

The Power of the Tongue

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- [0:00] Well, good morning, church. Turn with me, if you have a Bible, to the book of James. We're continuing in our series this summer, which we've entitled Steadfast in this very practical, down-to-earth book of the New Testament.
- This morning we're reading James chapter 3, verses 1 to 12. So let me read these verses for us.
- James chapter 3, beginning at verse 1. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.
- If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also. Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder.
- Wherever the will of the pilot directs, so also the tongue is a small member. Yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!
- [1:25] And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.
- For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue.
- It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.
- From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening, both fresh and salt water?
- Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. One of the distinguishing characteristics of human beings, compared to other animals, is our constant use of words.
- [2:34] According to a study of college students conducted in 2007, the average person studied spoke approximately 16,000 words per day. Male or female, there was not a significant difference based on gender.
- The range was 800 words for the least talkative person to 47,000 words for the most talkative person. But you know, that's only the number of words that come out of our mouths.
- I think today, many of us probably type at least as much as we talk. And we read at least as much as we hear. Words are everywhere.
- Many of things that we know they'll like to hear. Or when somebody offends us, we might tell them off or vent to another friend or post our frustrations on Facebook.
- Or when we're uncomfortable or anxious, we complain and whine. When we have a strong opinion or a strong reaction to something, we want to make it known. And most of the time, I think we just say what we want to say and go on with our lives.

- [4 : 04] I mean, if I really did speak 16,000 words yesterday, or even half or a quarter of that amount, how many of those do I remember today?
- We're often careless in how we speak. You know, I think we also know that words spoken to us can stay with us for a long time.
- When I was in elementary school, I remember hearing that old rhyme, sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Now, perhaps that statement was meant to express courage and resilience in the face of threats or insults.
- And courage and resilience are good qualities to cultivate, but it's simply not true to say that words will never hurt. Doug Moo, commenting on this very passage, I think in James, I think rightly said, far easier to heal are the wounds caused by sticks and stones than the damage caused by words.
- I think in most cases that is true. The passage we're looking at this morning tells us that our words matter. They matter a lot. And so we'll look at this passage under three headings.
- [5 : 18] First, the power of our words in verses 1 through verse 5, the first half of verse 5. And second, the danger of our words from second half of verse 5 to verse 8.
- And third, the inconsistency of our words in verses 9 to 12. So the power of our words, the danger of our words, and the inconsistency of our words. First, the power of our words.
- Now, James begins this section in verse 1 with a warning that would have immediately caught his hearer's attention. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers.
- Now, imagine a doctor speaking to a class of prospective medical school students and opening his talk by saying, not many of you should become physicians.
- Or, you know, I thought if I was speaking to a group of seminary students, and if I said, not many of you should become pastors. Right? You might be surprised to hear things like that.
- [6 : 17] Right? Verse 1 is not quite what you'd expect to hear from someone who is himself a teacher. James says we, right? He identifies himself as a teacher. He's talking about teachers in the church particularly.
- You might expect James to give more of a recruiting pitch. We need more teachers. You should consider this. But James actually felt the need to give a warning to those who are aspiring to teach and lead in the Christian church.
- You see, many of the people James was writing to were poor. They were being persecuted. They were being mistreated by their wealthy landlords and bosses. And so the church was one of the few places where they could potentially get some respect.
- where they might rise to a position of honor and even authority. Right? In their society, maybe 10% of people could read and write. And so teachers who could read and write and speak in public, especially in the Jewish context, were highly regarded.
- But James wanted to remind them, being a teacher in the church is not primarily a high honor to enjoy. It's primarily a high responsibility to steward.
- [7 : 30] You see, what is the highest honor in the church of Jesus Christ? The highest honor in the church of Jesus Christ is not standing up at the pulpit, being a pastor, being a recognized leader.
- The highest honor in the church belongs to every single believer in Jesus Christ. It's through your connection to Christ, you are a child of God and an heir of his heavenly kingdom.
- That is the highest honor you can aspire to or experience anywhere. To be a child of the king of the universe. To belong to him now and forever.

There's no higher privilege and honor available to human beings anywhere. And so James is reminding us, if you're dissatisfied with the honor of being a child of God, don't become a church leader.

Because you won't help yourself or anybody else. James says, no, teaching in the church is a high responsibility. We who teach will be held to a higher standard.

[8:33] Because we talk a lot. And lots of people are listening. We all fall short in many ways, but when lots of people are listening and when you're speaking to a lot of people, you have to be doubly careful.

James says in this chapter that we who teach must be extra careful both about what we say and about how we live. If you notice, the first half of this chapter that we're looking at today focuses on what we say.

The second half of this chapter, what we'll look at next week, starting at verse 13, focuses on how we live. Right? Who is wise and understanding among you by his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

Now, you could take everything that James says in verses 1 to 12 and apply it specifically to teachers and leaders in the church. That would be a fruitful exercise for those of us who are teachers and leaders in the church but I think James is making a more general point.

Right? He starts with a specific warning and then he moves to a more general point that has a broad application to all of us. Right? And he begins by saying, our words have power.

[9:47] Look at the two images he uses in verses 3 and 4. First, verse 3. A small bit in the horse's mouth is the means by which a rider guides the whole body of the horse.

And then verse 4. A small rudder is the means by which the pilot or the captain guides a large ship. So in other words, James is saying the tongue sets the pace for the rest of the body.

If we learn to bridle our tongue, control our tongue, then we can also learn to exercise self-control and discipline over the other parts of our body.

If we don't bridle our tongue, then the rest of our body will tend to go rogue as well. James wants us to marvel how a very small instrument, right?

A bit in the horse's mouth, right? In the mouth of a large horse, a rudder, right? Tiny thing compared to a large ship has effects that are vastly disproportionate to its size.

[11:01] Tiny but mighty, we might say. Right? And James says, if this is true of horses and boats, how much more is it true of human beings? So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

Now, when James talks about boasting in verse 5, he's not only referring to bad kinds of speech. Later in chapter 4, James will refer to boasting in arrogance, which he says is evil.

But already in chapter 1, chapter 1 verse 9, he's talked about boasting in humility. So he says, let the lowly brother or sister boast in their exaltation in Christ.

In other words, as Christians, we can boast about what God has done for us. How he's forgiven our sins and renewed our minds and lifted us out of the pit of despair and given us real and lasting hope.

We can rejoice even when we're beaten down by trials because by God's grace, we're still walking with Jesus and he is walking with us on the road to glory.

[12:07] Right? There are things we can boast about. In other words, that we can rejoice in, that we can celebrate, that we can tell others about with energy and excitement and joy. So the tongue isn't only a huge liability.

Right? James doesn't begin by speaking about the negative potential of the tongue. He reminds us of the positive potential of the tongue. It has great potential for positive good.

Right? That's why James talks about guiding or bridling our tongue, not just silencing our tongue. Right? Already in chapter 1, James said we should be quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to anger, but that does mean that there is a time to speak and that there is a time to be angry.

Now, for example, let's say if you're having conflict or tension in marriage or some other close relationship.

And by the way, let me just say, these last few months have brought out all kinds of conflict and tension in all kinds of relationships. So if you're feeling that somewhere or other, you're not alone.

[13:17] But the solution to conflict and tension is not to just stop talking to each other. Right? Especially within a family relationship or someone you're living with.

Right? The solution is not to just stop talking to each other or avoid all difficult conversations. You actually have to learn to communicate with words. And sometimes that includes expressing anger or disappointment or other difficult emotions in a way that is honest and sincere without also being destructive and toxic.

When my wife and I were dating, a wise older woman said to us, no two people are compatible. She said, it's not whether you have conflict, but it's how you deal with it that will either strengthen or strain your marriage.

You see, conflict or tension can be an opportunity to learn to communicate with our words and to grow together as a result. And the book of Proverbs talks about how wise words can bring healing and restoration where there's been hurt and division and confusion.

So here's a few Proverbs from the book of Proverbs. The tongue of the wise brings healing. An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips. Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

[14:47] Like an ornament of fine gold is the rebuke of a wise judge to a listening ear. With patience, a ruler may be persuaded and a soft tongue will break a bone.

A soft answer turns away wrath. So there's all kinds of positive potential for good effects of honest and kind and gentle and careful and intentional speech.

Words can be a powerful force of good. That's what we see in this first section. But then the second section, verses five to eight, emphasizes the danger of our words.

James continues with the contrast of small things that have big effects. But then he introduces a different image in the second half of verse five.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire. And the tongue is a fire. I mean, think about it.

[15:58] Forest fires, brush fires, houses burn, it all starts with a small spark. Often completely unintentional.

James is also drawing upon the wisdom of Proverbs here. Here's some other Proverbs about the destructive potential of speech. A worthless man plots evil and his speech is like a scorching fire.

A dishonest person spreads strife and a gossip separates close friends. Evildoers are trapped by their sinful talk. The words of the reckless pierce like swords.

Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam. The mouths of fools are their undoing and their lips are a snare to their very lives. The point is, words can be a powerful force for good, but they can also result in ruin and destruction that spirals out of control.

You see, once a fire starts spreading, you can't just say, oops, sorry I dropped the match in the bushes. I wish I hadn't done that.

[17:07] Okay, problem solved, let's go on with life as if it never happened. No. Right? It's much easier to start a fire than to put out a fire that starts raging out of control.

And similarly, it takes far more time and energy to clean up the mess caused by unrighteous words than it did to say those words in the first place.

It's not that hard to lie, gossip, brag, manipulate, blame, ridicule, quarrel, complain.

Unrighteous words can come out of our mouths without much effort, even without us really thinking about it. But unrighteous words carry destructive power.

And when serious damage has been done, often it's not enough to just say, I'm sorry I said that, can we go on as if it never happened? In some cases, it may take a significant investment of time and energy to rebuild healthy patterns of relating to one another.

[18:22] Because even after the fire has died out, you're still dealing with all the charred wreckage that has been consumed by it. James wants us to take seriously the danger of our words.

and along with the image of a brush fire, James uses the image of pollution or contamination in verse 6. The tongue is a world of unrighteousness staining the whole body.

Again, I think it's the same point. It's much easier to stain a piece of clothing than to remove a stain that is set in. And we might ask, where does this destructive power, this polluting stain, ultimately come from?

James says it's kindled by hell itself. I mean, think about the story of how sin entered the world in Genesis 3.

It began with the serpent speaking deceptive and manipulative words to Eve, planting seeds of distrust and resentment toward God.

[19:31] did God really say that? Why wouldn't he want you to eat from that tree? You certainly won't die if you do.

You're pretty smart. You should be able to make a judgment on your own. Maybe God's trying to hold something back from you.

And then after Eve and then Adam take and eat of the forbidden fruit, what happens?

God comes to Adam, says, dude, what's up? What happened? And Adam says, she made me do it.

The woman who you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree and I ate. Deflect responsibility, blame somebody else. So ever since then, the course of human history have been polluted by unrighteous words.

[20:34] Deception and manipulation, blaming and deflecting, half-truths and outright lies, gossip and ridicule, cursing and complaining, bragging and flattering.

Our words have caused all kinds of ruin and destruction. You see, we figured out how to tame, how to restrain, how to hold in check just about everything else on earth.

But we haven't figured out how to tame one of the smallest members of our own bodies. Our tongues are restless, unstable, disorderly, unpredictable, like poisonous snakes, ready to strike at any moment.

That's the image James is giving us in verses 7 and 8. Our words are powerful but they're also dangerous. And then in verses 9 to 12, James highlights the greatest danger of all, the inconsistency of our words.

With our tongue we bless the Lord, our Lord and Father and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. Right?

[21 : 52] James here points us to some of the best ways we can use words. Right? The positive potential of words praising and blessing God and some of the worst, cursing other people.

Think about it. Is there any more noble use of human words than to declare the praises of the author of life himself? Is there any more fitting way to use our tongues than to look up to our heavenly Father and bless his holy name for he is good and his love endures forever?

You know, this is something that no other earthly creature can do. Yes, the Psalms and the prophets speak poetically about the heavens declaring the glory of God and the skies proclaiming his handiwork and the mountains and the hills breaking into song but of all earthly creatures it's only human beings who have put such thoughts into written words.

It's only human beings who have written down intricately reasoned arguments and composed beautiful poetry and song when God made us in his image, in his likeness.

He installed us as priests in his heavenly temple. Right? Our job was and is to offer up the praises of all creation to the Lord of all.

[23 : 08] that's a glorious and sacred thing. With our words to lead all creation that gives wordless praise to God almighty.

That's an amazing and powerful thing that we can do with our words. But then James points to one of the worst things we can do with our words to curse other human beings.

Now notice what James doesn't say. He doesn't say with our tongue we bless God and then with our tongue we curse God. Why doesn't he say that?

Right? Of course cursing God is perhaps the worst thing we could do with our tongues. But James is speaking to religious people. He's speaking to people who identify as Christians who say they believe in the God of the Bible.

Right? Many of James' hearers right? Perhaps many of us would say I've never cursed God. I'm not like those irreverent atheists and pagans. But James says have you not dishonored your fellow human beings who are made in the image of God?

[24 : 22] He says think about it have you not dishonored devalued despised other human beings? And don't you realize that when you dishonor another human being you are dishonoring the one in whose image and likeness they were made?

You see when James talks about cursing he's not just talking about foul language. You can dishonor and devalue and despise another human being while remaining very polite and socially acceptable.

James says consider the words that have come out of our mouths this morning even as we've sung or spoken hymns and songs of praise. And then he challenges us consider all the words that have come out of our mouths during the past week.

toward our spouses toward our kids toward our housemates toward our bosses toward our coworkers toward our next door neighbors toward distracted drivers and jaywalking pedestrians toward people of other nationalities or other racial groups toward people who hold opposing political views toward people who have misunderstood you and mistreated you personally.

Think about all those image bearers of God that we've interacted with in the last week. What have our words to them communicated?

[26 : 02] Does James challenge hit home? It did for me. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.

My brothers and sisters this ought not to be so. verses 11 and 12 James points out that that kind of inconsistency doesn't happen anywhere else in the created order.

A spring doesn't pour forth fresh and salt water simultaneously. A tree only bears fruit of its own kind not of another kind. And a salt pond can't yield fresh water.

But with our tongues we can be praising God in one moment and dishonoring one of his image bearers in the next. James says this is a monstrous inconsistency it's a horrific perversion of God's created order and it's one that James exposes and challenges.

Do we recognize the ways that our words have been inconsistent with one another? God is to God is all about steadfastness.

[27:22] James' primary concern is that we become people who are steadfast in our love undivided in our loyalty to God and to his son Jesus Christ because God is steadfast in his love and undivided in his loyalty to us.

He is the father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. He is good and his steadfast love endures forever.

God is calling us to be the kind of people that develop that steadfastness. Remember at the beginning he said some of that steadfastness is produced through trials, through hard experiences.

It's not something we naturally begin with but it's something that we can grow into and develop over time. But here James is pointing out a specific area where if we're honest with ourselves many of us perhaps even all of us have failed to express that kind of steadfastness and instead we've expressed inconsistency.

And you see the inconsistency of our words exposes the inconsistency of our hearts. It's very likely that James was thinking back to Jesus' own teaching. Matthew 15 18 Jesus said what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart.

[28:56] And that is what defiles a person. That's what pollutes us. That's what stains us. That's what contaminates us is what's in our heart.

And what comes out of our mouth simply shows us something that's in our heart. You see, how do we remedy the inconsistency of our words?

How do we tame our tongues that so easily get us into trouble? James says we need change at a heart level. And we need change that doesn't originate from ourselves.

He already said in verse 8, no human being can tame the tongue. Literally verse 8 reads, but the tongue no one is able to tame of mankind.

And yet in that statement, I think there is a glimmer of hope. Many years ago, the early church father Augustine commented on that verse. And he noticed, he said, James does not say simply that no one can tame the tongue, but no one among humans.

[30:10] So that when it is tamed, we confess that this is brought about by the mercy, the help, the grace of God. You see, there is hope for us.

Because the God who is steadfast, the father of life, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change, the God who is always true to his word, he has intervened on our behalf.

He has sent his one and only son into the world to save us from the fires of hell and from the fires of evil and rebellion that burn within our own hearts and come out through our unrighteous words.

God's love. He has come to save us from that restless evil, that deadly poison. In Jesus Christ, God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves.

He put it to death on the cross and he rose triumphantly from the grave. You see, our hope does not come from our good words.

[31:23] James is not saying, just try harder and say better things. No, he's pointing us to our true hope from the living and abiding word of God, from the truth about what Jesus has done on our behalf.

As James said earlier in chapter one, the implanted word of God is able to save your souls. That is the word that brings healing and forgiveness, new life and lasting change that is sweet to our soul and healing to our bones.

So, brothers and sisters, cling to the truth about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Listen to that word. Let that truth sink deeply into your heart above all else.

Draw upon that new creation life that God has bestowed upon us through the resurrection of Jesus himself and out of the abundance of a heart that is being renewed day by day by the grace of God.

Let us speak. Let us pray. Father God, we pray that you would forgive us for our unrighteous words, for our words that have started all kinds of fires, that have caused harm and ruin and destruction and mistrust.

[33 : 03] we thank you that by your grace you have come to repair and heal us. We thank you for the reliability and the power of your word, that you have been faithful to your word, that you sent your only son, the word of God himself, Jesus Christ our Lord, to save us and fill us with your spirit and give us everlasting hope.

Father, we pray that you would fill our hearts, fill our hearts with your truth, with your love, with your steadfastness, that our words may more and more come to reflect your steadfast love, your undivided loyalty and faithfulness to us.

May our words come to reflect that steadfastness and consistency and stability that comes from being anchored in you. We pray all these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.