

THE BITTER-SWEET TONGUE

by Eric Miller

KEY VERSE:

“With it (the tongue) we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.”

James 3:9-11

FAITH STORY:

James 3:1-12; Matt 5:11; 12:34-35

FAITH FOCUS:

James writes this passage to warn us about the power that our tongue can have on the direction of our lives. He talks about how the tongue, even though it is quite small, can have an enormous impact on us and on others. He addresses the inconsistency of praising and cursing coming from the same mouth. He then gets to the root of the problem, “Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?” The problem isn’t just with our words; it’s with the “spring” inside of us. If we are truly filled with “living water,” then our words should reflect that.

SESSION GOAL:

Help the students understand that their words flow directly from the “spring” that’s inside of them and that they are very powerful and should be used to praise God and bless others, not to hurt others.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Discuss how the tongue can change the whole direction of your life
- Discuss the inconsistency of praise and cursing coming from the same mouth

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Bibles for every student
- 2 Chalkboard or dry erase board
- 3 A snack, and Enough iced tea or hot tea for every student, Paper cups
- 4 Small containers of sugar and salt
- 5 Sparkling non-alcoholic grape juice
- 6 Before students arrive, fill cups with the tea, one for every person. Then add a generous amount of salt to several of the cups and mix well.
- 7 Prepare a story from your past where you were hurt by something someone said about you, or when you hurt another person with your words. Be willing to share how it made you feel and the impact it had on you.

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (10–15 minutes)

Welcome students and pass out the snacks and drinks. Allow a few minutes for students to visit and enjoy the snacks, and wait for reactions that might come from students drinking the salted beverage.

Say: *Some tastes just don't mix well. You enjoy salt on some foods, but not in your drink. Can you think of other food tastes that don't go together well? (Ex: toothpaste and orange juice, gum and pretzels.) Write answers down on the board.*

Divide the board into two columns, one labeled "SWEET", and the other "SOUR". Ask students to name something that is really sweet that they like to eat, and write the responses down under the "SWEET" column. Then, repeat the procedure for the "SOUR" column. This is an example chart:

SWEET	SOUR
chocolate	sour cream
cookies	pickles
peanut butter	sour-patch kids
ice-cream	lemons

After a few minutes of this, draw some lines from items in the "SWEET" column to items in the "SOUR" column that wouldn't mix very well. Example: Chocolate covered pickles! Can they imagine these taste combinations?

CONNECT: (1 minute)

Say: *"It's amazing how our tongue can react differently to the different things that come into the mouth. Now let's look at how the tongue affects the things that come out of our mouth."*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (20–25 minutes)

Make sure that everyone has a Bible. Ask for a volunteer to read the passage from James while everyone else follows along. When he/she has finished reading, lead them in a discussion of the following questions, while referring back to the passage for reference.

- How are a bit in a horse's mouth and a rudder on a ship similar? Why does James compare these things to the tongue? Do you think it's true that something as small as your tongue can change the whole direction of your life?
- Think about all of the wild animals that have been tamed by humans. What do you think would be the hardest animal to tame? Ex: elephants, lions, tigers, killer whales, etc... Why do you think that James says that "no one can tame the tongue?"
- James compares the tongue to a "spark" and "fire." Why?

- Look at verse 9. How is praising God and cursing people with the same tongue inconsistent? Is cursing other people the same as cursing God? How?
- Why does James use the metaphor of a spring in verse 11? How does the condition of the spring influence the water that flows from it?

APPLY: (5–10 minutes)

Share your personal story of being hurt by someone else’s words, or hurting someone else with what you said. Invite students to share their own personal stories.

Then say: *“We’ve already talked about how certain tastes just don’t go together and you definitely don’t want them in your mouth at the same time. James says that what comes out of our mouth is the same way. Praising and cursing shouldn’t come out of the same mouth, just like fresh and salt water can’t come from the same spring. So, how do we get control of our tongues?”*

Have volunteers look up and read these scriptures: Matt 15:11, Matt 12:34-35

SAY: *“We see that Jesus said it’s what comes out of our mouths that make us unclean. He also said that every word that we say comes directly from our hearts. Jesus said, ‘Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.’ Take a minute and think about the words that come out of your mouth. Do they come from a heart that is overflowing with Jesus, or do they come from another source? Changing our words and taming our tongues begins with letting Jesus tame our hearts. When we give our hearts to Jesus, he changes us from the inside out and then our speech and actions start to change as well. Just like James said that a fig tree can’t bear olives and a grapevine can’t bear figs, when Jesus changes you to a “grapevine” on the inside, you can’t help but bear grapes!”*

Pour the sparkling grape juice and pass it out to students. Drink it together.

Discuss: *Is this better than the tea? Can you feel it “bubbling” as you drink it?*

This grape juice can symbolize the good words and attitudes that can spring out of our hearts when Jesus lives in us.

RESPOND: (10 minutes)

Lead the group in this contemplative prayer, explaining that you will be allowing for quiet times for them to pray their own prayers.

God, we thank you for creating us with choices, including the choice of the words that will come out of our mouths.

PAUSE

We pray for forgiveness for the times when we thought or said bad things—when we hurt you, God, and others.

PAUSE

We pray for changes to happen inside our hearts. The change that I need right now is:

PAUSE

We pray for you to bless us, Lord, and to give us hearts full of love so that we can be a blessing to others.

PAUSE

Live in us, Jesus. And God's children said,
Amen!

Say: *"Let's get some good words coming out of us this morning by sharing what we appreciate about each other."* Encourage groups to give words of affirmation and appreciation to each person in the group.

Bring the whole group together, share your own words of affirmation for them, and dismiss them with God's blessing.

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE:

James, the writer of this epistle, was most likely the brother of Jesus. He was a very influential man in the early church, as he was a leader of the Jerusalem Council, (Acts 15:13) and Paul also referred to him as a "pillar" of the church in Gal 2:9. The book of James is based on action and the outward changes in a believer's life due to their inward transformation: "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do...faith without works is useless." (2:18b, 20b) He teaches that if a person establishes their theology in this way—being shallow, empty, and fruitless—they are apt to become proud, boastful, and malicious in their speech. James is trying to warn people about that.

James' book can seem a bit legalistic at first glance. In fact, Martin Luther once called it, "the epistle of straw." He wrote, "It is a very dangerous and bad book....I feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove." He did later recant his opinion saying, "I think highly of James and regard it as valuable." (Growing Slowly Wise. Roper, David. Pg7)

I believe the deeper principle that James is trying to teach us is that we cannot change our actions without first having our heart changed, and once our heart is truly changed, we cannot help but change our actions. These convictions gave James a deep pure faith, which he was martyred for in A.D. 44.