

Words for the Wordy

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, I want you to imagine the scene quietly. He sneaks through the bushes. He gathers a few twigs together.

There's a few scraps of paper that he puts there on the ground, perhaps a touch of petrol as well. And then he looks around furtively. His eyes dash around the surrounding bushes, and he knows there are no witnesses.

And so his hand slips into his trouser pocket, and he takes out a small box. And from that box he draws out a small stick. And he rubs the stick down the side of the box, and a spark comes, and he throws it on the pile of rubbish, and a fire flashes up.

And soon it catches the eucalyptus, and the fire begins to blaze, and soon it jumps from tree to tree. Soon houses and property and animals and human beings will melt before its heat.

And there we have it, a fire, a small spark, and from that spark comes a raging fire, a fire that will ravage everything in its path, an inferno that will kill and destroy.

[1 : 08] And all of that because of a small spark. And listen to this. Listen to what the writer, what James says in verse 6 of our passage.

He says this, And the tongue also is 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.

Friends, as you can see from what I've said so far, and by what James 3 says, today I want to talk about the tongue. However, in order to understand James 3, we need to listen carefully to verse 1 in particular, and I want you to have a look at it with me.

Verse 1 says this, Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. Now, I want you to note what this verse is saying.

It's saying that whatever else James has to say in this passage, his main area of concern is Andrew and me. That is, his main area of concern is teachers within Christian congregations.

[2 : 18] Oh, I should spread it out a little bit. That is anyone who teaches anyone within the church. So that'll be our Sunday school teachers, that'll be our small group leaders, that'll be anyone who teaches others from the scriptures, anyone who teaches people what it means to be Christian.

I presume it might even mean you and your family lives as well. So, however, it is particularly directed towards us, those who search the scriptures and apply them to people's lives.

What James is saying is we are in a greater position of, in a position of greater responsibility, and with that responsibility comes a stricter judgment. That is, he's saying this is very rare for the Bible to be this up front, really, in terms of saying carefully to one group of people you're going to be judged more strictly than others.

But that is what this says. This says those who teach God's word, that is, Andrew, myself, and any of you who teach God's word, will undergo a particularly rigorous scrutiny on that last day.

And that's the focus of James 3, teachers of God's people. However, I need to make the point that James 3 is also directed to a broader group of people. It's also directed toward anyone who uses the tongue as well.

[3 : 33] And that's made clear in reference to all people in verse 2. So that's just by way of background so that we can get into the passage. The second bit of background comes from thinking about the rest of the Bible.

Now, in order to do this, I want you to spend some time imagining. I want you to think about the most important part of your body. And as a way to help you think about it, I want you to think about this.

If you were on the way home this morning in your car and you were involved in a car accident, what part of your body would you want to remain unhurt? What part of your body would you want to remain unhurt?

Would it be your neck? Your spine? Your legs? Your arms? Your face? For some people, it might even be their genitals, I guess.

But I guess that if we thought seriously about it, most of us would say our heads. And the reason is, the thing we dread most is brain damage, isn't it?

[4 : 32] It's one of those things that modern medicine still can't do a lot with. So in modern society, it's the head that is the most important part of the body.

Well, in the Bible, it's different. In the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, a person's face is the most important part of the body. Why? Because it's our face which has in it the organs of communication.

Our faces have our ears, our eyes, our mouth, and it's the way that those particular organs function that makes us different from all other creatures.

The way we use them shows what being human is all about. After all, think about it for a moment.

It's hearing, seeing, and speaking that makes us truly human, that enables us to communicate.

Chief amongst all of those particular organs and abilities is that of speaking. The organ of the mouth is, as it were, the top dog.

[5 : 38] Our ears hear, our eyes see, but it's the mouth that tells us what our ears have heard and our eyes have seen. It's what the mouth does that makes us different from any other creature.

After all, animals have ears, don't they? And they have eyes and they even have mouths. But the human mouth is different. Only humans can learn a language. My dogs, I try and teach them, but they're a bit slow and they haven't managed it yet.

And they won't. They are unable to do it. Friends, no other living being can do what we can do with our mouth, our lips, our tongue, our palate, and our throat.

We can speak. We can call. We can command and teach and instruct and admonish and yell and accuse and swear and bless and curse and sing and praise and rejoice and pray and cry and complain and murmur and I could go on all day and just work my way through the dictionary.

No animal can do those things. So what makes us human is the way we use our mouths in speaking.

[6 : 51] To be human is to communicate. So there's the context for James chapter 3. To be human is to communicate. It's to use our tongues.

Now in James 3, James is going to go on and tell us six things about the use of our tongues. So I want you to stick with me and have a look at them. And the first thing is, the first thing to know about the tongue is that we all make mistakes with it.

Let's have a look at verse 2. It says, We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

It's clear what James is saying, isn't it? Although we all have tongues, we all cannot control them.

We all make mistakes with them. For the life of us, we cannot use our tongues properly.

The truth of what James says can be seen in some of the stock phrases that have come into the English language. For example, we have phrases such as, Shut your mouth. Why?

[7 : 54] Because you don't like what's coming out of it. Open your mouth and put the other foot in it. Don't bad mouth so-and-so. A person speaks with a forked tongue.

A person can be said to be mouthing off. Or that person spoke with their tongue in their cheek. Our use of the tongue illustrates that we are far from being perfect beings.

We utter words in haste, don't we? We tell lies. We tell untruths. We make sly suggestions. We engage in harmful gossip. We use our tongues for innuendo and for impurity.

And in verse 3, James goes on to tell us much more about our tongues. Have a look at it. His second point is that the human tongue is a small thing that can accomplish incredibly large things.

He goes on to say, Look, a bit in a horse's mouth can make a horse go wherever you want. I haven't ever tried terribly hard, I must say, but they tell me that that is true.

[8 : 58] A tiny rudder can direct a huge boat. A small spark can set a whole forest aflame. Now, you know, don't you, that we Australians know perhaps more better than any other country in the world, although the US has seen some incredibly bad fires in these last few years.

It doesn't take much to start a bushfire in Australia, does it? A thrown-away cigarette butt, a piece of glass on a scorching day, a spark from an incinerator, a fool with a box of matches, or even an out of, you know, an unrepaired electrical line that might just spark a fire, as in 2009.

All of a sudden, whole kilometres are set, square kilometres are set alight. Houses are destroyed. People are killed. And all of that because of a little spark.

The tongue is just like that, says James. It is a small member, yet it boasts great exploits. The words of James here are potent when you think about them.

They are relevant to all speech, whether it be spoken or written. The power of the tongue for good or evil is astronomical. And I do make that point about written because some of us are at our most potent in writing and can do incredible damage.

[10:22] By the way, I have this little thing in ministry that if I have something hard to say to someone, I will say it to their face. Why?

Because I know I can use words very harmfully and words can be very potent when they're in writing. You write to someone, they will go back to it time and time and time again.

They will pour over it. They will read things into it that are not there. There's no opportunity to clarify it. Friends, whether written or spoken, the mouth can do incredibly harsh things.

And that brings us to James' third point about the tongue. Verse 6, he indicates that when the primary influence on the tongue is sin, then there is the most fearful potential for evil with the tongue.

When the primary influence of the tongue is sin, then there is enormous potential for evil. And every one of us here today have seen that little terror of the tongue in action, haven't we?

[11:27] Either used by us or used on us. On the one hand, we have all seen the tongue used for good, haven't we? We've seen it bringing comfort, speaking out against injustice, encouraging, praising God.

And above all, every one of us here who is Christian have seen the tongue or the written word bring the gospel to us. What greater use could there be for a tongue than to speak to people about Jesus?

But each of us have also seen, haven't we, the other side of the tongue. We've seen that poisonous side of the tongue. I don't know if you've ever seen the movie clips, for those of you who didn't, you know, can't remember actually hearing, seen the movie clips of Adolf Hitler.

Even though he's speaking in a language I do not know, I know it is immensely powerful. It was this gilded tongue of Adolf Hitler that started a war that killed millions of people, caused them to do things that they normally would not do.

It is the tongue of false teachers around the world that leads thousands into deception every passing day. It is the tongue that can destroy whole Christian congregations.

[12:48] It is the tongue that stirs up hatred, that makes us prejudiced, that rubbishes others, that talks behind their backs, that slanders, gossips, lies, speaks deceit.

There is no more effective way of destroying people and relationships than using this. And you don't need a gun to kill someone.

You just need a tongue. It is easy. You just open your mouth, let go the safety catch, pull the trigger and bang.

Another person has been swiftly and deftly dealt with, assassinated in one sense, lethally, brutally and effectively.

And the good thing is that mostly it's legal, it's clean, it's effective and there is no corpse to dispose of.

[13:44] The tongue is a fire, isn't it? It's a literal terror and you usually can't get busted for your use of it except in the case of well-known public figures.

Friends, that tongue is hotter and more destructive than any bushfire. And what James says here is when it is set on fire by hell, that is when the power of evil is behind it, it can set the whole world ablaze.

Let me summarise what this verse 6 is saying. He's saying the tongue is indeed a fire. When it is set on fire by hell, it can set the whole world aflame and while it may be used for far-reaching good, it possesses the most fearful potential for evil.

And since all people are by nature sinners, the world is continually being subjected to the ravages of the tongue. And that brings us to the fourth lesson from James this morning.

In verses 7 and 8, he points out human inability. He tells us no human being can tame the tongue. Look at what he says, verse 7 and verse 8. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind.

[15:03] But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil full of deadly poison. And each one of us here today knows that James is right. Our inability over our own selves is no clearer than in reference to our tongues.

The tongue is uncontrollable by human beings. We can't keep it from wagging when it shouldn't and we can't make it work when it should. It won't listen to us.

It is untameable. Friends, I can tame my dogs to do whatever I want, well, mostly to do whatever I want them to do. But I cannot tame my tongue. It is untameable and uncontrollable.

But I think the great thing about this verse though is it gives us a hint that we can't tame it. But what about God? Perhaps he can. Verse 10 hints the same way when it says, my brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

And other parts of scripture come to our aid. You see, because we read elsewhere in scripture that God can put words in the mouths of people such as his prophets, Moses, Jeremiah, Paul the apostle, and so on.

[16:12] And God, we're told in Isaiah 6, can cleanse the unclean lips. Psalm 141, verse 3, has one of the very earliest memory verses that I learned.

Set a guard, O Lord, upon my mouth. Keep watch at the door of my lips. Why did I need to ask God to do that? Because I need to ask God to tame my tongue.

Scripture makes clear that God can tame the tongue. He can even use the tongue. Surely that's what the gift of tongues is about in the New Testament. God delights in one thing in particular, the proclamation of his word.

And what the gift of tongues does is it has God taking people's tongues and using them to speak the gospel and speak his praises often in a language they don't understand.

And it's here that James moves to his fifth point. He points out the Christian use of the tongue is shamefully inconsistent. Christian use of the tongue is shamefully inconsistent.

[17:15] Look at verses 9 and 10. James says, With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who are made in God's likeness.

Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing, my brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can you hear him? Everything James has said so far has been equally applicable to Christians and non-Christians.

Everyone makes mistakes when they open their mouth. Everyone puts their foot in it. Some do so to more extent than others. But we all do it. We all make mistakes with our tongues. And in these verses, James expresses God's displeasure.

He indicates that things should be different for Christians. If we are Christians, we are different from the rest of the world. And why is it then that there are these shameful inconsistencies with us?

Why is it that we continue to use our tongues the way the rest of the world does? I mean, we claim that we know God. We claim that that makes us different. And why is it that often we don't act differently in this area at all?

[18:20] Why is it that often in Christian churches we are worse than the rest of the world? If there is one area which we see, sin's continuing grip on us, it is in this area.

And these inconsistencies, James says, God says, cannot remain. We cannot say that we love God whom we cannot see if we do not love our brother whom we can see.

John 1 John. And if I want to just use the tongue in reference to that, we cannot speak in one breath about God and his mercy, forgiveness and love and with the very next breath rip into our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

These things ought not to be so. It is absurd for us Christians to be acting like this. Unnatural, inconsistent. We Christians yet are such hypocrites in this area, aren't we?

We look at our society, we see our lying politicians, we see people who misuse their tongues all the time, we see those who slander God or blaspheme against him and we rail against it, we say these things ought not to be the case and we find ourselves disgusted but at the same time we speak ill of our brothers and sisters.

[19:35] tongues. Or even if we don't open our mouth, we are inwardly evil toward them. There are huge inconsistencies aren't there in our hearts and in our words.

And in verses 11 and 12 James puts this, builds on this point, he tells us the sixth thing about the tongue. He makes the point that the tongue reflects the heart. The tongue reflects what's inside a person.

Look at him there in these last two verses. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs?

Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. The point's really clear here. When God created plants, he created them to bear fruit according to their kind.

We read that in Genesis 1. The nature of a plant determines the nature of its fruit. You can tell what sort of plant you're looking at by the sort of fruit that it bears. And Christians are meant to have the fruit of clean hearts, issuing in pure hands and a clean tongue.

[20 : 46] But the use of words by Christians indicates a terrible truth. Our gossip, slander, defamation, unfair judgment, criticism, niggling behind backs, grumbling, complaining, indicate a terrifying truth.

Our hearts are still tainted by sin. We're in need of cleansing and purifying. And the impact of the work of Jesus is yet to be made complete in us.

So there are the six points that James makes about the tongue. And when you listen to them, it's hard not to be overwhelmed, isn't it? But the great thing is that James also gives us some clues as to how to react to the truth that we hear from God in his word.

And I think he gives three indications as to how we should proceed in dealing with it. First indication, in your Bibles, flip back to chapter 1. Look at verses 19 to 21.

And I'll read them in my version. In my view, verse 19 of this section is one of the most misquoted verses in the Bible.

[22 : 09] It is misquoted because it is taken to be a general proverb. Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. I think the context indicates it should be read slightly differently.

You see, the immediate context is the preceding verse, and it talks about the word of truth. The word of truth appears to be a reference to the gospel. And then the verses afterwards, particularly verse 21, talks about receiving the implanted word, which is able to save our souls.

That's got to be the gospel, doesn't it? It's a reference to the word about Jesus Christ, which saves us. And verse 22 then tells us that we should be people who hear the word and do it.

Now, that context in mind, it makes sense to me that verse 18 is telling us that we should be quick to hear this word, the word of the gospel. And I think that interpretation makes great sense.

Because the gospel tells us that we are rebels against God and in need of his help, doesn't it? It tells us that God sent his only son into the world so that we might be set right with God.

[23 : 12] Now, if we are people who are quick to hear that message, then we'll be very slow to condemn, won't we? If we hear the message that we were sinners and God forgave us, we'll be very slow to condemn others, slow to speak in judgment of others.

As fellow sinners who needed forgiveness and still need it, we'll be slow to get angry at their sinfulness. The first antidote to the bad use of the tongue is this.

If you want to master your tongue, here's the first place to go. Go to the cross. learn how God has had mercy on you. Learn how God forgives you. Learn how God accepts you.

Learn how you were once his enemy and he made you his friend. And when you've heard all of this and heard all that God has done for you in Christ, then turn and see if you can get angry with your brother or sister.

Be quick to hear the word of God and you'll be slow to act in judgment and slow to be angry. second thing. James goes on to tell us within the book of James about God the judge.

[24 : 19] My view is that what James says in James 3, 1 to 11 is part of a longer section that starts with James 3, 1 and finishes at James 4, 12. And that verse, these verses contain lots of stuff about the tongue.

Look at chapter 4, verse 1, where James talks about fighting and quarrelling. You can see it in verse 11 where he talks about speaking evil of others. But you can see it also by the fact that he begins and ends that section by talking about God the judge.

In chapter 3, verse 1 he says teachers will be judged with stricter judgment. And in 4, 12 he says there is one lawgiver and one judge. The point that James is making is that when we use our tongues we should realise that we will all have to face God the judge at some point in our existence.

and when we do we will have to give an account of how we have treated our fellow humans in general and our brothers and sisters in Christ in particular.

You see God is very protective of his children. I've been writing at the moment on the book of Exodus and as you work through Exodus you see how much God loves his people and how harshly he treats those who mistreat his people because he wants to protect and care for his people, his children.

[25 : 36] God is very harsh in his judgment against those who abuse his people and that includes us and the way we use our tongues. So when you next feel tempted to use your tongue to gossip, slander or speak evil of someone, remember God is your judge and you will have to give an account before him as to how you have acted toward others.

And in God's eyes calling your brother, sister, a fool is tantamount to murder. That's what the Lord Jesus Christ says in the Sermon on the Mount.

Using your tongue to abuse someone is the same thing in God's eyes as physical abuse. And most of us would never physically abuse someone. But you can do it with your tongue.

Let's turn to the last point that James makes in dealing with the tongue. Let me read it to you, James 4, 7 to 10, slightly different version from the one you've got. Submit yourselves therefore to God.

Resist the devil, he'll flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep.

[26 : 51] Let your laughter be turned to mourning, your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before God and he will exalt you. This passage is in the midst of passages talking about the misuse of the tongue.

It is before James mentions God the judge. James is showing us the only way to come before God the judge in the light of our misuse of the tongue is this. And notice the language he uses.

He talks about submitting to God, drawing near to God, resisting the devil, cleansing the inward and outward parts of our existence, mourning our sinfulness.

And he promises that when we have this attitude, then God will lift us up. the language that's being used is the language of repentance. We are to acknowledge our sin before God and we are to turn away from it and choose to resist it and choose to do good.

The way to master our tongue is to bring it under God's control. And we do this by acknowledging where things are right and choosing to obey God.

[27 : 55] So there we are friends and there's James' analysis of our situation with regard to the tongue. There's a solution as to how we tame the tongue and all we have to do is to draw things now together.

Because I want to speak now to our life together. As I look back on my own life, I realise that nearly every major step in my life, nearly every attitude I have, nearly everything that I am as a human being, has been brought about by things that have been said to me or about me and that I have said to or about others.

The use of people's tongues and the words that people have written have shaped my existence and the existence of those that I have lived with. The words that my parents said about me and to me have shaped me.

Friends, many of you here are parents and you've got adult children now. How many of them have come to you and said, oh, you know what you said to me then? And you might not even remember that you even said it.

And yet you hear that it has shaped them in some way. Or you know, and you know that you've said things to your children that have shaped the way that their lives have formed.

[29 : 21] Friends, the tongue is enormously powerful. The encouragement, the rebuke, the talk about what I was good or not good at, from my parents and from those around you, shaped me.

And similarly, my tongue has shaped the life of my own children, either for good or for bad. It shaped my marriage to Heather, either for good or bad.

If that's so of ordinary families, and we all know it's true, then surely it's true of God's family as well. You see, what you say about others, either to their face or behind their back to others, has enormous ramifications.

It can maim. It can hurt. It can taint people's attitudes to another person. It can destroy.

Or, it can build up, encourage, edify. Friends, words are power. Words matter.

[30 : 37] And so today, I want us to corporately commit ourselves to hearing the word of God to us this morning about the tongue. As God's people, let us be quick to hear God's word to us.

And let's be aware that as we talk to each other and about each other, we do so under the watchful eye of our judge. And let's repent of anything wrong we have done in this area and determine to have our hearts cleansed by Christ and our actions sanitised.

And friends, may I say that if you have been caught in sin this morning, that relates to a brother or sister, then sort it out with them.

Go and repent. I want to add one more word from James. It comes from James 5, verse 16, where James says we should confess our sins to one another.

Friends, please hear me. If you have wronged a brother or a sister, let me urge you not only to repent before God, but to repent before your brother and sister and ask their forgiveness.

[31 : 50] Let them know that you have done wrong in your use of the tongue. Sort it out with them. Friends, let me tell you, there is nothing so soul-destroying to an individual or to a congregation as the remaining damage of an unleashed tongue.

I have been in congregations where people's attitudes to another person have been under a cloud for 40 plus years, where there has been bitterness within a congregation for 40 years because of something someone did with their tongue 40, 50 years ago.

And I'm sure within this congregation there are people maimed and hurt by what another congregation member has done with their tongue. Some still hold grudges. Friends, the tongue can be enormously, enormously hurtful and potent and can destroy whole Christian congregations.

Let's not have it here. Let's ask God to sanitise our tongues and let's acknowledge where we've got it wrong.

Let's pray. Lord God, thank you for forgiving us in Jesus. Please help us to forgive others where we need to.

[33 : 22] Father, we pray that you would tame our tongues and that we would be different from the world around us. set a guard, O Lord, upon our mouths.

Keep watch at the door of our lips. We ask this for the glory of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.