

THE COMPASS

GETTING THROUGH THE DAY: Practical Wisdom from JAMES

Part 5:

Talkin' Toxins

Doug Brendel

To control a horse, the way I understand it, you put a bit — a little metal mouthpiece — in the horse's mouth.

Then when you pull on the reins, the pressure of the bit in the horse's mouth inclines the horse to turn, or slow down, or however you train the horse to respond to various moves.

Some experts say that the bit is intended for communication, not control.

But whatever terminology you use, the horse has a piece of metal in its mouth, and you control that piece of metal, and this fact puts you in charge!

We see a horse and rider galloping along, very dramatically or very elegantly, maybe it's an exciting scene in a movie — and we don't tend to think about where all that beauty and drama and power started.

A mature horse may be somewhere in the neighborhood of 1,000 pounds.

The heaviest bit is generally in the neighborhood of 14 ounces.

That's an 1,100-to-1 power ratio.

The littlest thing controls that enormous animal.

I find that my life is the same way.

The littlest thing controls my whole life.

I think of myself as doing all these things — I'm a husband, I'm a father, I'm in ministry, I'm a writer — I have a mortgage and a calendar and a computer and two car loans — I have a plan for this and a strategy for that — I have goals, I have dreams — I have certain values, certain principles, certain standards — I have this big, complicated view of how I am conducting my life, how I'm directing my course—

—but in fact, the entire course of my existence is overwhelmingly controlled by one tiny component, one seemingly insignificant element of my life:

my words.

We've been studying the book of James, in the New Testament — which is really a letter that a guy named James wrote to his friends — and James saw how important this issue was, and how most of his friends were missing it.

So he wrote about it.

He said, it's harder to control what you say than any other aspect of your behavior:

James 3:8 ...No man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Let's talk poisons. Cyanide, for instance.

Do you know how cyanide works?

You know that your bloodstream picks up oxygen from your lungs, and carries it throughout your body.

The cells in your blood designed to carry the oxygen are hemoglobins.

They're kind of spoon-shaped, and they pick up oxygen in the spoon, sail through your arteries, and drop off the oxygen where it's needed.

But cyanide is nasty stuff.

You breathe it in, or swallow it, or absorb it through your skin, and it goes into your bloodstream and finds the hemoglobins and essentially bends that spoon flat, so it can't hold oxygen.

The hemoglobins keep sailing through your arteries, but they're not carrying anything.

Pretty soon you're breathing fast; you're trying to suck in more oxygen but it's not doing any good.

You get dizzy, you get weak, you get a headache. You get nauseous.

Your heart starts racing. You go into convulsions. You pass out.

You stop breathing. And you die.

James is talking poisons? Let's talk mushrooms. Why don't you want to go out in the forest and eat wild mushrooms?

Because some of them are poisonous.

You can't tell from the taste; they may taste delicious at first.

But the poison is spreading.

After a while, you start to feel giddy, you may start sweating profusely; then your pulse starts racing, you feel anxiety, and the more panicky you get, the faster your heart pumps the poison through your body.

It doesn't really matter, though, because by the time you first notice the symptoms, it's already too late.

Don't eat wild mushrooms.

James is talking poisons. Let's talk tetanus.

The spores of the tetanus bacteria are everywhere in the environment: in soil, in dust, in animal waste.

And they're hardy. They just hang out, waiting for someone to host a party for them.

Then say you step on a nail, or accidentally cut yourself, and the wound is dirty — and without your realizing it, the bacteria spores enter your body through the open wound.

They like it there. You've become their host. And within a few days, they start doing their thing — which is to start producing a powerful nerve poison.

At first you just get a headache, Then your jaw muscles start cramping.

As the poison spreads, it attacks each muscle group it encounters: you get spasms in your neck, your arms, your legs, your stomach.

Then you go into violent seizures.

People with tetanus sometimes bend in two as the poison attacks their nervous system.

In 30% of cases, you die. In the other 70% of cases, you have spasms for weeks, weakness and stiffness for months, breathing problems, high blood pressure, abnormal heartbeat, blood clots, and other side-effects.

This is why just about everybody gets vaccinated for tetanus, and if you get hurt you often get a fresh tetanus shot.

Because tetanus is a terrible way to die.
 How do you know if you have tetanus? From the symptoms.
 By the time you have it, it's too late.

Poison ivy.

It's the oil of the plant — it's actually a kind of sap — that's poisonous.
 It fools your immune system into thinking that it's under attack, so your bloodstream
 rushes killer T-cells to the scene.

The T-cells unleash enzymes and toxins designed to kill off invaders — but what they're
 actually doing is more or less ripping up the blood vessels under your skin, which
 causes blisters.

It also attacks your nerve cells — which makes you itch like crazy.

But that's not all — lucky you.

The oil gets into your bloodstream — so you may break out even on parts of your body
 where you never touched the plant.

Of course maybe you're one of the 15% or so of people who don't have a reaction to
 poison ivy.

But do you know what happens if you try to impress your friends by repeatedly touching
 poison ivy?

You teach your body to be like other people, and it blisters your skin just like everybody
 else's.

Now how much poison ivy oil does it take to get a rash? 50 micrograms.
 How big would that be? Less than a grain of salt.

James says my tongue is full of poison.

Poison starts tiny, but it spreads.

My words are little — but in that moment when a word passes my lips and evaporates,
 its effect isn't over.

Its effect is just beginning.

* * *

Sometimes I speak cyanide.

My words cut off someone else's life.

I make a remark that puts someone else down.

Like the poison that flattens out the oxygen-bearing spoons of hemoglobin, my
 comments incline you to think poorly of that person — and where you might have
 been a source of help and support to them, now you're likely to let them flounder.

*That Larry Jaworski. He's so weak. Can't get a handle on his habit. Moron. Utterly
 undisciplined. Honestly, how can you help a person like that? You have to want
 help, you know? You have to be willing to take advice.*

Couple of weeks later, Larry Jaworski takes you to lunch. Opens his heart. Tells you
 about his problem.

What's your perspective on Larry Jaworski? How do you receive his commentary?

I have set you up to think of him negatively.

You are perfectly positioned to help him — he has chosen you as the one he opens up to — you are perfectly positioned to bring oxygen-rich love and wisdom and support into his life—

—but I have flattened your spoon.

I spoke cyanide.

I suggested — in a normal everyday dialogue with you; I didn't go out of my way to make this impression on you, it was just a routine conversation with you — I suggested that Larry was a loser.

Insincere. Beyond help. A slacker.

I poisoned you with my words, and now you are inclined to give Larry the brush-off.

* * *

Sometimes I speak wild mushroom.

It tastes delicious to make such cutting remarks. It's fun. It's a rush. I'm clever and articulate and besides, they deserved it.

But those words start wreaking havoc later.

Maybe my victim overhears me. Maybe someone repeats my comments later.

The relationship comes under attack.

Maybe by the time I realize what I've done, it's too late.

Years ago, I got a bit of painful but accurate wisdom from Dr. Ed Willmington, the worship minister at Scottsdale Bible Church.

I was preparing to leave the drama ministry at SBC and move over to Mountain Valley Church.

Ed was concerned about my leaving the protective covering of his ministry area.

I thought he was just being selfish, because I was such a tremendous asset — haha!

But he told me what his concern really was; here's what he said:

“Doug, you use strong words.”

He was tuned in to the fact that I'm inclined to vivid language, and when I'm angry, I tend to be quite, shall we say, flashy.

There's a part of me that likes to shock people.

And there's a part of me that likes to get a big reaction — I like to make people laugh, or make them kind of catch their breath.

Sometimes I like the sound of my own story so much, I kind of go with it, I expand on it, it evolves.

This is not an asset for a leader in a church family. This is a liability.

I have to watch it.

Sometimes I'm talking and my wife reaches over and quietly touches my arm.

This is a loving signal which translated means, “That's the end of the truth, darling; everything from here on out is unnecessary and probably untrue.”

She's saying, Doug, you're speaking wild mushroom. Tastes good at the moment, but you'll feel badly about this later.

* * *

Sometimes I speak tetanus.

Maybe you're wounded, and I give you a casual response. I'm not tuned in to your pain.

Maybe I give you bad advice. I'm not wise about addressing your need.

In any case, the bacteria spores of my words come to live inside you, and they gradually

produce poison.
 You were hurting, and now you hurt even worse — because I didn't love you well.
 I didn't take care with what I said.
 I spoke tetanus — you were deeply wounded already, and now you're taking in bacterial
 poison on top of the original pain.

* * *

Sometimes I speak poison ivy.
 I make a tiny little comment. Nothing, really — or that's what I tell myself.
 Hardly a grain of salt.
 To me, it was just a harmless comment.
 But your system took it as an alarm. You reacted.
 The course of your life is radically altered by my offhand comment.

I was in middle management, years ago.
 I made a comment to the boss about a very close friend of mine, someone working
 under me.
 I said something along the lines of "She hates about half of our clients."
 Months went by. Some problems developed in the company.
 The boss repeated my remark. *Well, you know, Doug says...*
 My friend was furious. She quit the company. Our friendship was shattered. It took
 years, literally years, to repair.
 I had spoken poison ivy.
 A grain of salt. A harmless comment.
 But then — blisters, and itching, and pain.

* * *

There are plenty of other ways to fail with words.
 These are just a few examples that come to my mind, because of my experiences and
 observations — and my own personal failings.
 James nails me. I think he nails all of us.
 We say we love God, but then we fail to love people.
 The way James puts it is:

- 9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who
 have been made in God's likeness.**
- 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not
 be.**
- 11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?**
- 12 My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a
 salt spring produce fresh water.**

If I love God — if I am committed to living by his plan, his best for me — then I'm going
 to love people.
 Thing 1 is loving God; Thing 2 is loving people.
 Jesus said they're equally important. They're intertwined.
 If I'm claiming to love God but I'm trashing people with my words, there's a serious
 disconnect.

If I say I'm an olive tree, but I produce figs, that's a pretty good sign that what I really am is a fig tree.

If I say I'm a fresh water spring, but I produce salt water, that's a pretty good sign that what I really am is a salt spring.

If I say I'm a follower of Christ, but I damage people with my words, that's a pretty good sign that what I really am is a Christian of convenience.

My personal Doug Brendel reality is: I'm a Christian of convenience about once a day.
Or more.

I don't watch my mouth.

I don't take care with what I say.

God doesn't love me any less for this. He just cries for me.

He cries for the damage I'm doing to people around me.

And he cries for the damage I'm doing to my own spirit.

But how can I change?

I think there are a couple clues in this passage of James's letter.

First, if a bit is used to communicate with a horse, not just control it, then I think I need to talk to my mouth. (***Talk to your mouth***)

Maybe I can never totally control it, as James says — but I can train. I can work on this, and get better.

I won't be perfect every day. I will fail sometimes, sure.

In Romans 7:15, the apostle Paul says, **"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do."**

But I need to tune in to this issue in my life, and talk to myself, and hold fast to the reality that this issue is important.

I need to stick with it. I need to be diligent.

Hebrews 6:11 says I should demonstrate **"diligence to the very end."**

If tomorrow I use words in a destructive way, and I catch myself too late, I can always go back to God and grow some more.

God *invites* me to this.

Lamentations 3:21-23 says, **"...This I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."**

God won't condemn me for failing, and I can start training again tomorrow.

Another strategy for changing the way I talk to people and about people may be to go to someone else and talk about this issue. (***Talk about it***)

I may need to come to you and ask forgiveness for something I said to you.

I may need to ask forgiveness for something I said about you.

I may need to ask you to hold me accountable for the way I talk to you, the way I talk about other people.

Find someone you trust to be truthful but gentle with you, and ask them to be your mouth monitor.

Ask them to pray for you, and with you, asking God to give them wisdom and insight — and influence with you.

This may be a hugely important step.
 This may be a life-changing measure.
 This may lead to loving God better, and loving people better, than you ever have!

In any event, taming my tongue is all about guards.

Proverbs 13:3 says **He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.**

Proverbs 21:23 says **He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity.**

What does a guard do?

He engages in an ever-present watch over something of value.

Nothing comes or goes without the guard's knowledge and approval.

So guarding my lips, guarding my mouth, guarding my words means resisting the urge to say the first thing that comes to mind.

Getting out of the habit of saying whatever I think the moment I think it.

Training in a new lifestyle — a new style of speech.

Guiding all the words and ideas exiting my mouth *first* through a *filter*.

On oral spam filter!

I don't have to do this on my own, under my own power.

God will help me.

The psalmist David discovered this, and he wrote:

Psalms 141:3 **Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips.**

I am not on my own in this effort.

God will partner with me.

* * *

My words don't have to spark a fire or spread a poison.

My words can bring life and health.

In **Proverbs 4**, a wise father says:

20 My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words.

21 Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart;

22 for they are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body.

That's the kind of talk I want to become known for.

Words of life. Words of health. Words of wisdom and help and compassion and joy and light.