

Faith Talks: James 3:1-12

“Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly. Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way.

We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong. In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches.

But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.

People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty spring.”

James begins this section by issuing a word of caution to those who would pursue a teaching ministry. He warns them that the responsibility to teach others should not be entered into lightly, because the teacher will incur a stricter judgment. There are a couple of risks that teaching poses. First, the teacher runs the risk of imparting incorrect information and leading people astray. This is why it is critical for a teacher of God's Word to be very careful to handle God's word properly and not distort it. Teachers also run the risk of doing damage even when they speak truth, if they fail to communicate truth clearly, or if they speak truth in a harmful manner. There is nothing wrong with desiring to teach so long as the person is prepared to assume the great responsibility that comes with teaching. If you are not willing to assume the responsibility to put in the effort required to teach accurately and to model what you teach consistently, don't do it.

So James begins with a caution to teachers, but then he addresses all of us regarding the ease with which we sin with our tongues. We all mess

up with our words. Our mouths are the hardest part of our body to control. If you never sin with your words you a perfect person, because if you can control your tongue you can control your entire being. Why is it so hard to avoid sinning with our words?

The reason is pretty simple: We do a lot of talking. Teachers are most vulnerable because of how much they talk. Proverbs 10:19 tells us that when there is a lot of talking, sin is unavoidable.

Research has been conducted to determine the number of words that men and women speak in the course of a day. For years the conventional wisdom based on the research was that women speak on average about 20,000 words/day and men speak only 7,000. My wife's explanation is that the woman has to repeat herself 3x before the husband finally listens. A more recent study revealed a much closer disparity between the sexes. It revealed women speak just over 16,000 words/day and men speak slightly less than 16,000. If that is true, consider this: The number of words you speak in a week, if put into print, would fill two, 200-page books. If your words were put into print you be writing over 100 books/yr. Here is something to think about: If your words were published which section of the library would they fit into: "Inspiration", "Fiction", "Horror", "Drama", "Tragedy", "Comedy"?

After reminding us how easy it is to sin with our words he proceeds, via two analogies, to describe the powerful impact of our words.

First, he compares the tongue to a bit placed in the mouth of a horse. The bit and the tongue are both small, however, their lack of size does not diminish their power to exert tremendous influence and control.

Then he compares the tongue to the rudder of a great ship. The rudder doesn't have to be big to exert a powerful influence on a ship's direction; neither does the tongue need to be big to direct our lives.

James concludes with the statement, "In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches." This translation does not convey the meaning very well. Eugene Peterson in 'The Message' does a better job when he translates this verse, "A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it! In both analogies that James uses, the point being made is that the tongue

is powerful for good or bad, not that it is proud or boastful. The bit and rudder have a constructive, not a destructive impact on the horse and ship. James point is to demonstrate that something so small and seemingly insignificant as our words, can have a tremendous impact.

Words of encouragement are like oxygen to the soul.

Martin Luther King Jr. inspired millions to hope and persevere by his words. A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

Years ago I was preaching a Youth Rally at Van Nest Assembly of God in the Bronx. My text was the prodigal son. At the close of the service I was emphasizing the love of the father in the face of the rebellion and brokenness of the son. I told the young people there is always hope, there is always hope, there is always hope!! During the prayer time after the message a youth pastor came to me with a man who had come forward. He explained that this man had just received news he had AIDS. He was contemplating suicide but as he walking by the church and saw there was a service he decided to walk in. He came in right when I was saying the words, "There is always hope".

In verses 5b-8 James focuses on the destructive potential of the tongue by the use of a third analogy; the tongue as a fire. Just like with the bit and rudder, the analogy here shows that something as small as a spark can set a whole forest aflame. The largest wildfire in the recorded history of Yellowstone National Park was in 1988. More than 2 million acres, approximately a third of the entire park, was scorched. The largest of the fires was caused by a dropped cigarette. James describes the tongue as a "world of iniquity". What he means by that phrase is that the sins of the tongue are wide-ranging. Almost any sin you can think of can find expression in our words or be enticed by our words.

Words express hatred and incite violence; sexual immorality can be expressed and enticed by words. Fraud is defined as theft via lying.

In almost 30 years of ministry I have learned over and over again that the phrase "sticks and stones my break my bones but words can never hurt me" is wishful thinking. Most people have been hurt much more

severely by words than sticks or stones. Sure, words don't cause physical wounds, but they cause emotional and psychological wounds that take even longer to heal from. These wounds many times cause physical problems, thus causing harm to the body indirectly.

According to the US News & World Report psychologists Cliff Notarius of Catholic University and Howard Markman of the University of Denver studied newlyweds over the first decade of marriage, they found a very subtle but telling difference at the beginning of the relationships. Among couples who would ultimately stay together, 5 out of every 100 comments made about each other were putdowns. Among couples who would later split, 10 of every 100 comments were insults. That gap magnified over the following decade, until couples heading downhill were flinging five times as many cruel and invalidating comments at each other as happy couples. "Hostile putdowns act as cancerous cells that, if unchecked, erode the relationship over time," says Notarius,

If no one can tame the tongue, is our situation hopeless? Are we helpless victims, controlled by our big mouths and therefore not responsible for what comes out of them?

No, absolutely not! No man can tame the tongue, but that doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit can't tame the tongue.

Speaking in tongues is an odd evidence for the baptism in the Spirit. Or is it? It actually makes perfect sense. What better way to demonstrate that a person is under the influence of the Spirit than for God to take control of the person's tongue?

In verses 9-12 James turns his attention to the *inconsistency* that is manifested by our words. From the same mouth a man praises God and slanders his neighbor! James response is an emphatic, "this is not right!!" James is returning to the key theme of this letter: Our faith ought to be evidenced by works that correspond with what we profess to believe. He writes, "*Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty spring.*" He is echoing the teaching of Jesus when He said, "You will know a person by his/her fruits." This metaphor expresses the idea that peoples' actions – in this case their words – give evidence to what they truly

believe and value. When James wrote this he was also very likely echoing Jesus words, “The mouth speaks from that which fills the heart.” Words reflect what is in the mind and spirit of the person. It would be a mistake to take James’ and Jesus’ teaching on this matter to mean that a true Christian, with the Spirit of God living in him, CANNOT sin with his words? James is teaching by way of analogy and analogies should not be pressed too precisely. Anyone, even a person with the darkest heart and evil motives can say “the right thing” when they see the need to. Didn’t you sometimes speak words that were kind, true, and loving before you came to Christ? And now that you are saved, have you completely ceased from sinning with your words? James is making the point that the normal, day to day speech of a person is indicative of the person’s true heart and character.

Sometimes we let our passions rule over our convictions. We can let our personal emotions and appetites determine our decisions rather than submitting to the Word of God and following the leading of the Spirit. But normally, there ought to be a strong consistency between the words we say and the Word of God; between the way we speak and the way the Spirit of God speaks.

CLOSE: So what should we do if our words are not what they should be? What if you have foot in mouth disease? The only time Peter didn’t have his foot in his mouth was when he was changing feet.

1. What we believe will necessarily and absolutely influence the way we speak. The mouth speaks from what fills the heart. Focus first on your mind and heart. Renew you mind and heart on God’s truth. If your heart is full of jealousy and envy you will gossip and slander others. Ask God to show you the heart issues that prompt the language problems.
2. Practice listening before you talk & more than you talk. Take a hint from nature. We have two ears and one mouth. Listen 2x more than you speak. The mouth was designed to close; the ears were not. This week pay attention to your conversations and see if you are listening more than talking.

3. Don't just remove bad speech. Replace it with good speech. Look for opportunities to speak words of life to people. John Maxwell practices something he calls his 30 second rule. Within the first 30 seconds of a conversation he tries to find something he can compliment the person on or encourage the person with.

Don't work to earn God's acceptance.

Don't work to earn heaven.

Do work for the glory God

Do work for the good of others