

Watch your Words

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Date: 05 October 2025

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- [0 : 00] I'm so sorry, I had some slides for this morning and they didn't load properly, which is, I think, on the fault of my memory stick. So can you imagine, they were beautiful, can you imagine my beautiful slides as I'm speaking.
- So the power of the tongue, taming the tongue, sometimes I think the passage chooses you. So from a young age, I have always been a talker, but it wasn't until I started secondary school that I discovered how many ways you can get in trouble for talking.
- I was in trouble for talking in class, talking in assembly, talking in the corridor, and also for the mysterious and I think school specific crime of answering back.
- Someone can maybe tell me afterwards why that's different from answering. As an adult, I think I was pleased to be liberated from these constraints.
- But looking back at my young adult years, I'm aware that I often spoke before thinking. I sometimes made unkind jokes. And I certainly, and I still do, talk about myself more than I listen to other people.
- [1 : 14] Taming the tongue is a lifelong lesson. James even goes so far as to say that human beings will never manage it. We can't certainly manage it on our own.
- But that doesn't mean that we should give up trying. James' words are timeless. They're very stark, aren't they? I kind of got that impression when Michelle read that so beautifully to us.
- James certainly isn't taking prisoners here. But they are also practical. So we're looking at taming the tongue. And I love the alliteration of that.
- So I've got three words which start with the letter T. The first is test. How do we know how we're doing right now? And how do we know what doing well looks like?
- The second is train. Taming the tongue doesn't happen overnight. It requires commitment and perseverance. And I felt like that was like training.
- [2 : 17] And transform. There's hope here. It's kind of under the surface of this passage, but it's here. And I think the hope is that if we can get this right even some of the time, it can be transformational to ourselves and to the world in which we live.
- So to start with, James is unequivocal about the power of the tongue. He says the tongue is also a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.
- It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. The tongue has the power to bring life or death.
- And this idea is embedded in scripture. In Genesis 1, right at the beginning, God says, let there be light. God speaks creation into being.
- In John 1 verse 1, John writes, in the beginning was the word, and the word was God, and the word was with God. God speaks life into being.
- [3 : 24] In Genesis 3, the serpent in the garden uses only its words to bring about the fall of mankind. It has no other power, but that is power enough.

And there are countless examples in the Old Testament, I'm sure you can think of many, of the power of God speaking. And in the New Testament, of Jesus speaking, get up, pick up your mat and walk.

And the words that we speak also have power. Paul reminds us of the spiritual battle that we are part of in Ephesians 6. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Our tongues and the words we speak contain spiritual power. There's an idea in behavioural science called the disinhibition effect.

And the idea of the disinhibition effect is the more physically you are removed from someone, the easier it is to say something uninhibited.

[4 : 38] So this even works online. So there have been studies that show if people are having a conversation online, it is easier to say things that you wouldn't say if you are physically in the room with someone else.

And I think this is a really interesting effect. I think it's why it's easier to shout at someone when you're in your car driving and they cut you up.

It's easier to do that than if you walk past someone on the pavement. It's easier to say it when you're physically removed from the other person. It's easier to make a comment online or send someone a message than it is to say it to their face.

And I think this really makes sense as Christians because our tongues, the power of speech is meant to be a relational tool. And I think also what happens is when our relationship with God is under strain when we feel more distanced from God, it's easier to say the wrong things.

But as Christians, I think it's really important that we know that the words we speak, even at a distance, even if no one else is going to hear them, have as much spiritual power as those words spoken to someone's face.

[5 : 57] So what do we do about this, this disconnect? Our words have spiritual power, but we've all said the wrong thing from time to time. So I think the first thing is to test.

I think we need to self-assess with humility. And to do this, I think we need to be reflective about how we're doing. And a tool that I find really useful is called the Prayer of Examine.

This was a prayer developed by St. Ignatius, and it was intended to encourage reflection on God at the end of the day. So the idea is you review the day in your head, you let the things that have happened in your day go through your mind, and you spend time, first of all, thanking God for where he has been present in your day.

Then you think about if there's anything you want to repent of from your day, what are those conversations that you didn't do your best in? Where could you have done a bit better? And then finally, you ask for God's help to do better the next day.

So it's developing prayerfully a reflective practice. Another little test I do to see how I'm doing is I ask myself the question, would God agree with what I've just said about that person?

[7 : 16] Would he agree with it in the way I just said it? Sometimes we're annoyed or frustrated by other people, and sometimes we do need to challenge people's behaviour.

And I think it's okay to do that in a kind way. For example, the difference between saying, I'm frustrated that you didn't clear up after yourself at breakfast, is different from saying you're a lazy person and you never do anything around the house.

Be specific, address the problem and not the person. However, I think when we look to correct or challenge other people, we need to remember that the bar here is set very high.

God is endlessly compassionate to us as his people. In Psalm 103, the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love.

He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever. And it goes on. We are not always put in the position, our way to judge other people.

[8 : 21] And James actually writes this in the previous chapter. In chapter two, he says, speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. That's James 2 verse 13. So maybe we can amend my little test phrase. Would God agree with what I have said?

And does God require me to say it? Is it my job to say it? And I guess I've been preparing for this sermon against the backdrop of the freedom of speech debate, which is playing out here and in the US.

I don't think James is specifically talking about that. So I'm not going to comment on that particularly. But I think I was struck by James's reminder that even if we have the freedom to say something, we are still individually responsible to God for what we say.

And if we say things at the end of the day that we think God would not agree with, then who are we in agreement with? I think we can inadvertently empower the schemes of the enemy by saying things that are clumsy or ill thought out.

[9 : 43] We can do damage beyond the obvious damage that we see in front of us. Medical studies have shown that people who have negative words spoken against them repeatedly and over time are more likely to suffer from chronic illness.

And think about something such as the power of racism, hurtful words that cause generational trauma. Our words have destructive power beyond the direct impact on the person we speak about.

So what are we going to do? I think we are going to train. We're going to undergo some training. James actually uses the word tame throughout this passage.

It describes the domestication or subduing of the wildest animals. And the taming metaphor reminded me of a book that I loved reading at school.

It's by Barry Hines and it's called A Kestrel for a Knave. It was a set text when I grew up in Yorkshire. It was made into a film called Kez, directed by Ken Loach.

[10 : 54] And it's the story of a young boy and he's taming a bird of prey. He's taming a kestrel. He's called Billy Casper. And he says this, Folks stop me and say, Is it tame?

Is it heck tame? It's trained, that's all. It's fierce and it's wild. And it's not bothered by anyone, not even about me. That's why it's great.

And remembering this book made me think of two things. Firstly, taming is not a quick process. It takes perseverance, application and practice.

It's not going to happen overnight. And secondly, I think like Billy, we have to have humility about how hard it is to tame something.

So if you think you've got no problems in this area, then I'm afraid the bad news is you've probably got that wrong. No one does this perfectly. As James writes, No human being can tame the tongue.

[11 : 56] And James doesn't say that because he wants us to give up, but he wants us to be attentive and he wants us to persevere. And training felt to me like a good word to describe the tongue because it is, after all, a muscular organ.

And we learn to train and master the tongue in the early years of life. This training of the tongue allows us to swallow food and to form speech. And as adults, we have control of our tongue as a muscle.

However, the changes James describes still happen as adults, but they take place in our brains, in the neural pathways that control our emotions, our thoughts and our speech.

And I believe the taming of the tongue is one part of what Paul describes in Romans 12 as being transformed by the renewing of the mind.

And I'm going to talk a bit more about transforming later. I don't know if you've ever trained something, maybe a pet, maybe you've trained a small child to use the toilet, it's a difficult one, or maybe you've trained for something like a race or a walk or a competition or a match.

[13 : 12] My little midlife crisis has involved weight training. And when you're training, you need a plan, you need to evaluate where you are now, and you need to set some goals for where you want to be.

And you need to commit to practicing regularly over a sustained period of time. Now, I don't think we really think about how we use our speech in this way.

But I think that maybe James is saying that we should think about it. I think it's easy to think about how we talk as part of our character.

And the danger is that character we often perceive as to be something that is unchangeable. So I would have said I'm a talker, I have strong opinions. You might say to me that you're a direct person.

People know where they stand with me. I am someone who speaks my mind. But when James talks about taming and Paul talks about transforming and renewing, they are both reminding us that we can change because we are new creations in Christ.

[14 : 21] Furthermore, James is saying that we need to apply ourselves to changing. It requires hard work. And the good news is, I think, that this project of holiness is not something we undertake alone.

In John 14, verse 15, Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit and says he will send an advocate or a helper. The Holy Spirit is part of the Trinity.

God in relationship with itself through the Trinity. And I believe that the Holy Spirit is meant to be in a relationship with us. I think it is wrong to think of the Holy Spirit as someone who will come and just sort out all our problems.

Relying on the Holy Spirit is not about doing nothing yourself. It is about working together in partnership. And that will enable us and empower us to do the right thing.

When I did my training to become a counsellor, I learnt that I could train myself to listen properly before speaking. And to be honest, that was a revelation to me in my 40s.

[15 : 32] A total revelation. And I discovered that the more I practised, the better results I got. The most amazing characteristic of the brains that God has created for us is that they can change.

It is a truth embedded in scripture and proven by science. So transform. There is difficult stuff in this passage.

But there is hope. And that I believe is by learning to tame our tongues a little bit better, we can see a big transformation and lead fruitful lives.

And this hope for me was really contained in verse 3. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.

Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.

[16 : 40] At the time, Gnostic philosophy was very popular when James was writing to the early church. It was a kind of Greek idea fundamentally, but had seeped into some Christian sects.

And it suggested that the material and spiritual aspects of a person were separate. So material things like what someone said, how they behaved, those were inherently and irredeemably evil.

And the soul, the spiritual aspects were good. And it's not a biblical idea because God said that creation was good. But it was prevalent. And James and John are writing a little bit in that context.

And James talks about our behaviour, our speech, our tongue, because he knows that changes in behaviour affect the whole person. That's what he's saying in verse 3.

It just struck me as such a modern idea. It was actually developments in psychology in the 20th century, particularly behavioural scientists, I guess starting with Pavlov.

[17 : 49] And interventions such as, I don't know if anyone's done any cognitive behavioural therapy or CBT. These have evolved because science shows that behavioural changes change the way we think and then the way we feel.

And James has this in his letter 2,000 years ago before scientists caught up. I'm encouraged by James' mention of the bit of the horse harness or the rudder.

Because I don't actually often feel like a new creation. I feel like there's too much old stuff. And James is saying that a really small change can actually make a big difference.

So, if I repeatedly say negative things about other people, my brain will be accustomed to using those neural connections that produce negative thoughts.

But in the same way, if I work on saying positive things, if I just work on that, just saying positive things, over time my brain will change so it will think positively about people more often.

[18 : 56] That is how the horse and the ship metaphor works. And that's how God has created us. So, if you're feeling a bit overwhelmed hearing this passage, if you're worried that you're not a new creation yet, then I think James is saying that it's okay to start small.

Ask God to help you. And right at the end, where James is actually talking about the contamination of salt water, if you look what there is without that contamination, there is the fruitfulness of new creation people.

Spring water, ripe figs, grapes on the vine. Changing what we see, speak, changes what we think. And in turn, it changes how fruitful we are.

Our words can bring life. They have power to bring restoration and transformation. So, let's conclude.

So, test, first of all. How am I doing? Reflect on this prayerfully in order to develop discernment. Train. Do you have a plan? How's your goal going?

[20 : 09] Do you need a friend or someone to do it with you and to be accountable to? Transform. You are a new creation. Change is possible and it's a promise for those of us who are born again in Christ.

You are no longer determined by who you were before. So, I think we better pray. Dear Lord, Dear Lord, I'm sorry for the times when the things we've said have hurt other people and have called destruction beyond what we can see or know.

Dear Lord, we ask for your forgiveness and your restoration. Help us to train our tongues so that we can tame them. And help us to be people who speak life into this world.

Send your Holy Spirit, Lord, to be our helper and our advocate. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.