

FAITH THAT WORKS // Watch Your Words

Today, I want to talk about something that has the potential to stink up our lives, but we don't typically pay much attention to.

James 3:1-12, "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! 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." (ESV)

Now, what is the small object that James is saying causes all these problems in life?

The tongue. Our words.

I'm bringing this to you today, not as an expert, but as a co-learner, a student, alongside you. And in this passage, James gives us three principles and then points us toward a solution.

THE POWER OF THE TONGUE

James uses three analogies to make this point. He says the tongue is like a small little bit in a horse's mouth, and this tiny little bit is able to control and turn the biggest horse. The bit is small, but it has enormous power.

Same thing with a rudder on a ship. It's a small part of a ship but it has enormous power! If you don't have control of the rudder, it doesn't matter what else you do have control over, you're not getting where you want to go. Very small part of the ship with enormous power.

Then James says the tongue is a fire.

Think about the fires in Maui from 2023. It was one severed power line. A single spark on some dry grass within hours had people abandoning their homes and swimming out in the Pacific Ocean for safety. Thousands of homes destroyed, and over 100 people lost their lives because of one little spark!

James says your tongue is a relatively small part of your body, but it determines the whole course of your life.

- People form their opinions of us based on our words.
- We make judgments about one another based on our words.
- We begin and end relationships with our words.
- We draw people in or push them away with our words.

Think about how words have impacted your life: *"I love you. I'm so proud of you. I think you're incredible! You bring me so much joy. You're the best part of my day. You always mess things up. We're going in a different direction. I've found someone else."*

See, our best relationships came about through words. Our most broken or estranged relationships became that way through our words. The Holocaust it didn't begin with weapons. It began with words and propaganda years before war ever broke out.

The most painful moments in our lives are often connected to things said about us or said to us by someone we looked to for validation or guidance, love, or affirmation. A parent, a mentor, a boss, a spouse... their words have tremendous power.

Or think about things you might have said that you wish you could take back. *"If only I hadn't sent that email... or posted on socials..."* Some of you are the sweet, kind, warm, easy to get along with type, but when you get behind that keyboard, you become like the John Wick of social media. There's no round you won't fire, no word left unsaid. How many people have lost marriages, jobs, families, opportunities, friendships, important relationships over their words?

Like a bit, like a rudder, like a fire-- the tongue contains tremendous power.

THE POISON OF OUR WORDS

James 3:7-8, "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." (ESV)

People have tamed all kinds of animals, but no human being can tame the tongue.

James 3:8, "...It is a restless evil, full of deadly **poison**." (ESV)

The thing about poison, is it stays with you. It gets in your system and it's hard to get out. One of the most venomous forms of communication is gossip.

Proverbs 11:12-13, "Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent. Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered." (ESV)

Proverbs 16:28, "A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends." (ESV)

Proverbs 18:7-8, "A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul. The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body." (ESV)

Getting the scoop might feel good in the moment, but in the end, it's poison to your soul. Why? It not only breeds suspicion and contempt for whoever it is your talking about, but if you're someone who revels in sharing negative information or complaining about other people, you prove yourself to be an untrustworthy person, or if you entertain gossip, your willingness to listen to it is just as evil.

What do we do? Well, I'll tell you what I do. If someone comes to me with negative information about anyone, and they want to complain or negatively talk about someone, I'll kindly stop them and say, "*Hey, before you go any further, have you talked to the person you're talking to me about? The way we do things around here is if we have an issue with someone, we talk WITH them not ABOUT them. So, take the*

issue or concern to that person first. If you want help or coaching on how to have that conversation, I'm happy to help. But I won't entertain gossip."

James 3:9-10, "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..." (ESV)

The question for us today is do we do this? Do we bless God on Sunday and curse our neighbor on Monday? Do we bless God on Sunday and slander our coworkers, our boss, even those we serve with during the week?

You know, I get emails from all of you. So many of them are encouraging and I'm so thankful. I have a rainy-day folder filled with encouragement, all the of the notes and cards. There've been many days where those encouragements have lifted me out of a funk or a downward spiral, so thank you encouragers out there. What we say has the power to build up or tear down.

THE PROOF OF THE HEART

What we say is the clearest indicator of what we really think. Our words expose the heart. What we say reveals what we think. How many of you have ever said something you regret? You wish you could take it back! But once the toothpaste comes out of the tube, you can't put it back it. We might say, "*Oh I didn't really mean it. I don't actually think that...*" but the question is, where did that come from then?

That's what James is saying.

James 3:11-12, "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." (ESV)

No matter how much a fig tree may try, it will only produce ever be able to produce figs. That's what it is, that's what's in it. And whatever is in that tree, or in that spring, is going to show up, it's going to come out. What's on the outside reveals what really is on the inside.

The reality is, whatever we said that we wish we could take back, it was in there somewhere. We're just frustrated that we didn't restrain, or put a better filter on it, and what we really thought came out. And no matter how many air fresheners we put

on those vents, nothing can filter out the smell. The smell is evidence of something rotten. Our words reveal the rotten nature of what's in here. That's why Jesus says judge the tree by its fruit. What does it produce? What's on the outside? What's the evidence?

Matthew 12:34-37, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (ESV)

Just because we say something in private to our spouse or close friend, gossip, slander, unkind, uncharitable words that divide and tear down, every careless word will be brought into the light, into judgment. Even those said to your closest friend or your spouse. Just because we're talking to a close friend, or a spouse, or relative doesn't mean we're in the clear.

Why? Because no matter who you say them to, words expose your heart. Even if you keep the best filters and *never* say a wrong word, what's foul in the heart is still there, and God wants to do something about that today.

For some of us, our words reveal that we're not really followers of Jesus. We've learned to put on a good Christian act, but when the pressure is on, what's really in our heart comes out. And what's revealed is that we may act one way on the outside, but inside, there is poison, hatred, bitterness, contempt, cynicism.

James 1:26, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." (ESV)

Does the way you speak to others or about others filled with grace? Is it merciful? Kind? Loving? Do your words sound like a person who's been transformed by God's patience, kindness, gentleness, and grace?

3 Practical Applications:

1. Be Slow to Speak.

Before you send that email, before you vent your anger, before you spread rumors, or negative information or assumptions about someone, ask yourself... "Do I really

need to share this about this person? Is there anything profitable that comes from me repeating this tale or am I simply delighting in the faults or misfortunes of others?"

Think about it before speaking because Jesus said you will be brought into judgment for that idle gossip spoken to your friend, or your spouse, your coworker, your children. Because once you say it, you can't get it back.

2. Be Quick to Apologize

Don't ever underestimate the power of a genuine apology. If you lose your patience with your kids, or you say a harsh word to your spouse that you wish you could take back, or you accidentally copied someone on an email that you can't unsend, be quick to own it, and apologize.

Husbands, do you apologize to your wife? To you kids? Wives, do you apologize to your husbands? Parents, do you apologize to your kids when you've blown it? Bosses, managers, do you apologize to your employees? Don't ever underestimate the power of coming back and owning it, when you've blown it. An apology has far more power than we realize.

Please don't apologize and process with someone about something horrible you said but they didn't know about. *"Pastor, we were talking about you in small group and I said some horrible things about you and everyone was in agreement about it and I shouldn't have talked about what a ugly buffoon I think you are. Please forgive me."* You know, I was kind of better off not knowing about it.

Now, if you're quick to apologize, but you keep doing the same behavior repeatedly, your apology means less and less over time. Eventually, if the behavior doesn't change, the apology loses its power.

So, the invitation for all of us today is to allow God to change the heart because the issue isn't the tongue. James says that you can't tame the tongue. The issue is the heart. So how do our hearts receive healing?

Maybe you had harsh words spoken over you, things spoken over you that you've never fully healed from. God has healing for you today.

In the most difficult season of my life, the devil was having a heyday with my heart and mind. I was carrying so much shame because of words spoken to me, over me. And a friend pointed me to Hebrews 2 and encouraged me to personalize it and think on it.

Hebrews 2:11, "...That is why He is not ashamed to call them brothers..."

And it hit me. That truth completely dissolved weight I'd been carrying on my shoulders. Jesus is not ashamed to call me brother. He's not ashamed. And His opinion, what Jesus says about me, FAR outweighs anyone else. Jesus says, *"I am not ashamed to call you my own. My brother. My sister. It doesn't matter what they said, or the word spoken over you."*

Maybe you need to hear Jesus speaking about you today, saying to His heavenly Father, *"I'm not ashamed to call him brother, sister, family."* Jesus says, *"you belong to me."*

He's not ashamed of us, and His opinion is the only one that counts.