

A Word About Words

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[0 : 00] Not many of you should become or presume to be teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways, but anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

Now, the fact that the passage starts with these two verses indicates, I think, that James has teachers as his focus, not just in this passage, but also in next week's passage on wisdom.

He is, first and foremost, I think, talking to teachers. Teaching, after all, is all about using the tongue, which is this week's passage, to impart wisdom, which is next week's passage.

But it would be wrong, I think, to assume then that this passage is only for teachers, because James says, after all, that the problem of the tongue afflicts all of us, not just teachers.

Verse 2 says that of all the ways that we can stumble, perfecting our speech is the hardest to achieve. If we can do that, he's sort of implying, then the rest of life, the rest of your body is easy peasy. You'll be perfect. But because it's too hard, so hard, we're all to think twice before we presume to teach. That's his point, I think. Because if we do, we're likely to fall short as we teach. And when we do, when we do fall short, say the wrong things, we don't just drag ourselves down. As teachers, we drag those we teach down as well. And so he says that teachers are more strictly judged, because we're accountable not just for ourselves, but also for those we teach. Of course, the converse is also true.

[1 : 49] As Paul says in 1 Timothy 5 and 17, the elders who direct the affairs of the church, and I've got a slide of the verse there, well, are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. But just because you're not a teacher doesn't mean your problem with the tongue disappears. Everything that James says in this passage still applies.

It's relevant for everyone, but especially for teachers. So what is it that we are to learn about the tongue? Well, most of James' focus here tonight is to help us understand the nature of the tongue. And the first point he makes, next point, is that it's a part with disproportionate power. It's small in size, but its power is way beyond its size indicates. And this he illustrates in verses 3 and 4. So if you look down with me, by comparing it with two things, a horse and a ship.

Both of these are impressive in their strength and size, but in each case, the thing that controls them is small by comparison. So for the horse, that's the bit in its mouth. And for the ship, that's the very small rudder which the pilot controls. In each case, the power of the horse, as well as the power of the strong winds that drive the ship, both of these are harnessed and directed at will by this very small part. And so likewise, in verse 5, James says, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Now if you think about it on the surface, the analogy doesn't quite make sense, does it? Because while the bit physically controls the horse and the rudder, the ship, the tongue doesn't physically control the body.

After, that is, you don't use your tongue to steer where you go, right? So what does James mean then? Well, I think the analogy works like this. I think what he's saying is that the tongue, like the bit and the rudder, has disproportionate power to influence the thing to which it belongs.

And the tongue has power to influence us, not our physical body, but us in the course of our lives. That's its great boast. Its great claim to fame.

[4 : 17] See, I can't even control my tongue. Great claim to fame. The arms may be strong enough to lift heavy objects and the legs can cover long distances, but the tongue is the thing that can actually change your destiny in life.

And in that sense, I think it is meant that it controls the body. Of course, by tongue, what James just means is that he's, what he means is the words that are spoken by it.

What he's saying is that words are powerful. And you just have to think of some of the most powerful speeches in history. There's actually a book that I have at home by that title, *Speeches That Changed the World*.

So, for example, consider Martin Luther King's speech, the I Have a Dream speech, some of you might know. It changed the course of American history during the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

So, I'm going to read some excerpts of it and just get the sense of what it's doing, the power of it. I'm happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

[5 : 28] Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. The momentous decree came as a great beacon, light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice.

It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. But 100 years later, the Negro is still not free.

100 years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. 100 years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.

100 years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so, we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

And then he goes on later on and he answers these famous words. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed.

[6 : 43] We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today. Now, I'm no orator like Martin Luther King, but the power of that speech, I think, comes true, doesn't it?

Just from the mere words, not from the speaker. And that's just it, isn't it? These are just mere words. He's just using his tongue, one small part in the body.

And yet, by that speech, he was able to move millions across the country, a power way beyond its size. Now, the converse, again, is true, isn't it?

[7 : 44] If you watch any of Hitler's speeches, it's chilling, but it's also amazingly effective. Well, it's the destructive powers of the tongue which James focuses on in our passage tonight.

And part of this danger lies in the fact that this power is actually uncontrollable. So, on in verse 5, second half, James likens it to a fire. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 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.

Now, living in Australia, we know exactly what this entails, doesn't it? Our bushfires each summer often start with the merest of sparks. And once it starts, just the amount of damage that it causes, it's almost impossible to stop.

And so it is with the tongue, one callous word, one thoughtless word, and the damage is done. I'm going to ask Harry and Helen to come up now to help me, just to role play what I think is a typical scene at home.

[8 : 58] Husband and wife, around the kitchen table, maybe. Hi, I'm home.

Oh, I'm just making dinner. Oh, spaghetti golden days again. Yeah, what's wrong with that? Well, there's nothing wrong with it.

It's only, you know, the third time this week and the 23rd time this month, you know. Nothing wrong with that. Well, hey, if I had 28 hours in my day, I could spend four of them cooking you an amazing lamb roast, so-called Jamie Oliver style.

But I don't. I'm really busy. I was at work, I had to pick up the kids, we had appointments to do with, and then you call me and say, by the way, can you go and get my suits from the dry cleaner? You could have given me more than 20 minutes' notice.

Well, I can't help that, can I? I mean, you know, something came up. Amazing, isn't it, how often something just comes up. Well, something came up for me today, and that's why we're having

bolognese again.

[9 : 59] All right, well, don't get so sensitive about it. I mean, you know, I'm happy to eat spagol. I mean, any time, all the time. Let's have it every night.

Yeah, you're just getting a little bit ridiculous. I'm not going to cook pasta bolognese every night, am I? I mean, my pasta and I made risotto. That's my pasta. That was really good. And did you show any appreciation for that?

Oh, so now I have to say thank you, what, like every day or every mouthful or every meal? Oh, really?

Well, it would be nice, sometimes, if you could just say thanks. Okay, okay, sure. Well, maybe you'd just like to go and do your own thing. Thanks.

Stay having dinner at work. No, no, because, you know, I could have dinner at work. Yes. I could just stay at work. Yes. I could have dinner at work every night.

[10 : 57] Right. They'd probably even pay for me to have dinner at work, and would I have to say thank you to the people who paid me to have dinner at work? Well, why don't you just go and do your own thing then?

Phil, what is that? Girls, do you want to finally help me set the dinner, the table for dinner? All right. There's going to be three spaces. Daddy's not joining us tonight.

Thanks, Harry and Helen. And just, I wrote the script, okay, so it's got nothing to do with them at home. The irony, of course, is that if you do any cooking, Jamie Oliver's slow cook three hours is much easier than bolognese, actually.

Just stick it in the oven instead of chopping and peeling and doing all that kind of stuff. But that's beside the point. I guess the point is, all it took was one word, wasn't it?

That word, again. Are we having passed the bolognese again? And then the entire forest got burned down. Now, how often have I looked back on a big quarrel and just slapped myself in the face?

[12 : 11] Because if I only held my tongue over that one thing, if I had done what Proverbs 15, verse 1 says, a gentle answer turns away wrath, then none of it would have happened.

But often we can't help ourselves, can we? At work, with our siblings, parents. If I'm not wrong, I think there was one story even of one of those bike gang wars actually started because one gang member couldn't help passing, just making a passing insult on the girlfriend of the other, of the member of another gang.

And then, before you know it. And while we see the damage that it causes externally, as we look at these verses, James is actually turning the attention internally.

That is, the fire that has started is actually inside us. Can you see that? For it corrupts the whole body. And it sets the entire course of one's life on fire. The evil, that is, that starts on our tongue is actually capable of bringing the worst out of us.

It may start with words, but often it quickly escalates to physical violence, vindictive actions. We're stirred up in our rage and jealousy and hatred and all kinds of other evil reactions.

[13 : 32] And that's why James calls it a world of evil among the body parts, which is itself set on fire by hell. It's almost as if the tongue has a hotline to hell, hell being the place, symbolically, where all evil starts.

And often when we fall, it's often the tongue that gets stripped first. So I wonder whether you've ever been in a situation where you're really angry and upset, and you try really hard to hold it in, and just when you think you've got it under control, something tips it over the edge.

And then you just can't hold back, right? You just say something really stupid, and before you know it, it just keeps going on and on. And once you've started, it's uncontrollable. And then all the other parts, the body parts, start joining, and you bang your fist.

Objects are flung across the room or table. I don't know. Maybe it's just me, but... That's my problem. But I think you know that the tongue just can't be tamed, can it?

And once it's let loose, it just takes the rest of the body with it. Which is a great irony, as James now points out, because in verse 7 he says, all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures, are being tamed, and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue.

[14 : 48] It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. So if you go to a circus, you will see four to five ton elephants standing on two feet and pirouetting like a ballet dancer.

Or lion tamers, putting their heads between the lion's jaws. Or in India, cobras, mesmerized by snake charmers. These are meant to be wild animals.

But this 60 grand piece of flesh between your teeth, between the human jaws, is more poisonous than a cobra. And no one can bring it under control. Just think when a driver cuts in front of us, or the one who doesn't indicate when turning.

Have you got that one? Right in front of you. Our instant and almost reflex action, a reaction is to swear at them. And even if we can manage not to say one of those big F words, something else just comes out, right?

Like fish or crumbs or something. And that's why they have the phrase trying to bite your tongue, which is a vain attempt to restrain it physically.

[15:57] But we can't even do that, can we? Even when we know we just need to shut up and resist and have that last word, the tongue is a restless evil, full of poison.

It's so easy to say the wrong things, and often so hard to say the right ones. Now I've painted a despairing picture, probably because it is despairing, and how much we wish we could control our tongue more.

Often I think, how much less would I hurt my wife and my children, the very people I love, if I could control my tongue? How many conflicts would I avoid?

And some of these conflicts, I just start even without realizing realizing that I've said the wrong thing. That's why I think James laments in verse 9 and 10, lamenting and not, as it were, having an answer.

With the tongue, verse 9, we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing.

[17:02] My brothers and sisters, this should not be. We humans are a bundle of contradictions. We are made in God's likeness, therefore we're given the gift of speech like God, and even as we can praise our Creator, we curse those whom He has created.

People made in God's image, and just like us. James is right. This should not be. This should not be. And yet, and yet, it is.

So what can we do about it? If we can't control the uncontrollable, what hope do we have? Well, James tells us where the true problem lies in the last couple of verses, and he says that the heart of the problem is that the heart is the problem.

The real problem is not in our tongues, it's in our hearts. Cutting the tongue off wouldn't solve the problem. You're not going to find a sack of hidden poison in your tongue if you cut it off.

It's not there. In fact, nowadays, with emails and SMS, we're not just doing it with our physical tongues anymore, are we? We've got so-called digital tongues capable of doing the same damage when we send text and emails.

[18:24] Have you ever got an email criticizing you before, and your instinct is almost to just type a quick reply, and if you did, live to regret it. Whether we say it or we type it, James says that what we find on the tongue merely reflects what's really in our hearts.

So Jesus himself said it to the Pharisees in Matthew 12 and 34. It's on the slide there. You brood of vipers, how can you speak good when you are evil? Same thing James says. For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.

And so it is here in verse 11. 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.

Everything that comes out of our mouths starts all the way back in our hearts. Now often we're tempted to think it's the other person's fault, right?

If only she didn't provoke me, I wouldn't have lost my temper. He made me do it. But that's not true, is it? Because if we can say something evil, that's only because our hearts are evil.

[19:39] We can't get salt water from a fresh spring. And so we can't get evil from a pure heart. No amount of evil that others do to you can make you and make me say something evil if we are pure in heart.

You only have to look at Jesus. I mean, they held all kinds of insults at him as he hung in absolute agony on the cross. Not a single word of evil came out from him instead.

No cursing, no rage, no angry words. Instead, do you remember what he said? Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

You see, I think God in his wisdom actually made us like that. He actually created the tongue so that invariably it speaks what's in the heart. so that we can't hide our sinfulness.

We can't deceive ourselves to think that we're better than we really are. So in a sense, it's a blessing really because it gives us a chance to repent and makes us realize how much we actually need Jesus and how much we need the gospel to save us.

[20 : 51] And it's only when we realize that change, I think, can start happening from within. in our hearts where the word of truth, as James calls it, is implanted.

That's when we start to gain true wisdom, wisdom from above, which we'll look at next week or you'll look at with Andrew next week in verses 13 to 18. And then when that occurs, then the tongue will naturally speak what's in our hearts.

And then when our heart becomes pure, so will our speech. I think that's the only way it can work.

And James says that by saying only fresh water can come from a fresh spring.

But this is a lifelong process. Now, I actually think that even though James is right and the tongue is uncontrollable, it doesn't mean then that we don't do anything to try and control it.

But that even as we start to gain wisdom in our hearts, that there are things that we can practice now to reduce the damage that we do to others. And so one of the things that we can practice actually came from week two.

[22 : 03] Back in James chapter one in verse 19, which Andrew spoke from. It says to be slow to speak and quick to listen. That is, we need to still treat the tongue as if it was like a time bomb.

Even as we work over the long term in our hearts, we need to continue to be vigilant and always, as it were, treat it as though it would go off any time.

And if it does, create a trail of disaster. So for example, if you find yourself getting hot and bothered, then stop. Just ask for a timeout. Don't keep arguing.

Go somewhere. Cool down. Take your tongue out of action. Don't think that you can keep going and bite your tongue and say the right thing. You can't.

If you get an angry email, well, don't reply to it immediately. Go and sleep on it. Come back when you've calmed down. Don't compound the problem with a careless reply.

[23 : 04] That's why I think Andrew has a good rule. If you want to compliment someone, do it by email. If you have difficult words to say to people, do it face to face. So I think there are things that we should practice, even as we work from inside out, to control our tongues.

But I want to just conclude by coming back to the topic of teachers. You may have heard this whole thing tonight and go, thankfully I'm not a teacher and I never want to be. But I'm not sure that that's the way to go, right?

I hope I've not discouraged anyone from teaching because teaching is necessary. Even as words can do great damage, it is also words that God uses to heal and to save.

Paul says, face comes from hearing and hearing through the word of God. So without words and without teachers, people are not going to believe in Jesus. People are not going to learn how to control their tongues.

So I think the church needs people who can teach and God's will is to raise people to teach and serve him doing that. But what he needs is not perfect teachers but humble ones, teachers who realize the dangers of their tongues.

[24 : 20] But I think the other thing too is that whether we like it or not, many of us, although not official teachers, are actually already teachers. So if you're a parent, you are a teacher to your child.

If you're a leader at Sunday school or at youth, you're a teacher to those who lead. Even my 10-year-old daughter, Emma, is a teacher. And she was once, she became one ever since my younger daughter was born.

Every time she says something wrong and gets away with it, her little sister is watching and learning from her. So I think that as long as there's someone learning from you, whether you want to be or not, you're actually a teacher.

So the question is not whether you're going to teach or not, but whether you're going to do it humbly and carefully or carelessly as people watch you. So I think everyone needs to heed these words of James, whether it's for us or whether it's for those we teach.

We need to watch our tongue, but more importantly, we need to start working on our hearts to seek true wisdom from our birth, but also to practice speaking slowly, hearing quickly.

[25 : 36] And as we do, hopefully by God's grace, we will learn to praise him and praise others more and bless others more and damage others less. Let's pray. Father, forgive us that we often use the tongue in a way that dishonors you.

And we know that that's because our heart is still not right before you, that we have many things to learn and many things to change. We thank you that by grace and faith in your son, Jesus, you do forgive us.

And even as we look to him, you continue to give us more and more wisdom as we learn from his example and as we learn from your word.

So change us from within. Help us to be truly wise that we can speak words that heal and words that glorify you. help us to put in place real practical actions so that when we are angry, when we know that our tongue is about to get away from us, we will stop and we will be able to correct ourselves before we do damage to others.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

[27 : 03] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.