaritan village, James and John suggested calling down fire from heaven to consume them. Jesus rebuked them again, adding, “ ‘You do not know what manner of spirit you are of’ ” (Luke 9:55). Again, the issue gave expression in their words: they were being prompted by the wrong spirit.

James does not recommend any self-help techniques for this problem. Instead, rather dismal, he concludes that “no man can tame the tongue” (James 3:8). It is impossible for humans to change their words for the same reason it is impossible for them to change their own hearts. Only God can cause such a supernatural change. Along with Isaiah, any child of God can see the uncleanness of their own lips and of those around them (Isa. 6:5). The same child of God can be given a new heart that is promised to all who will surrender to Him (Ezek. 36:26). This deep heart change is what brings lasting changes in both word and deed.
NOT TO BE UNDERESTIMATED

James opens this chapter by recommending his listeners not to seek out a teaching position. Back then (and sometimes in the present day), teachers were synonymous with prestige and an enviable position. Such authority gave them the aura of power and importance. Teachers were looked up to, held in high esteem, and their words could be taken, unfiltered, straight to the heart.

It was this last quality that prompted James to steer people away from clambering toward being a teacher—it brings an awesome responsibility, and that is sometimes overlooked. Part of this responsibility is being held to a “stricter judgment” (James 3:1) with words, since words have even more power when coupled with more influence. Becoming a teacher, especially a spiritual teacher, is not something to be sought after for worldly reasons or power; it is something that should only be pursued with God’s calling and strength.

A few verses later, James seems to be swept along by his own imagery and waxes poetic about the dangers of the tongue, calling it a “world of iniquity” that “defiles the whole body” and “is set on fire by hell” (v. 6). He seems to be stressing that words do more than they seem to, and therefore the tongue has more power than we give it credit for. Words have been used to take a righteous person’s life (1 Kings 21:1–16), discourage an entire group of people from God’s work (Neh. 6:5–9, 19), and even to deny a relationship with Jesus (Luke 22:54–62).

It’s common to hear, “I didn’t mean it,” or, “I was only joking,” appended to harsh or un-Christ-like expressions. Phrases like these cannot undo the damage of words (though, of course, apologies are intensely appropriate in the aftermath of such expressions). There is no “backspace” when it comes to what one says that can truly undo the effect.

Words can deeply affect an individual’s life that aren’t even used as an insult. After David had killed Goliath and been welcomed into King Saul’s inner circle, David and Saul were the recipients of a song by the women celebrating: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (1 Sam. 18:7). This comparison gave opportunity for the birth of resentment and long-term hatred of Saul toward David (v. 8). Later, on two separate occasions when David was seeking refuge from foreign (and enemy) nations, these very words were used by the servants of these foreign kings to explain why David was not someone to be trusted: Hadn’t they heard the song? Didn’t they know who David was? (1 Sam. 21:11; 29:5). Knowing full well these stories, as well as the teachings of Jesus, James urges his listeners to not underestimate the power of one’s words and their far-reaching effect—whether for good or evil.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Ephesians 4:29  
Proverbs 13:3  
Proverbs 12:18  
Ezekiel 36:25–27  
Matthew 15:11  
Luke 6:45

What other verses/promises come to mind with James 3:1–12?

Review your memorized verse from James 3:1–12.
NO MAN EVER SPOKE LIKE THIS MAN!

Among many other qualities, Jesus was known for how He spoke. Unable to arrest Jesus, the officers defended themselves with the confession, “‘No man ever spoke like this Man!’” (John 7:46). His listeners were also astonished at His teaching, because He taught them with an authority they weren’t used to (Matt. 7:29; Mark 1:11). He had a balance they had never seen before: His righteousness and intimacy with God clearly transcended that of their religious leaders, but His intimate compassion and closeness to all levels of humanity was contrary to what they’d experienced in such holy men.

Instead of the expected words of condemnation, Jesus explicitly and tenderly told the woman caught in adultery that He did not condemn her, and sent her into a life of freedom from sin (John 8:1–12). When sought after by a religious leader under the cover of darkness, He gently rebuked him for not knowing the basics of salvation, and yet shared some of the most gospel-centric and truth-condensed verses in all of Scripture (John 3:1–20). He tactfully guided the woman at the well to an exposure of her need and misunderstandings and then gave her one of the very few explicit acknowledgements of His Messiahship (John 4:5–26). He used countless real-life experiences to both clearly share the gospel with all open hearts and enshroud it in mystery for those who would only abuse His words (e.g., Luke 14, 15).

Jesus could speak this way because of who He was. Not in the sense that His words cannot be spoken by His people today, but in the sense that He was one with God, so it was expressed by His words. There’s a difference between sounding kind and expressing kindness from the heart. To have such words come from the heart, the heart itself must be captured and transformed by the Holy Spirit. The new heart is given as a free gift by God to all who are willing (Ezek. 36:26, 27).

Those who struggle with their words may try of their own volition to say this and not that, to make promises, and they may even make strides. But it is treating the symptom of an issue that only Jesus has the power to change. Jesus did not come just to secure the possibility for us, but also to show what the result of such a glorious surrender can be. As humanity’s living Example, He invites His disciples in every age to walk with Him and after Him, even in word.
THE STRONGEST ARGUMENT

There is an eloquence far more powerful than the eloquence of words in the quiet, consistent life of a pure, true Christian. What a man is has more influence than what he says. The officers who were sent to Jesus came back with the report that never man spoke as He spoke. But the reason for this was that never man lived as He lived. Had His life been other than it was, He could not have spoken as He did. His words bore with them a convincing power, because they came from a heart pure and holy, full of love and sympathy, benevolence and truth.

It is our own character and experience that determine our influence upon others. In order to convince others of the power of Christ’s grace, we must know its power in our own hearts and lives. The gospel we present for the saving of souls must be the gospel by which our own souls are saved. Only through a living faith in Christ as a personal Saviour is it possible to make our influence felt in a skeptical world. If we would draw sinners out of the swift-running current, our own feet must be firmly set upon the Rock, Christ Jesus.

The badge of Christianity is not an outward sign, not the wearing of a cross or a crown, but it is that which reveals the union of man with God. By the power of His grace manifested in the transformation of character the world is to be convinced that God has sent His Son as its Redeemer. No other influence that can surround the human soul has such power as the influence of an unselfish life. The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian.

To live such a life, to exert such an influence, costs at every step effort, self-sacrifice, discipline. It is because they do not understand this that many are so easily discouraged in the Christian life. Many who sincerely consecrate their lives to God’s service are surprised and disappointed to find themselves, as never before, confronted by obstacles and beset by trials and perplexities. They pray for Christlikeness of character, for a fitness for the Lord’s work, and they are placed in circumstances that seem to call forth all the evil of their nature. Faults are revealed of which they did not even suspect the existence. Like Israel of old they question, “If God is leading us, why do all these things come upon us?”

It is because God is leading them that these things come upon them. Trials and obstacles are the Lord’s chosen methods of discipline and His appointed conditions of success. . . . Often He permits the fires of affliction to assail them that they may be purified. (Ellen G. White, The Ministry of Healing, 469–471.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Share a time that you were meaningfully and positively impacted by someone’s words.

Why do you think words affect us so much?

How does it affect our relationship with God when we have both “fresh water” and “salty” coming from our mouths?

When James says that we should not curse men and bless God at the same time, does this allow for people to grow from immaturity to maturity? Why or why not?

How does Jesus speak differently after this study?

How can we balance our understanding of the importance of the expressions of our heart and the importance of the condition of our heart itself?

How can we have an Ezekiel 36:26 experience?

The Most Dangerous Part of the Body