

"Words Of Life And Death"

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Date: 14 January 2024

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[0 : 00] I invite you as we begin our sermon today to turn with me to the book of James chapter 3. You'll find it on page 1851 of your pew Bibles.

Words matter. I do. I promise. Never. Always. I love you.

He's passed on. Goodbye. I have a dream. You feeling lucky, punk?

Here I stand and I can do no other. Give me liberty or give me death. All men are created equal.

Or how about this? Your sins are forgiven. It is finished. The tomb is empty. He is risen.

[1 : 10] Words have great power. What you say. The words you use matter. What words you listen to.

What you give your attention to. Matters. That is what this sermon is about. And I pray that what you take away from our time together this morning is that words matter.

It is typical for an installation service like this for the pastor to select a text that has something to do with pastoring and then to preach on it.

And as I considered my love for words. And their power. I was led to this passage. So please follow along with me as I read James chapter 3 verses 1 through 5.

My brethren. My brethren. Let not many of you become teachers. Knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

[2 : 15] For we all stumble in many things. And if anyone does not stumble in word. He is a perfect man able also to bridle his whole body.

Indeed we put bits into horses mouths so that they obey us. And we turn their whole body. Look also at the ships.

Although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds. They are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member.

And boasts great things. Here James gives a solemn warning. That people should not become teachers lightly.

Teachers and teaching. Pastoring and preaching. Is all about words. And words are powerful.

[3 : 16] And because words are powerful. Teaching is dangerous. And should not be undertaken lightly. And while that applies to me and my role as a pastor.

You need to know that teachers and pastors aren't the only ones. Who use words. And need serious warnings about words.

The tongue is a dangerous thing. It is powerful. And we all must take great care. As to how we use it. Point number one.

The power of words. I think we tend to forget just how significant the words we use are.

We're so used to speaking and having that as a luxury. That we forget their power and danger. We forget what is in a word.

[4 : 18] And the consequences of how we speak to one another. And the things we say. It's similar to how we often forget how dangerous cars are.

We drive them all the time. And we forget that we're driving a two ton hunk of metal at 60 miles per hour. Capable of doing immense damage.

In many situations. A license to drive could be far more dangerous than a license to carry. And yet we rarely feel that danger.

So too with words. We rarely stop and appreciate just how serious the things we say are. And how serious their consequences.

You hear, talk is cheap. Or sticks and stones may break my bones. But words will never hurt me. These sayings aren't exactly wrong.

[5 : 21] But it's easy to forget the other end of things. That what you say has huge impacts. And really matters. Words shape worlds.

Words shape lives. It's rightly said that the pen is mightier than the sword. Or like how one author puts it. Words are powerful.

Words can light fires in the hearts of men. Words can wring tears out of the hardest hearts. John, James, knowing the danger and the power of words.

Wants to make clear to his readers. That even though the tongue is a small thing. We ought not estimate. We ought to not underestimate.

The consequences of how we use it. Like a huge ship. Directed by very great and strong winds. I don't know if you've ever had the privilege of seeing like a great old fashioned sailing ship in person.

[6 : 29] They're massive, incredible things. And yet they're turned by small rudders. So too, we should not underestimate the ability of a small word to have a great impact for good or for evil.

Or look at how just a small spark. Can set ablaze a great forest. You must be careful with your words.

You must think through the things you have to say. There are no one-off comments. It is so important.

It is so important. Because some of us have no idea the consequences of the things we say to other people. You may throw out a word and carelessly forget it.

But it might linger in someone else's brain for years. Think before you speak. And then think after about what you've said.

[7 : 34] Because your words matter. It's like the carelessness that the careless gender reveal that set California on fire years back.

You know. Just a little bit of thought goes a long way. The text shows that words matter so much because they are capable of directing everything else in the world.

We do not live in a world of chaos. What we live in is a world that is ruled by the things people say. The chaos you see can always be directed right back to things that people have spoken.

And so too words direct the world and hold great power. The author uses this analogy of a bit in the mouth of a horse.

Horses are strong impressive things. And yet a simple rein and bit is capable of directing wherever they would go. You control the world around you by what you say.

[8 : 51] You have influence on reality by how you speak. If you want a life that is out of control. Just let go of the reins and see what happens.

Say the first thing that comes to your mind. Leave no filter on your words and see just how great of an effect what you say has. Your words are important.

So think carefully about them. Consider also that words are supernatural. Words, the ability to speak and communicate, is one of the things that sets us so clearly apart from animals.

And the ability to speak is actually part of what it means to be made in the image of God. God doesn't use hands. He doesn't have feet.

He doesn't grow hair. But he does use words. He uses words to create the world. We read in Genesis the account of God speaking the universe into existence.

[10 : 08] And so words are supernatural things, powerful, and must not be used carelessly. Many of you know me well and will know that I have a deep love for words.

I love etymology and definitions. I would happily talk to you about the words susuris or quintessence and their origins.

I love books and songs and speeches and plays and really anything that has good words ordered well. But I don't just love words for words' sake.

I love them because what they're capable of doing. Words have changed my life. They've changed my relationships with other people.

And the efforts that I have spent to be better with my words have returned to me a hundredfold. There are few better investments in life than learning how to speak well and to speak good, true, right things.

[11 : 22] And it is because of the power of words that I have become your pastor. I am here because I want to use the power of words to shape your lives, to bring good to you, and to glorify God.

Please hold me to that standard while I am here. And please pray that I would be able to do so. Point number two.

Words of death. Think of a scalpel.

Sharp. Precise. In the right hands, it can save lives. But in the wrong hands, it can take them. So, too, with words.

Depending on how they're used, they bring life or they take it away. As with all powerful things, it comes down to the person who wields it.

[12:41] Look at the passage in James, verse 2. For we all stumble in many things. And if anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.

The last thing you want to stumble with is something dangerous. You stumble. I stumble. We all stumble.

And that goes especially for our words. You do not do things as you should. And you have a very powerful tool that you misuse.

Consider all the evil that we do with our mouths. We lie. We twist reality. We grumble and complain against God.

We manipulate others. We boast. We mock. We blaspheme. We curse others who are made in the image of God. We tear down and we destroy with our mouths.

[13:52] We curse others. When you lie, what you are doing is you are twisting the good power of words to do something that they aren't meant to do.

You take this powerful gift and instead of using it to spread the truth, you use it to gain your own self-interests. Our words are meant to reflect the truth and to establish it.

They are meant to bring life and goodness. But instead, we are a room full of people who use their words to cut against the grain of the world to fit our own desires and our own preferences.

Our words are so dangerous and so significant that Paul uses them to condemn us. In Romans 3, he says, Of all people, their throat is an open grave.

They use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. That means death comes out of our mouths as we lead other people to sin.

[15:08] Death comes out of our mouths as we use our words to tear other people down. We want control over others so we deceive and spin the truth.

We manipulate them and trick them to get what we want. We do things like we exaggerate our problems to provoke sympathy from others.

Or we hide our mistakes to avoid consequences. We inflate our achievements to win praise.

And we bend the truth to serve a lie and serve ourselves. We are manipulators who speak death.

Then Paul talks about the venom of asps being in our lips.

That means from our mouth comes forth things that poison others. Consider how your bitterness and your frustrations and your envies, you speak those to others and it poisons them too.

[16:14] How often are your complaints drawing other people into discontent and bitterness and jealousy? You're not using your words to build up, but to tear down.

Our mouths fill to the brim with reasons why everything in the world isn't good. And why the world isn't good enough for ourselves. We want to tear down that which we hate because it does not conform to our desire.

None of these things make the world a better place, but they are death-dealing. They are words of death. But we should not be surprised to find that the words we speak are so often negative.

Jesus rebukes rightly the corruption of our hearts when he says in Matthew 12, You brood of vipers, how can you speak good when you are evil?

For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.

[17:31] I tell you on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Your words pour forth from your heart, and your words are deadly because your heart is deadly and full of sin. So what should we do then?

If our words are so bad and have so many consequences, what are we to do in response? First thing is shut up.

You've heard the classic line, God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason. We would prevent so much wrong if we just closed our mouth.

I love how Proverbs puts it, Proverbs 17, 28, even the fool who keeps silent is considered wise. Or my dad's favorite line, the closed mouth catches no feet.

[18 : 52] Lincoln puts it really well when he says, it's better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt. We all need to just stop talking.

Be slow to speak. It will help so many things. I mean, trust me, I love to talk. I do it all the time. But before you can say anything helpful, before you can say anything good, you must first learn how to stop talking and listen and to think before you speak.

There is much that we feel is so necessary. I need to say this. When so often things would be fine if it was just left unsaid.

Some of the worst things we say, we say because we feel some unnecessary need to voice our opinion on things. We say this.

[20 : 03] Consider how good advice, given in a bad way or at a bad time, often hurts more than it helps. And know that while criticism is necessary, if you don't love the thing you're criticizing, you will never be able to speak helpful words.

Stop and consider before you speak. The more powerful a weapon you use, the more care needs to be exercised when using it.

Especially harsh words, especially negative words. They can cut down and they must be used with precise care like a scalpel.

I want you to know that as your pastor, I will still stumble. Especially in my words. I write a few thousand words every week for a sermon.

And the chance of me getting them all right is slim to none. So I will need your forgiveness as I pastor this church.

[21 : 18] I will need your patience. Because I will stumble. But I know that words can be deadly. So I will take great care to restrain my words.

I freely admit there is much I do not know. So I will try hard to avoid speaking beyond my understanding. Please pray for me that sin would not rule in my words for my sake and for all of our sakes.

You must also note that I will be judged more strictly than you for the words that I speak. This position is a dangerous position because of how important it is.

And I will have to give an account on the final day for the things I speak to you. Thank God that he is just and merciful.

As we wrap up point two about words of death, I need to make this clear. We all deserve to be in hell because of the words we have spoken.

[22 : 34] We have been given an amazing tool to create, to bring life, and we use it for selfish gain, for the destruction of ourselves and others.

In Matthew it says, but I say to you, everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council.

And whoever says, you fool, will be liable to the hell of fire. Our words are words of death and they have great consequences.

Point number three, words of life. We must be clear because the Bible is clear. Words are meant to be wonderful things.

They are created to bring such good. It says in Proverbs, a word spoken in due season. How good is it?

[23 : 38] Think to your life of how people have used words at the right moment to bless you and to comfort you. So many times I have been privileged to be given a kind, careful word in a moment of distress.

And it has meant so much to me. Words exist for our good. Pastors and teachers exist for our good. We have voices to speak good, to speak words of life.

Look at God, who we get our words from. Look at how he uses words for good. In Genesis, he speaks and behold, there is light.

He speaks and behold, there is order. He speaks and behold, there is life. He brings good all around with his words.

He declares that the world is good and good and very good. His words unite. His words unite and instruct as he speaks with man and teaches them their role.

[24 : 57] As he affirms the goodness of what he has made. I mean, what would we be like if our words were as quick to bless as they are to curse?

Imagine if if we would enlighten with our words as often as we deceive with them. I mean, what is wrong with our hearts that it is so easy to complain?

I mean, for me, it comes out when I'm driving. I just so easily someone does something I don't like and I get upset instantly.

It comes so naturally. Yet we have to work to be thankful. We have to work to say kind, encouraging words.

There's something deeply wrong with us that words of life are so much harder to speak. We are quick to gossip and slow to encourage.

[26 : 05] But James mentions something significant. He says that if anyone does not sin in what he says, he is a perfect man able also to bridle his whole body.

There is one man who fits that description. There is one man who does not stumble in anything that he says. His words are perfect.

In him you will find a man who speaks good all the time. You need him as your guide.

You need him as your speaker, as your pastor, as your savior. Look at the gospels and see how perfect Jesus' words are.

See how they are true and wise. See as they are loving and compassionate. Never did a man speak like this man.

[27 : 13] His words are creating words. His words are life-giving words. He wields the scalpel, the two-edged sword and he only ever uses it to cut down evil.

John writes that he himself is the embodied word, the power and the goodness of what words were meant to be. John 1, 1-5.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God, and all things were made through him, and without him was not anything that was made, made.

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Will you keep on speaking your words of protest, and bring death with what you say?

will you walk in the light? Will you receive him? Will you receive this word that is like the sun that makes plants to grow and life to spring forth?

[28 : 31] You are dead in your sins and trespasses because of your words, but his words can make you alive. He suffered on the cross so that any who trust in him would have their sins forgiven would have their careless, thoughtless words washed away.

I thank God that the careless words I've spoken have been atoned for. Hear him giving life giving words.

John 11 25, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

do you believe this? When he asked the disciples after a hard teaching where many of the people who followed him left, he asks the disciples, will you leave too because of this hard teaching?

And Peter, in a moment of wonderful understanding, says, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

[29 : 49] Where will you go? What words will you listen to? Words matter, and there are no words that you should value more than this book, and this God, and this Savior.

I encourage you to receive these words. And for those who have received Christ, you must know that you may no longer speak like you did in the past.

Ephesians 4:29, let no corrupting talk come out of your mouth, but only such as is good for building up as it fits the occasion that it might give grace to those who hear.

Understand that the best things you can speak are the words of this book. We all stumble in what we say, but this book does not, and if you speak these words, you will not fail.

This whole chapter in James 3, I have memorized, that I might be able to speak and to think better words. I encourage you to memorize the Bible to help you speak words of life.

[31 : 06] Obey the command in Colossians 3, 16, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

what will you do with the power you've been given? What will you do with your mouth and your words? Will you speak words of life?

Will you sing praises? Or will you curse and lie and take this blessing and use it for evil? Lastly, as your pastor, I am not here to speak to you my own words.

my own words would be words of death. I am here to speak to you the words of the Bible. The point of all of this is for me to faithfully bring before you words that are better than my own.

I will work hard to plant this book deep into my heart to meditate, to study, to memorize so that when I come to you, as much as is possible, I bring words of life.

[32 : 17] Lord, help me. let's close in prayer. Lord God, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the way that it illuminates, that it transforms, the power you have given us to be able to bring life and blessing and hope and peace to one another.

We ask that you would cause these words to dwell within us richly in your Son's name.