

Faith Works: The Book of James

A Small Tongue, a Big Problem

James 3:1-5

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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! (James 3:1–5)

I usually prefer preaching sermons that offer new thoughts. Often “igniting a passion to follow Jesus” means helping people discover biblical truths that were previously unknown.

But spiritual maturity also requires remembering truths that we “know” but don’t apply. In other words, for many Christians the problem isn’t learning a biblical principle; there’s a challenge with applying it. Worse, better at applying it to someone else than ourselves.

Maybe throughout the last year, you’ve heard someone express their frustration this way: “Rules for thee but not for me.”

That potential exists with this sermon and throughout the third chapter of James. We’re talking about what and how we communicate. When it comes to how we communicate, our problem is not information but justification. Our issue is not what we know but what we excuse.

Let me illustrate this. Think of the last time that you said something that you knew was wrong. My guess is that, as you replayed the scenario, you didn’t say: “I had no idea I shouldn’t say that!” Rather, you probably said, “Ugh, why did I say that!? I know better.” But that’s the problem, isn’t it? We tend to excuse the obvious.

So, before I get into principles that you probably already know, I’m going to ask you to resist the temptation to apply this text to someone else. I want you to listen for you. There will surely be ways for you to apply this as you help other people follow Jesus, but we all need to start with ourselves. And if you haven’t put your trust in Jesus and become a Christian yet, I’d like you to listen carefully too. Hopefully, this text will show you the connection between the mouth and the heart. I also hope this will show you the biblical standard even if you know Christians who have been bad examples in their speech.

Let's look at this text as something "for me and maybe for thee" by examining three cautions to be reminded about.

Caution #1: More Words = More Accountability

James begins this section by addressing the danger that teachers, including himself, are in because of their use of many words. It seems as if he desires to disarm his readers by cautioning them about something that would apply directly to himself. It's a wise pastoral strategy. Start with a sticky issue by applying it first to yourself. Those who teach are judged with greater strictness.

It would appear that James is attempting to bring a dose of reality into the mix here. Various commentators agree that teachers were valued during the time when James wrote this letter. With a population that was less widely educated, those with knowledge and a gift of communication were respected.

Not much has changed. I'm drawn to people who know their stuff and who can say or write it in a way that is helpful and memorable. Words have power. One of my favorite lines from a movie about Winston Churchill is: "He mobilized the English language and sent it into battle." Words create worlds.

That's one of the reasons that Paul cautioned Timothy about the danger of false teachers:

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

With the advent of the information age and the internet, this caution is one that we need to heed even more. We need even more discernment because it's not hard to find a teacher to verify and promote what we want to hear. And it's remarkable how quickly we might trust someone who we don't even know because they say something we wanted to hear.

James is seeking to elevate the responsibility that teachers have lest we become overly enamored with their content or their gifting. He's attempting to bring some realism into the mix. What kind of caution?

It's related to the phrase "judged with greater strictness."

James reminds us that there's a straight line between what we say and accountability. In other words, our words matter. This isn't a new concept in James. Words are really important to James. When we studied chapter one, this topic sounded like this:

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. . . (James 1:19).

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

James is writing to people who are under pressure, and you can imagine that sinful words were surfacing. Doesn't that happen to you? Hasn't it happened a lot lately?

Secondly, sinful words were affecting relationships in the church. In a few weeks, we'll come to the fourth chapter of James where he'll talk about what's underneath our conflicts and our words:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? (James 4:1).

James writes as a pastor who knows what people—even church people—are like. That should encourage you! The challenges of our day and age are not new, and the Bible speaks to them. You see, we might be tempted to use the hardness of life right now as an excuse for our words. It's good to be reminded that sinful words have always been problematic, and there's never an excuse.

But beyond this book, I wouldn't be surprised if James remembered Jesus's words:

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 (Matt. 12:35–37).

It sounds a lot like the message of the book of James. Or maybe he was thinking of the wisdom expressed in Proverbs:

When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent (Prov. 10:19).

Since teachers use more words, James issues this caution. I surely feel this. I've been the lead pastor at College Park since 2008. With three services each Sunday, it's safe to estimate that I use about twelve thousand words. Multiply that over thirteen years; that's five million seven hundred thousand spoken words—just in sermons. And some of you have been around long enough to witness moments when I've gotten a little tongue-tied or said something the wrong way or I wasn't clear enough in what I said.

But the caution is not just for teachers. A recent study by the University of Arizona¹ found that we average about sixteen thousand words a day. Now there were some outliers. For some participants in the study, it was as low as 795 words (only forty-nine words per waking hour) and as high as forty-seven thousand (three thousand words per waking hour). You'll have to decide which direction you lean. But think of the responsibility of all those words.

¹ <https://ubrp.arizona.edu/study-finds-no-difference-in-the-amount-men-and-women-talk/#:~:text=On%20average%2C%20women%20speak%2016%2C215,speak%2015%2C669%20words%20per%20day.>

Quantity is not the only problem. I'm sure you can think of something said to you directly, said to other people about you, or something written in a text or email. All it took was a single word or the way that something was said—and the damage was done. We forget the need for accountability with our words.

What's more, because we all have massive megaphones in our pockets, we can hear and read more words from others. We can begin to take on words and tones of the culture at large. So we need to ask ourselves if our words are on our spiritual radar.

If nothing else, I hope this message serves to remind you that our words matter. I know you know that. But knowing that isn't the problem. Remembering it when we're proud, defensive, mad, fearful, anxious, frustrated—that's when what we believe matters. Accountability for our words is the first caution.

Caution #2: Good Words = Good Sign

The second caution relates to the connection between our words and the rest of our life. James identifies that a person who can control their tongue is usually the same kind of person who can control other areas as well. The reverse is also true: it's a bad sign if someone doesn't have control over his or her words.

In verse 2, James acknowledges that everyone stumbles in different sin issues. He's recognizing the pervasive nature of our sinfulness. But then he specifically focuses on our words. If a person doesn't stumble in what he says, James calls him a perfect man.

Now James doesn't mean "without fault" when he says "perfect." After all, he just said that "we all stumble in many ways." No, he means "perfect" in the sense of being mature. It's the same meaning that we saw in 2:22 ("faith was completed by his works") and in 1:4 ("that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing").

The idea here is pretty simple: the words of my mouth connect to my way of life.

This means two things. First, that our words are revealing. They show us and others who we really are. Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). Since we cannot see what is actually happening in the heart, there are very few ways to discern what a person is thinking about, what they are meditating on, what makes them bitter, what brings them joy, or what they love. You can't see it. But you can hear it.

I'm sure that you've said something like, "I don't know where that came from!" after you said something regrettable. Or, "That came out of nowhere." Well, actually it didn't. Our words come from our desires and thoughts. I don't know how to gauge what percentage of thoughts we actually express, but I trust that we could agree it's a lot more than what we actually say.

Our words are a good sign of where we're at spiritually. Remember the sermon from last week? Please say, "Yes!" James went to great lengths to connect faith and works. Chapter two ended with the statement, ". . .faith without works is dead." And, then, the first "works" James addresses are our

words. That should tell you something. It's not just that our words are the most obvious. That might be true. But they are also extremely important because they are the most visible barometer of our hearts. Good words are a good sign. Bad words are a bad sign.

Several years ago I was watching an interview with three pastors who were national leaders. They were talking about an area of secondary importance. And the interview scared me. I watched as two of the pastors reacted, boasted, interrupted, compared, and made light of the other pastor's position. One pastor was thoughtful while the others were rude. One pastor asked questions while the others moved from manipulative flattery to belligerent bantering. When I finished the video, I thought: "Uh oh." And it wasn't long until both pastors were fired from their churches because of their behavior in other areas. Looking back, their words were telling.

What do your words say of your maturity? Christian, I trust you realize that your words can uniquely communicate the grace that you've received. They can cause people to see how transformed your heart and life truly are. Maybe you're not a Christian, and something about a change from the inside out (including your words) seems really attractive to you. Consider asking someone you know who is a Christian how Jesus changed his or her life. They'll be glad to tell you.

Words are not only a sign of what's inside. They are also predictive about your future. In this way, they serve to control a lot of our life. "Actions invariably follow words."²

James uses his first two illustrations here: a horse bit and the rudder of a ship. The point of both illustrations is that something small not only controls something big but also that it leads somewhere. The control creates action. In the same way, our speech can have a big effect on our lives.

Let me give you a few examples:

- People who talk proudly are not easily warned about danger
- People who gossip and slander others tend to find each other and reaffirm their concerns
- People who are bitter can be exhausting to encourage, so people give up
- People who are unkind can end up being really lonely because no one wants to befriend them
- People who are angry cause others to be very careful and not get too close
- People who complain can justify themselves, discourage others, and poison an environment
- People who don't speak honestly allow people they love to make really bad decisions

Words create worlds.

- People who speak carefully are trusted by others
- People who are humble in what they say are easy to correct and warn
- People who refuse to listen to gossip have less of it come their way

² Kurt A. Richardson, [James](#), vol. 36, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 148.

- People who speak without anger are able to resolve conflicts
- People who give thanks tend to attract people and opportunities
- People who are lovingly candid build trust

Our words are more than just the expression of our hearts; they are signs of where we're headed. Good words are a good sign. Bad words are a bad sign.

Caution #3: Small Issue = Big Problems

The final point is really the theme of this entire section and the title of this sermon. While the tongue is a small member, it can create big problems. James, it would seem, wants to be sure that we do not fall into the trap of minimizing the issue here. A small member of the body can boast of great things.

In proportion to other parts of our body, the tongue has unusual power. James wants to make this vivid and memorable. Beyond the horse's bit and the ship's rudder, he uses forest fires, the fire of hell, the taming of wild beasts, a spring, and a fig tree as examples. He calls the tongue a "restless evil" and "full of deadly poison."

Why so many illustrations and powerful words? Because it's that important and because it's that easy to excuse.

Some of you know very well the deep pain of hurtful words spoken to you. Some of you are trying really hard to break the cycle of sinful, abusive speech that was a part of your home. Others of you know the real internal scars from living with someone who is verbally ruthless and wicked. Some of you know how you can read a short text and how a single word can cut so deeply. I pray that you'll keep trusting the Lord to give careful attention to your words.

Every one of us has wounded people with our words. And every one of us can be tempted to justify sinful words because of some excuse. I put a question out on social media regarding what kind of excuses we use when it comes to our words. I received over 130 responses. Here are some of those and a few of my own:

- I'm just being honest. . .keeping it real. . .just sayin'
- I'm trying not to be rude but. . .
- I'm just tired. . .frustrated. . .burdened
- Please don't take this the wrong way. . .
- I'm an Enneagram __
- I have some issues. . .I have pain/trauma
- I have trust issues so. . .
- I was only kidding
- I'm just telling you what I heard. . .

I know there are times when these things are said and what follows isn't sinful. But the list and the responses on social media would tell me what I think we all know: we find ways to justify sinful words. And the main way that we do that is by normalizing or minimizing the significance of what we're saying.

James doesn't seem to think that we need to be informed about the problem of the tongue. Rather, he operates from a perspective that our main problem is not realizing what a big deal this really is.

Christian, can I remind you that Jesus rescued you from a heart full of bitterness, anger, wrath, and malice? He redeemed you so that the miracle of the gospel could start in your heart and then flow through every part of your life, including your tongue. Are you careful with your words? Are they saturated with grace? Do you err on the side of love? Is there something strangely gracious about your words?

To those of you who have not yet turned to Christ, this message is nearly entirely about the fruit of our lives. But you know that fruits and roots are connected, right? Do you find yourself wanting to not make the mistakes of your family? Do you hear what you say and think, "Man, that's not right"? Are you sick of hurting people? Or, maybe you don't care, and it's kind of scary.

Why not come to Jesus today? Why not trust him as your Savior? Why not allow him to change your heart so that every part of you, including what you say, can be different?

All of us know that our words matter. But hopefully, James chapter three will help remind you that this is an area that's not only important, it's an area where God can bring new life.

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