

Who's in Control?

Taming the Tongue

Now, more than ever, adolescents and preteens are using inappropriate language. Timothy Jay, a leading researcher on cursing in the U.S., says most teens employ “conversational swearing”—“filler” curse words used in informal discussions. “Teens are more likely to drop casual expletives than the generation before them,” he says, and he estimates that the average adolescent uses roughly 80 to 90 swear words a day. While Jay believes this shift in language values is “not better or worse, just different,” we know this change flies in the face of truth (cf. “Youthful swearing is rising,” Melanie B. Glover, McClatchy Newspapers).

This, however, is not just a problem for worldly people. It poses a real threat to Christians—especially young disciples. When bombarded with corrupt language daily, sometimes they find their speech being “conformed” to the world’s wicked standard (cf. Rom. 12:2).

But is there really any danger? Will God condemn a Christian to hell for using a few inappropriate words? Consider what James says with regard to the powerful nature of the tongue and its temporal and eternal consequences in James 3:3-12:

It directs where we go. “Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires” (Jas. 3:3-4). The tongue is indeed a powerful member. It is like the guiding bit and the controlling rudder, because it determines our initial heading and our final destination—for both this life and the next.

It destroys what we have. “Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, or reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison” (Jas. 3:5-8). Our speech has the power to wipe out anything we may gain—it burns like an uncontrollable fire, consumes like a feral beast, and poisons like a deadly toxin. When we do not have a handle on our words, our faith and our souls are in jeopardy (cf. Jas. 1:26; 3:6; Prov. 15:4).

It displays who we are. “Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring can yield both salt water and fresh” (Jas. 3:10-12). Our speech is the microphone of our heart. Listen long enough and our speech will echo externally what is going on internally. If our hearts are good, our words will be good, but if our hearts are evil, our words will be evil (cf. Matt. 7:15-20).

So if the tongue is so powerful and cannot be tamed (Jas. 3:8), why even try? Is it a hopeless cause? Certainly not! It may be impossible for men but not for God (cf. Matt. 19:26). With His guidance, we can control our speech. However, we must do, at least, three things:

Ask for help. God is able to do all things—even to correct our language problems. Often we do not receive assistance simply because we do not ask for it (cf. Jas. 4:2). If we are struggling with controlling the way we speak, we should seek the “wisdom that is from above” (Jas. 3:17). The Bible says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (Jas. 1:5). If we find ourselves struggling, we should begin by asking God to help us.

Fix our hearts. When out of the “same mouth proceed blessing and cursing,” something is wrong inside. James calls this “double-mindedness”—literally “two-spirited” or “vacillating” (cf. Jas. 1:8). The only way to remedy this problem is to fill up with God’s word, forcing the wickedness out (cf. Jas. 1:21). We must have the faith in our hearts before we profess it with our mouths! (cf. Jas. 2:14; Titus 1:15-16) Only when we fix the problem inside will our speech be pure.

Change our habits. In James 3:2, it says that the perfect man is able to bridle tongue and body. The word *bridle* means: “to be a bit-leader, i.e. to curb,” thus, “to hold back.” Practically this means we must hold back **hurtful words**—gossip, slander, insult (cf. Jas. 4:11; Prov. 11:9, 11; 17:9). It also involves holding back **impulsive words** (cf. Jas. 1:19) and **filthy words**—profanity, euphemisms (cf. Jas. 3:9; Titus 2:8). It is not enough to simply acknowledge wrongdoing; we must change! (cf. Jas. 1:21-26)

Our speech can be a powerful influence for good or evil. The tongue is like a destructive beast if not controlled. We must, therefore, surrender our minds and language to God. Only then will He bless us and account us righteous and perfect (cf. Jas. 2:23; 3:2).

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