THE QUESTION

What did the early Christians teach about taming the tongue (James 3:1–12)?

Asked by a THF member on June 21, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 12 numbered quotations · the 31 early Christian passages and 159 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-did-the-early-christians-teach-about-taming-the-tongue-james-3-1-12

The short answer *Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words*

They taught that speech must be ruled by God, because every word will be judged and leaders answer for more. The mouth that praises God should not curse people, so Christians are to speak sparingly, refuse slander, answer cursing with patience, and bridle the tongue through humility.

LIBRARY ONLY	This study was written only from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed at the back, with a link to read it.
HOW IT WAS MADE	Compiled by machine learning from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible only. Every quotation was matched word for word against our stored text. Not yet reviewed by The Historic Faith.
SHARING WITH AN AI?	Every quotation here comes from The Historic Faith's library. If you paste this study into an AI, anything it adds beyond these pages comes from that AI, not from us.

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POINT 1 OF 7

Those entrusted with more must give more account

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

The Apostolic Constitutions remind a bishop that he must give a great account, because more is asked of those trusted with more. Tatian's Gospel harmony records Jesus saying that showy religious teachers will receive greater judgment. Both fit James' warning that teachers face a stricter judgment.

1 “Since you have the power of loosing, know yourself, and conduct yourself in this world in a way that fits your office, knowing that you must give a great account.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 20, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

2 “They devour widows' houses while making long prayers. Therefore they will receive greater judgment.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tatian,** *Diatessaron* 40 (c. 150–180 AD) **Source 6, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 7

Every careless word will be judged

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

The Apostolic Constitutions repeat Jesus' warning that we will answer for every idle word, and that our words can justify or condemn us. This is why controlling the tongue mattered so much to the early church.

3 “Your words shall not be empty, for you shall give an account for every idle word, Matthew 12:36”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 23, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

4 “By your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned.""”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 21, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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POINT 3 OF 7

Speak sparingly, knowing God is listening

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Gregory Thaumaturgus, retelling Ecclesiastes, says it is good to use the tongue sparingly and to keep the heart calm. He reminds readers that we always speak in God's hearing, so we should not say everything that comes to mind.

5 “Moreover, it is good to use the tongue sparingly, and to keep the heart calm and properly balanced when speaking.”

later in the same passage

“Instead, we should know and consider that, although we are far removed from heaven, we speak in God's hearing, and it is good for us to speak without giving offense.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Gregory Thaumaturgus,** **Source 15, page 7** Read it in the library ›
Metaphrase of Ecclesiastes 5 (c. 240–270 AD)
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 7

The mouth that worships should not curse

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Commodianus makes the same point as James: the tongue we use to adore the Lord should not be used to curse. The Apostolic Constitutions add that whoever wants to escape a curse should not curse others, but bless and make peace.

6 “Restrain your tongue from cursing, because with it you adore the Lord. Repress rage. Make yourself peaceable to all.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Commodianus,** *Writings* **Source 26, page 7** Read it in the library ›
(c. 250–300 AD)
THF's updated English

7 “Let them bless rather than slander. Let them make peace, and not stir up conflict.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** **Source 25, page 7** Read it in the library ›
(c. 250–380 AD)
THF's updated English

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POINT 5 OF 7

Bitterness and sweetness cannot share one heart

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

Cyprian is writing about those who divide the church, but his images echo James 3. He asks what wild beasts and the poison of serpents are doing in a Christian heart, and says bitterness cannot live with sweetness, like a spring that should not give two kinds of water.

8 “What is the fierceness of wolves doing in a Christian heart? What is the savageness of dogs doing there, and the deadly poison of serpents, and the bloodthirsty cruelty of wild beasts?”

later in the same passage

“Bitterness cannot exist together with sweetness, nor darkness with light, nor rain with clear weather, nor battle with peace, nor barrenness with fruitfulness, nor drought with springs, nor storm with calm.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Treatises* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 16, page 7** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 7

Answer cursing with patience, not more cursing

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Tertullian asks how he could claim to follow the Lord if he strikes back with his tongue when cursed. Polycarp likewise tells believers not to return cursing for cursing, but to remember the Lord's teaching.

9 “So then, if I strike back when cursed, with my tongue, how will I be found to have followed the teaching of the Lord?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Patience* 8 **Source 10, page 6** Read it in the library ›

(c. 196–220 AD)

THF's updated English

10 “or blow for blow, or cursing for cursing, but remembering what the Lord said in His teaching”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Polycarp,** *Epistle to the Philippians* (c. 100–155 AD) **Source 4, page 6** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

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POINT 7 OF 7

Bridle the tongue through humility

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Commodianus links bridling the tongue with humility and patience. Clement of Rome quotes the Psalm that calls us to keep the tongue from evil and to seek peace. Practical help for the tongue begins with a humble heart that turns from evil.

11 “Bridle the tongue. You ought to make yourself humble. Do not willingly use force, nor return force used against you.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Commodianus,** *Writings* (c. 250–300 AD) **Source 27, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

12 “Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Source 31, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not explain James' pictures of the rudder, the fire or the spring one by one.
- None of them sets out a step-by-step method for controlling speech.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 31 early Christian passages and 159 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–31, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 32–63, in Bible order), then 127 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are in THF’s updated English unless marked “1885 English” (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). “… [continues online]” marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**,

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Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *31 passages from 14 writers*

Barnabas, *c. 70–132 AD · source 1*

1 *Epistle of Barnabas* (on point 4) “the way of darkness is crooked and full of cursing… [continues online] **read ›**

Hermas, *c. 90–150 AD · source 2*

2 *Shepherd* (1885 English; on point 7) evil of no one, nor listen with pleasure to any one who speaks evil of another… [continues online] **read ›**

Ignatius of Antioch, *c. 98–117 AD · source 3*

3 *Epistle to the Trallians* (1885 English; on point 5) “they intermix the poison of their deceit with their persuasive talk, as if they mingled aconite with sweet wine, that so he who drinks, being deceived in his taste by… [continues online] **read ›**

Polycarp, *c. 100–155 AD · source 4*

4 *Epistle to the Philippians* **Quote 10, page 4** and false witness; "not returning evil for evil, or reviling for reviling," or blow for blow, or cursing for cursing, but remembering what the Lord said in His teaching: "Judge… [continues online] **read ›**

Tatian, *c. 150–180 AD · sources 5–6*

5 *Diatessaron* 14 (1885 English; on point 5) “the overflowings of the heart the mouth 34 speaks… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *Diatessaron* 40 (1885 English) **Quote 2, page 2** “you are brethren. 37 Matthew 23:9 Call not then to yourselves any one father on earth: for your Father is one, who is 38 in heaven… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · source 7*

7 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (1885 English; on point 7) “thy tongue from evil, and thy lips that they speak no guile… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 8–9*

8 *Stromata* 4.6 (on point 4) “bless with their mouth, but they curse in their heart… [continues online] **read ›**

9 *Instructor* 3.11 (1885 English; on point 3) “5:13 Whosoever shall bless his friend early in the morning with a loud voice, shall be regarded not to differ from cursing. Proverbs 27:14… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 10–11*

10 *On Patience* 8 (1885 English) **Quote 9, page 4** “wound that outrageous one more by enduring: for he will be beaten by Him for whose sake you endure… [continues online] **read ›**

11 *On Idolatry* 23 (on point 2) orders that there must be no swearing. The debtor says, "I wrote, but I said nothing." It is the tongue, not the written letter, which kills. Here I call Nature… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 12–14*

12 *Commentary on John* 6 (on point 5) “And it does not escape the Baptist's notice that they have the poison of vipers under their tongue, and the poison of asps, for the poison of asps is… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *Against Celsus* 41 (1885 English; on point 6) “we read, Bless them that curse you… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Against Celsus* 54 (1885 English; on point 7) “your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking guile… [continues online] **read ›**

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Gregory Thaumaturgus, *c. 240–270 AD · source 15*

15 *Metaphrase of Ecclesiastes* 5 (1885 English) **Quote 5, page 3** “it is a good thing to use the tongue sparingly, and to keep a calm and rightly balanced heart in the exercise of speech… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 16–19*

16 *Treatises* (1885 English) **Quote 8, page 4** “cannot consist and be associated with sweetness, darkness with light, rain with clearness, battle with peace, barrenness with fertility, drought with springs, storm with tranquillity… [continues online] **read ›**

17 *Epistles* (1885 English; on point 5) “the envenomed tongue of the devil, who from the beginning of the world, always deceitful and lying, lies that he may deceive, cajoles that he may injure, promises good that… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *Treatises* (1885 English; on point 5) “blessed Apostle Paul designates and points out these when he says, The poison of asps is under their lips, and their mouth is full of cursing and bitterness… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *Treatises* (on point 5) sitting in the seat of pestilence, as plagues and stains on the faith, deceiving with a serpent's tongue, and skillful in corrupting the truth, pouring out deadly poisons from… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 20–25*

20 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 1, page 2** the Scripture says, men have entrusted much, they will require the more, in Luke 12:48. For no man is free from sin, except Him who was made man for… [continues online] **read ›**

21 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 4, page 2** But concerning bishops, we have heard from our Lord that a shepherd who is to be ordained as bishop for the churches in every parish must be blameless, beyond reproach, … [continues online] **read ›**

22 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 1) But if the slanderous charge is false, and you who are the pastors, along with the deacons, accept that falsehood as truth, either because you show favoritism or take bribes, … [continues online] **read ›**

23 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 3, page 2** “shall you be mindful of injuries; for the ways of those that remember injuries are unto death… [continues online] **read ›**

24 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 4) “did not only murmur, but also cursed her, forgetting Him that said: He that blesses you is blessed, and he that curses you is cursed… [continues online] **read ›**

25 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 7, page 3** “26:2 And again he says: Those that bring reproaches are exceeding foolish… [continues online] **read ›**

Commodianus, *c. 250–300 AD · sources 26–27*

26 *Writings* **Quote 6, page 3** “your tongue from cursing, because with it you adore the Lord… [continues online] **read ›**

27 *Writings* **Quote 11, page 5** “Bridle the tongue. You ought to make yourself humble… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Rome · *sources 28–31*

28 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English; on point 7) “mouth has abounded with wickedness, and thy tongue contrived deceit… [continues online] **read ›**

29 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English; on point 7) “ye judge, so shall ye be judged… [continues online] **read ›**

30 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (on point 4) their heart.” And again it says, “They loved Him with their mouth, and lied to Him with their tongue; but their heart was not right with Him, nor were they… [continues online] **read ›**

31 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English) **Quote 12, page 5** “thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *32 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

32 **Psalms 34:14** Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. (Septuagint Psalm 33:15 (Psalm 34:14 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

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33 **Matthew 7:2** For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you. **read ›**

34 **Matthew 11:22** But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. **read ›**

35 **Matthew 12:37** For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." **read ›**

36 **Matthew 12:41** The men of Nineveh will stand up in the judgment with this generation and will condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, someone greater than Jonah is here. **read ›**

37 **Mark 12:40** those who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation." **read ›**

38 **Luke 5:3** He entered into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little from the land. He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat. **read ›**

39 **Luke 10:14** But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the judgment than for you. **read ›**

40 **Luke 12:48** but he who did not know and did things worthy of blows shall be beaten with few. From everyone to whom much was given, much shall be required; and from him to whom much was entrusted, they shall ask more. **read ›**

41 **John 2:2** Jesus also was invited, with his disciples, to the wedding. **read ›**

42 **Acts 9:14** Here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." **read ›**

43 **Acts 27:40** Casting off the anchors, they left them in the sea, at the same time untying the rudder ropes. Hoisting up the foresail to the wind, they made for the beach. **read ›**

44 **Acts 28:4** When the islanders saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "Surely this man is a murderer. Though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." **read ›**

45 **Romans 3:13** Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have dealt deceitfully; the poison of cobras is under their lips; **read ›**

46 **Romans 3:14** their mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; **read ›**

47 **Romans 9:7** Nor are they all children because they are Abraham's seed. But, "In Isaac your seed shall be called." **read ›**

48 **Galatians 1:8** But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach to you a gospel other than what we preached to you, let him be cursed. **read ›**

49 **Titus 2:8** and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us. **read ›**

50 **Titus 3:2** to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable and gentle, showing all meekness toward all men. **read ›**

51 **James 1:26** If anyone among you thinks himself to be religious while he does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this man's religion is worthless. **read ›**

52 **James 3:1** Let not many of you be teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will receive heavier judgment. **read ›**

53 **James 3:2** For we all stumble in many things. Anyone who does not stumble in word is a perfect person, able to bridle the whole body also. **read ›**

54 **James 3:3** Look, we put bits into horses' mouths so that they obey us, and we guide their whole body. **read ›**

55 **James 3:4** Behold, the ships also, though they are so big and are driven by fierce winds, are yet guided by a very small rudder, wherever the pilot desires. **read ›**

56 **James 3:5** So the tongue is also a little member, and boasts great things. See how large a forest a small fire sets ablaze! **read ›**

57 **James 3:6** And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. Thus the tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting the course of life on fire, and itself set on fire by hell. **read ›**

58 **James 3:7** For every kind of animal, bird, creeping thing, and sea creature is tamed, and has been tamed by mankind; **read ›**

59 **James 3:8** but no human being can tame the tongue—an uncontrollable evil, full of deadly poison. **read ›**

60 **James 3:9** With it we bless God the Father, and with it we curse people who have been made in the likeness of God. **read ›**

61 **James 3:10** Out of the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. **read ›**

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62 **1 Peter 3:9** not repaying evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but instead blessing, knowing that you were called to this so that you might inherit a blessing. **read ›**

63 **1 Peter 3:10** For the one who desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *127 verses, by reference*

Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.

Genesis 9:5

Deuteronomy 22:10 · 26:18

1 Kings 18:33

Psalms 12:2 · 12:3 · 34:11 · 50:16 · 50:18 · 78:36 · 133:1

Proverbs 1:33 · 11:13 · 14:8

Isaiah 29:13 · 66:2

Jeremiah 9:23

Malachi 4:5

Matthew 3:7 · 5:3 · 5:4 · 5:5 · 5:7 · 5:8 · 5:11 · 5:13 · 5:28 · 5:39 · 5:42 · 6:3 · 6:12 · 6:19 · 6:25 · 6:31 · 6:32 · 7:1 · 7:9 · 7:13 · 7:21 · 8:4 · 9:13 · 10:12 · 10:39 · 10:41 · 12:7 · 12:36 · 15:8 · 16:26 · 18:3 · 18:10

Mark 1:8 · 7:6 · 7:15 · 8:36

Luke 1:20 · 6:20 · 6:22 · 6:36 · 6:37 · 6:38 · 10:5 · 12:20 · 12:22 · 12:23 · 12:30 · 12:33 · 13:32 · 18:10 · 19:8

John 2:3 · 2:13 · 5:3 · 8:12 · 8:39 · 11:25 · 12:25 · 12:28 · 14:6

Acts 10:14 · 17:31

Romans 1:26 · 1:32 · 8:11 · 9:15 · 12:8 · 12:9

1 Corinthians 1:10 · 1:23 · 1:31 · 2:8 · 2:13 · 2:15 · 6:10 · 6:14 · 8:6 · 9:23 · 10:24 · 11:16 · 14:13

2 Corinthians 4:14 · 6:14 · 8:12 · 10:17

Galatians 1:4 · 3:13 · 5:19

Ephesians 5:16 · 6:12 · 6:14

Philippians 2:2 · 2:10 · 3:15 · 3:16

Colossians 3:5

1 Timothy 6:3 · 6:7 · 6:10 · 6:20

Hebrews 9:14

1 Peter 1:13 · 1:21 · 3:22

1 John 2:3 · 5:3

2 John 1:10

Revelation 2:5 · 3:21

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Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

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THE END OF THIS STUDY