JAMES
Week 3: Watch Your Words

This includes:
1. Leader Preparation
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1. LEADER PREPARATION

LESSON OVERVIEW
Words hold power. People sometimes throw around nicknames, insults, and phrases carelessly, not thinking about the negative impact. James reminds Christians to consider the weight of what they say, realizing that there is great power in our words. In this lesson, your teenagers will be challenged to discover that their words bring either honor or dishonor, their words produce uncontrollable results, and wisdom can help them control their words.

LESSON OBJECTIVES
1. WHAT: Words are powerful—they can encourage and build up or discourage and tear down.
2. WHY: Most people aren’t aware of the influence their words have on others.
3. HOW: This lesson will challenge your students to be more intentional about encouraging and building up others through their words.

PRIMARY SCRIPTURE
James 3:1-12

SECONDARY SCRIPTURES
Ephesians 4:29 and James 3:13-18

TEACHING PREP
The short overview below is designed to help you prepare for your lesson. While you may not want to convey this information word-for-word with your teenagers, you’ll definitely want to refer to it as you lead your small group lesson.

Read James 3. Verses 1-12 are our primary verses for this week, but some of our focus also comes from verses 13-18.

James understands the importance and impact of our words. He compares the power of speech to a rudder guiding an entire ship. He reminds us that words can destroy, just like a small spark starts a fire. His call to tame the tongue is a relevant message for teenagers.

Words are powerful. A simple statement can make someone’s day or ruin it. Thanks to today’s technology, we can instantly share our words in emails, text messages, Facebook comments, instant messages, and cell phone conversations—and they’re often done without much thought. Few sentences have the power of “I love you” or the disappointment of “no, I’m not interested.” A seemingly innocent joke or comment can make someone feel awkward and worthless. At the same time, an encouraging letter or comment may restore confidence.

It’s easy to slip into gossip, critical comments, sarcasm, or blatant attacks. It’s easy to keep our words superficial or talk to make conversation rather than to make a difference.
As we’ve noted each week in this series, if your teenagers have a relationship with Jesus and want to grow spiritually, hold them accountable—talk about how God wants us to respond to his love by the way we live our lives. Emphasize grace and forgiveness, but also talk about how Christians are called to live lives that honor God through our actions. Being disciplined and making intentional choices to get sin out of our lives is biblical and important—these are choices that grow from our love of God because of his love for us!

If you have teenagers who have not yet decided to follow Jesus, use this as an opportunity to share with them how God desires to give us full, complete, meaningful lives and how sin gets in the way of that.

THE BEFORE & AFTER [optional]

Text Message Questions
We’ve provided some different text message questions to send out to your students prior to your meeting. Feel free to use one or both of the questions below. As with the rest of the curriculum, edit these questions to fit the needs of your ministry.

- What friend have you encouraged today? Tonight we’re continuing our study in James.
- What did you talk about with your friends today? Come to small group tonight to hear how much our words matter.

Parent Email
We’ve provided you with an email below that you can send to your parents following the lesson. Our hope is to encourage parents to continue the conversation at home. Feel free to edit and customize the email to fit your ministry needs.

Dear parents,

Our small groups are continuing their study of James, and this week’s lesson—built around chapter 3—offered a powerful reminder about the impact of our words. James spends an entire section of his letter reminding Christians of the potentially destructive power of words.

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Thanks to today’s technology, we can instantly share our words in emails, text messages, Facebook comments, instant messages, and cell phone conversations—and they’re often done without much thought. Few sentences have the power of “I love you” or the disappointment of “no, I’m not interested.” A seemingly innocent joke or comment can make someone feel awkward and worthless. At the same time, an encouraging letter or comment may restore confidence.

I’m sure you’ve spent plenty of time over the years encouraging your child to speak positively to and about other people, so it might be quite natural to sit down this week and have a conversation about the power of our words. Here are some questions you could include in this chat:

- Why can it be so tough for us to compliment other people—and avoid making negative statements?
- Why do you think God cares about the words we speak or write?
Based on your small group conversation, when does a wise person speak? When might a wise person choose not to speak?

Each day you and your teenager have opportunities to use words in a way that encourage, protect, and build up others. One night, during a meal, take time to have family members encourage one another. Tell your kids what traits and qualities stand out as examples of God's work. Talk about your love for your children—be as specific as possible, and use recent examples. Your words will be powerful!

Thank you for encouraging your teenager through this process of becoming the person God has created, planned, and desired!
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2. LESSON GUIDE

GETTING THINGS STARTED [optional]
As you begin your small group, welcome your students and invite them into your meeting area. Open in prayer, and then SAY SOMETHING LIKE:

Ever had one of those moments in life when you didn’t really know what to say? You knew you needed to say something, but you just couldn’t find the right words. That’s what happens in this scene from As Good As It Gets (rated PG-13), as Melvin struggles to find the right words to say to Carol after insulting her dress.

Start the DVD at 1:37:30, as Melvin sits. Stop the DVD at 1:40:30, as Melvin says, “You make me want to be a better man.”

ASK:
- Think of a time that you were encouraged by what someone else said about you. How did those words make you feel?
- How about a time that you were hurt by words someone spoke, either to your face or behind your back—how did those words make you feel?
- Why can it be so tough for us to compliment other people—and avoid making negative statements?
- Why do you think God cares about the words we speak or write?

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: Our words are remarkable things. It’s no exaggeration to say we can destroy a person with the things we say or write—or we can help lift that person to new heights. That’s why God cares so much about our words—they’re a reflection of whether we love the people around us, or if we’re focused on just our own selfish desires. The good news is, we can grow and mature in this area.

If you came up with an opening activity, movie clip, or game that worked well with your group, and you’d like to share it with other youth workers, please email us at ideas@simplyyouthministry.com.

TEACHING POINTS
The goal of the Teaching Points is to help students capture the essence of each lesson with more discussion and less lecture-style teaching. The main points we have chosen here are:

1. Your words can build up or tear down,
2. Words produce uncontrollable results,
3. Wisdom can help us control our words.

Remember: All throughout these lessons, it’s up to you to choose (1) how many questions you use, and (2) the wording of the main points—keep ours, or change the wording to make it clearer for your audience.

Read James 3:1-12 together as a group. Consider allowing one or more of the teenagers to read the text.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: Let’s see what James says about this common, universal struggle to control our tongue and watch our words.
1. Your words can build up or tear down

**ASK:**
- What are some of the ways our words can negatively affect the people around us?  
  [NOTE: Examples might include the effects of gossip, dissension, and even the tone of voice.]
- Look at verses 9-12. Has this happened to you before? You worship God at church or in small group or while doing devotions—and then you turn around and speak something hurtful or hateful. Maybe those words really did feel bitter or salty as you spoke them. Why do we do this?
- How do negative or critical words dishonor the target of your words? How do positive or uplifting words honor the recipient of your words?
- Do our attitudes shape our words or do our words shape our attitudes? Explain.

**SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Most words or conversations aren’t neutral. We’re either honoring or dishonoring other people—and God. That’s why it’s important to learn to be intentional about the words we use. Am I about to honor or dishonor someone? Am I about to build someone up or tear someone down? Am I about to respect or demean that person? Pause before speaking or writing—that can help you choose the more honorable path with your words.

2. Words produce uncontrollable results

**ASK:**
- Look at verses 3-12. Why do you think James chose these particular analogies—a horse, a ship, a fire, and a fountain—to describe the power of our words?
- Describe a time when something you said was misunderstood—what did you learn? How would you say it differently?

**SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Once you’ve said something, you can’t bring it back. It’s been spoken, and it’s been heard. You can ask for forgiveness after speaking or writing hurtful words, but you can’t completely erase the experience for the person who heard or read your words.

3. Wisdom can help us control our words

**ASK:**
- What is the nature of wisdom? What does it look like to use wisdom with your words?
- Read James 3:13-18. When does a wise person speak? When might a wise person choose not to speak?
- Is there ever a time when negative words are necessary? Explain why you feel the way you do.

**SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Verses 13-18 offer some insight on the relationship between our words and our spiritual maturity. James’ examples reflect situations where words will either heal or harm. Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition will be reflected in our words, through boasting and lying. The opposite is also true: Mercy, sincerity, gentleness, and a willingness to yield to others will be evidenced through the atmosphere of peace that our words create. We can ask God for wisdom in the words we choose and use.
ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION [optional]

ASK:
- Why do you think James spent so much time in his letter talking about the power of words?
- Verse 18 says "peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness." What are some ways your words can be "seeds of peace"?
- What might James write or say to your generation about the power of words? What are some unique challenges and opportunities your generation faces?

APPLICATION

[NOTE: This exercise might be too intense for some teenagers, so use your discretion.]

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: Close your eyes for a moment and think about the time in your life when you felt most wounded by another person’s words. I’m not going to ask you for details, but I want you to think about how those words hurt you and affected you. [NOTE: Pause a few moments.] Now, I want you to think about a time in life when another person’s words provided you with strength and encouragement and joy. This person’s words were almost like a treasure or healing medicine in your life at that moment. [NOTE: Pause for a few moments.] OK, go ahead and open your eyes.

ASK:
- Those two memories each brought a different set of emotions, right? Without giving details, tell us why the words were so powerful—choose either the negative or positive experience.
- No one likes to receive negative words, yet we all struggle to not use them against other people. How might this exercise help you the next time you’re about to criticize or slam or talk negatively about someone? And how might this help you look for more opportunities to share positive words with others?

If you choose to not use this exercise, ASK:
- No one likes to receive negative words, yet we all struggle to not use them against other people. When you think about how you’ve been affected by negative words, how might that help you the next time you’re about to criticize or slam someone? And how might recalling past times people have spoken uplifting words to you help you look for more opportunities to share positive words with others?

Pair up with another person in the group for these questions:

ASK:
- What are the biggest temptations that you face with your words? Do you tend to gossip about others? Do you struggle with making fun of people? Do you keep silent when you could be encouraging or standing up for someone?

- How have you grown in this area during your high school years? Or is the struggle as strong as it was back when you were a freshman?

- Read Ephesians 4:29. What would it take to reach the place where “everything” we said was “good and helpful”? What’s one step we could each take this week to move closer to that kind of Christ-like maturity?
Challenge students to email or text you after the small group with one area where they’re struggling—or have the pairs text each other. If your teenagers struggle with gossip, challenge them to work together on this. If most of the gossip happens at lunch, suggest that they sit someplace different so that they can break the habit. If it mainly occurs through text messages or emails, encourage them to not text anything about anyone else for the week and put a sticky note on their computers or note in their phones to remember this commitment.

**SUMMARY**
End your small group lesson here. Provide your teenagers with a quick summary or take-home challenge based on (1) the content of this lesson, (2) the dialogue that took place during the lesson, (3) your understanding of the issues and struggles your teenagers are facing, and (4) the big picture of your youth ministry and what your leadership team wants accomplished with the teaching and discussion time.

**FOR KEEPS [MEMORY VERSE]**
Encourage and/or challenge your teenagers to memorize the verse below.

*Don’t use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them (Ephesians 4:29).*