

“The Power of Our Words”

James 3:1-12

Introduction

Have you ever been called in by a boss, or a principal, and they begin the conversation with niceties? “I want you to know that you are doing a wonderful job. I know your heart is good.” Blah, blah, blah.

In your mind, you begin to realize: “This isn’t the REAL reason for this meeting. They’ve got something they are about to say that is going to hit me between the eyes.”

Well, as we read through the book of James, we have heard James tell us that we are to find comfort even in our struggles. We are to pray for wisdom. We are to obey God’s Word and we are to demonstrate our faith by passionately obeying God.

But, now, as we get into James 3, I think we get to the part that was his REAL purpose for writing. He has provided some very helpful and needed content up until this point. But, now he’s about to vent a little bit. He’s going to address real problems in the church. It wasn’t “out there” but “in here” that was causing the name of Jesus to be tarnished among unbelievers. So, James is going to address the sins head on – because there was too much at stake if he didn’t point out the problem and expect that his readers would change their behaviors.

- James 3:1ff – “Stop saying things that hurt other people.”
- James 4:1ff – “Start acting like Jesus-followers and stop acting like people who are on their way to Hell.”
- James 5:1ff – “Stop relying on your wealth and trust in Jesus. And stop using our resources to hurt others.”

Just to see if this morning’s content is relevant, how many of you have been hurt by what someone else said about you?

How many of you have hurt others by what you said about them?

So, God’s Word to us this morning is something we need to hear ... and we need to make adjustments.

READ James 3:1-12

1. Be Warned: Approach Teaching Seriously (v. 1)

- a. V. 3 “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”
- b. This is not intended to discourage people from teaching God’s Word.
 - 1) After all, we are told by the writer of Hebrews that a clear sign of spiritual maturity is that we are able to teach God’s Word to others.
 - 2) Hebrews 5:11-12 (CSB) “We have a great deal to say about this, and it is difficult to explain, since you have become too lazy to understand. Although by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the basic principles of God’s revelation again. You need milk, not solid food.”

- c. What James is doing is calling us to realize just how serious of a task it is to be a teacher of God's Word.
- d. Why?
 - 1) Because we may not teach it accurately.
 - 2) Because we may contradict what we are saying with our lives.
 - 3) Because we use it as a bully pulpit.
- e. As James begins the section of his letter in which he writes about the power of our words, he warns those who would flippantly get into a position where they are responsible to teach God's Word.

2. Be Honest: We All Struggle with What We Say (v. 2a)

- a. V. 2 "For we all stumble in many ways..."
- b. As James prepares to address problem of what comes out of our mouths, he makes a blanket statement... "we ALL stumble in many ways..."
 - 1) That's me.
 - 2) And that's you.
- c. What are some ways that we struggle with our words?
 - 1) Grumbling
 - 2) Inappropriate harsh words
 - 3) Unwarranted criticism
 - 4) Dirty talk
 - 5) Lying
 - 6) Cursing
 - 7) Duplicitous words ("hey, it's so good to see you" and then "they're such a jerk")
 - 8) Gossip
 - 9) Slander
- d. On and on we could go with how we might struggle with what comes out of our mouth.
 - 1) We may be tempted to say, "Well, others struggle but I don't."
 - 2) Those are **proud words**.
 - 3) Luke 18:11 "The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.'"
- e. So, is there any hope?!

3. Be Hopeful: Our Faith Affects Our Speech (v. 2)

- a. V. 2 "For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect (*mature*) man, able also to bridle his whole body."
 - 1) This is, after all, right after the verses where James said that a true, saving faith is going to be evidenced by our behavior. We cannot see faith – it's private, hidden within our mind and heart.
 - 2) But true saving faith won't remain private and hidden. It will show up in the way we behave – and in the way we talk.
 - 3) Someone who claims that they are on their way to Heaven and yet has an untamed tongue (and there is no progress toward Christlikeness in what comes out of their mouth) has no basis at all on which to have an assurance of their faith.
- b. But, if we are truly saved, as we saw in James 2:14-26, that saving faith will demonstrate itself in righteous behavior.

- 1) Will we continue to struggle with sin? Of course.
 - 2) But true saving faith will begin to permeate our life, always claiming new ground. God will be about the business of making us more like Jesus.
- c. So, let's say that you are truly passionate about taking the Bible seriously and obeying the Lord. You want to eradicate wickedness in your heart and you want to pursue holiness. What is ONE thing you could do to test the spiritual health of your heart?
- 1) ... Listen to what comes out of your mouth.
 - 2) It's that simple. Just listen to the words you say and how you say them and you will get a good feel for the spiritual condition of your heart.
 - 3) Listen to what Jesus once told His followers: **Luke 6:45 (NLT) "A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart."**
 - 4) Kim is my best ally in helping me on the road to holiness. There have been times when I've thought I was just fine but she pointed out that I had recently been complaining, or my words were harsh, or any number of other possibilities. Clearly, my words were revealing that there was something wrong with my heart.
 - 5) If someone claims to be spiritually mature but you keep hearing them brag about themselves (a proud heart) or gossip (a judgmental heart) or tell filthy jokes (they have a dirty heart), or anything else, they are revealing the condition of their heart.
 - 6) Or, if someone says that they love the Lord (but never talk about Him), or they love God's Word (but never talk about it), they reveal what is truly in their heart.
 - 7) If someone is saved and is serious about pursuing holiness, you'll hear it come out of their mouth.
- d. So, let's finish by looking at three warnings about the kind of words we use...

4. Be Aware:

a. Our Words Can Be Powerful (v. 3-5)

- 1) **V. 3-5 "3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 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. 5 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!"**
- 2) James uses three illustrations:
 - a) A small bit in a horse's mouth.
 - b) A small rudder on a ship.
 - c) A small fire in a forest.
- 3) The point he is making is that it is amazing how something so small can have such incredible power.
- 4) **The Carr Fire** was one of the many fires that ravaged California this year but it was one of the worst. It burned over 299K acres (just a little bit less than all of Calloway County), destroyed over 1,000 homes, and claimed the lives of 3 firemen and 5 civilians. How did it start? A flat tire! Business Insider reported¹ that it started "after a

¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/california-fire-caused-by-flat-tire-officials-say-2018-8>

trailer's tire blew out and the rim made contact with the pavement... That incident shot sparks into the dry brush, igniting a blaze..."

5) I know of other fires that have been started by people who had an axe to grind, or they just wanted to grumble about something they didn't like, or they wanted to hurt someone with their words who had hurt them.

6) It is amazing how powerful our words can be!

7) But it also works the other way, too. Your positive words have power!

8) Ephesians 4:29 (NLT) "Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them."

b. Our Words Can Be Reckless and Destructive (v. 6-8)

1) Vs. 6-8 "6 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. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

2) So, James uses the fire analogy and wild animal analogy to show that it is hard to contain what the mouth starts. Once someone has said something they shouldn't, it can create incredible destruction.

3) In fact, he says that the tongue "is fully of deadly poison."

4) Many years ago, back before Joseph was born, I was pastoring in Princeton, KY. We frequently went to LBL to enjoy some hiking and relaxing views of the water. On one occasion, Zach (who was probably about 4 at the time) wandered down the shoreline and we had Sean with us. Sean was throwing rocks and twigs in the water and then we noticed that he was trying to hit a stick in the water. I took a closer look ... and realized that the "stick" was a cottonmouth curled up under the water and it was looking right at us. Terror struck as I looked down the bank and saw Zach with 2 cottonmouths staring at him. I yelled for him to come to me, I picked my boys up in my arms, and Kim and I quickly headed for the safety of home.

5) Folks, if you are saying things you shouldn't, you are just like that cottonmouth with poison in your mouth. But, instead of folks getting to safety, you bite them.

6) "Oh, be careful little mouth what you say. Oh, be careful little mouth what you say. For the Father up above is looking down in love. Oh, be careful little mouth what you say."

c. Our Words Can Be Inconsistent (v. 9-12)

1) V. 9-12 "9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water."

2) James uses four analogies to show that nature isn't duplicitous.

a) A spring does NOT produce fresh AND salt water.

b) A fig tree does NOT bear figs AND olives.

c) A grapevine does NOT produce grapes AND figs.

d) A pond with salt water does NOT produce fresh water.

- 3) So, James is clearly implying that when we use our mouths to praise God and then use that same mouth to bring harm to someone who is made in God's image, we are going against nature. It's not natural! "These things ought not to be so."

Conclusion

So, how do we fix it?

Well, look back to vs. 8. "but no human being can tame the tongue..."

That's true. No human can tame the tongue ... but God can!

So, rely upon God's grace to help you become someone whose words testify to the fact that you truly are a Jesus follower:

Reach out to receive God's grace:

1. Ask for forgiveness as you repent.
2. Ask the Holy Spirit to change you.
3. Spend time in God's Word, getting it into you.
4. Commit to abide by Ephesians 4:29.
5. Get other believers to help you.