

# A Guide For Non-Conformists

## WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

On November 19, 1863, at the height of the civil war, President Lincoln addressed his nation from Gettysburg, PA with these now famous words: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

But 100 years later, the reality was that the nation who promised life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness still had laws of segregation and practiced anything but the equality of all men. So when Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, his words carried power because of the symbolic place where he stood. He began, “Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation.” In it, he would include the now famous oratory, “I have a dream...” He would say, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

Together, these two speeches created a movement that changed the fabric of American society. These speeches were, in many ways, revolutionary. They were not reactionary. They were measured, calculated, carefully crafted messages to lead a people into a better future.

So when James writes to the scattered church, exiled and persecuted, every word is measured. James follows his own advice that we should be slow to speak and quick to listen with a tongue that is bridled because true religion guards the mouth.

We have seen the dangers of leaders who get up and have no notes in front of them and just talk. They look carefree, but they also end up saying incredibly dangerous things. So James wants us to watch our mouths. So let’s consider the importance of watching every word we make.

### Control Your Tongue (vv. 3-5a)

James uses three pictures to show us how influential words can be. The tongue is like a bit in a horse’s mouth, a rudder on a ship, and a spark in a dry forest. A bit can be put into the mouth of a great and powerful horse and cause the one who holds the reins. A rudder at the back of a boat, though so small, can set the direction of a large boat. And a small spark in a woods with dry grass and woods can cause the hills to be set ablaze. If you’ve worked with horses, if you’ve sailed, or if you’ve been in the forest, you can appreciate how little things can do big damage. But James’s point isn’t just that the tongue can do a lot of damage, but that the tongue needs to be controlled, just like a bit, a rudder, and a spark need to be controlled.

Why does James make this point? Out of all the things that he could talk about, why the tongue? I think that the context of this letter helps us understand why James wants us to be

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measured with our words. I think James is helping us to understand Proverbs 15:1: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” When you’ve been hurt, when wrong has been done to you, what is the fleshly response? Just watch a child who’s toy has been taken from them by another sibling. They want to grab, yell, and hit. Watch siblings who pester one another and see how the words escalate. Or think of how people react when they feel some injustice has been done to them. They lash out.

As James writes to a persecuted church in exile, I think the temptation of the leaders and community was to use their words to be revolutionaries against those who had done them harm. They wanted to lash out. They wanted to use their words to react against those who had done them wrong. Maybe they were tempted to use their words to call for a revolution. But the kind of revolution fleshly reactions create are nasty, bloody, and painful. This, James says, is not the way of Christ. Instead, we ought to learn to master this little piece of flesh in our mouths. The mature wisdom, the faith that is put into action, is in the tongue that is self-controlled.

### **Realize The Power of the Tongue (vv. 5b-8)**

James wants us to grasp how damaging words can be. Since every word spoken in secret will be proclaimed from the rooftops and that every word will be measured and judged by our Lord, we need to realize how dangerous unguarded speech can be. James says the tongue is like a little fire that gets away, creating a world of unrighteousness and setting the world on fire, including our lives, that can be hellish.

Fire has incredible power. It’s easy to think you’ve got it under control, and just a little gust of wind can cause the flames to race away on you; or a patch of dry grass can catch fire and race away on you in no time. A few years ago the California hills were filled with fire because of a gender reveal party that went wrong and an accidental spark caused houses to be burned to the ground and great damage caused. This is like what careless, reactionary words can do. James’ primary concern isn’t with dirty words but careless words. It’s gossip, reactionary negative comment, the criticism, the attempt to change things in a way that is negative.

Not only are words compared to fire, but James compares the ability to tame the tongue to animals to show us how challenging it can be to tame our tongues. We can train all sorts of animals, but James points out how we are not able to tame an animal’s tongue.

In our home, we have two birds. They both are able to talk. We have taught them certain phrases. Our one bird, Jawa, is a cockatiel, and he loves to sing and talk when he’s excited. He can say about 25+ words and at times it’s quite fun to play peek-a-boo with him. He knows that when we say, “Come here, Jawa,” that we are going to take him out of the cage and play. He rushes out and jumps on our finger. But when he flies across the room and lands on the floor, he will often run away from you, hiding under the ottoman or couch and say, “Come here, Jawa!” Similarly, the breeder from whom we purchased Jawa has a large bird that was in an abusive home. Oscar is known for having a very foul mouth, muttering and swearing at people all the time, having learned it from his previous abusive owners.

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Words are powerful. As much as Adam was able to show his dominion over creation by naming all of the animals, he was never able to tame the tongue of animals, let alone his own tongue. But God sent the Last Adam, Jesus, who came and bridled his tongue. Not only did he not revile when he was reviled (1 Pe. 2:23), but he only said what his Father told him to say (Jn. 12:49-50) because he was the mature and wise One. Because he is able to bridle his tongue, he works to bridle the tongue of his body, the church by speaking words of training, correction, reproof, and instruction so that the man and woman of God would be thoroughly equipped.

The reason the tongue has to be tamed is that it shows how our heart is. Counsellors listen very carefully to every word that comes out of their client's mouths because it is in the little words that reveal the heart. It's the subtle things.

We should know how dangerous words are. Sticks and stones may break bones, but words break souls. For this reason, leaders have to be even more careful about what they say. It's the little words that shape the direction of churches and cities and provinces and nations. Just think of the chaos that happened on January 6<sup>th</sup>. A president who was careless with his words and didn't plan every word he said nearly created a constitutional crisis. I'm not commenting on the politics but on the carelessness of a president's mouth. In the same way, a careless church leader who doesn't bridle the tongue can cause churches to be in upheaval. So we need to constantly remember the power of words. So we control our mouths and know the power of the tongue so that we can..

### **Bless with our Tongues (vv. 9-12)**

We are now given two pictures of what our mouths can be like. We can either bless or curse. But we can't do both. We can't bless God and say our relationship with him is good when we speak ill of others. We can't have mouths that praise God on Sunday and criticize others on Monday. A spring doesn't have fresh and salt water. A tree produces the fruit of its kind, so either a tree produces good fruit because it is healthy within, or it produces bad fruit because it is unhealthy within.

What James wants us to realize is that when we feel threatened, we can't fight with the weapons of this world to protect ourselves. While it feels like we should lash out when people do wrong to us or hurt us, whether in public or private, this kind of speech is condemned by James. It's poison. It sets the world on fire.

Why does James condemn talk that tries to change things by lashing out with either critical talk, gossip, or slander? Why is James concerned about the little things that are said? Because when we criticize people who are made in the image of God, as Gen. 1:27-28 says, we are condemning what God has blessed. To condemn people is to stand in God's place and rebel against him.

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More than that, God has given us a mandate to bless the world. When God chose Abraham, who will be called a friend of God, he said he would bless him and make him a blessing to the world (Gen. 12:1-3). As people chosen and blessed by God to carry on that blessing of Abraham, we are made to bless the world. Consider what God said to Abraham after he passed the test of obedience in Gen. 22: “I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice” (Gen. 22:17-18).

As the people of God, we are to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, and pray for those who are abusive (Lk. 6:27-28). We bless when curse because we are people of creation who have been blessed and we are redeemed people who have been blessed. Therefore the way of our lives is blessing.

Too often, however, we have this idea that loving our enemies is being “nice.” This passivity or false meekness causes us to shrink back in hard times. Yes, we ought to defend ourselves. But the non-conformist way of the kingdom of heaven is that we overcome evil with good. When we pray for Jesus to make all things new, we aren’t asking him to just do some sentimental nice task and wipe tears from our eyes, but we are asking him to enact justice (Rev. 21:4). We are asking him to do justly and love mercy. So when we bless our enemies, we heap burning coals on their heads (Rom. 12:20-21). We don’t take up swords of iron but the sword of the Spirit.

This isn’t the normal way we think of blessing. But God saves through judgment. Praying that the Lord would judge our enemies is not cursing them. It is not seeking revenge. It is praying that either he would save them by the judgment of his Son or that he would judge them by punishing their wickedness. This is the way the Psalmists pray – those prayers asking God to deal with their enemies. We don’t need to take up arms and be revolutionaries by using harsh words which will only stir up anger, but be a people to bless. We don’t aim to be double minded, blessing God and cursing people. We aim to be the creational blessing and redeemed blessing of God to this world. We pray for the kingdom to come. We pray for evil to be confronted. We face injustice with justice. We do not retaliate, but we act as the blessed people of God.

One of the greatest influencers in my life was a man by the name of Phil. When I was discouraged, when I was down, when I faced hardship, he said good things, kind things, hard things, but in a way that built me up, not tearing me down. He wasn’t perfect, but his mouth was full of blessing. He taught me something powerful – that the majority of issues can be dealt with not by lashing out, not by being harsh, not by saying mean things, but speaking the truth in love and in encouragement. And what a difference he was in my first pastorate. A church that had a toxic culture and history of division became a church where blessing and justice and grace and gospel hope became the norm.

While we all stumble in many ways (Jas. 3:2), the hope of the gospel is this: if we confess with our mouth Jesus is Lord, believe in our hearts that God raised us from the dead, and turn away

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from sin, we will find that the revolution that God brings is not by being reactionary but by being the people of blessing to a world that needs the blessing of God.