

O Be Careful Little Mouth... (Part 3 of 5)

“What You Say About Yourself”

James 4:13-16 & Proverbs 27:1-2

Mark Vroegop

13 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"— 14 yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. 15 Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." 16 As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil (James 4:13-16, ESV).

*27 Do not boast about tomorrow,
for you do not know what a day may bring.
2 Let another praise you, and not your own mouth;
a stranger, and not your own lips (Prov 27:1-2, ESV).*

Two weeks ago I was interviewed for an article that a local magazine is publishing on people's response to September 11th. After asking me where I was when I first learned about the tragedy, the interviewer asked me a great question that gave me pause: "How do you think 9-11 changed you?" After thinking for a moment, I realized that 9-11 shattered my sense of safety, and I said, "It awakened me to the fact that we are much more vulnerable than we realized." 9-11 showed us how quickly (shockingly so) life can change.

The people who attended the Sugarland concert at the State Fair I'm sure felt the same way. I don't know how many times I've watched the footage of the stage collapsing. Every time I find myself struck not only by the tragedy of the moment, but how suddenly it happened. One moment a family is waiting for a concert to begin, and in the next they are running for their lives. Life can change in an instant. And the problem is that we usually don't live that way.

This is why James, when thinking of a metaphor for our lives, doesn't use safe or robust words. He doesn't say "Life is a journey with lots of hills and valleys." He doesn't say "Life is a battle with struggles and victories." No. He shocks and almost offends us by saying "You are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." Why would he say that?

James is, frankly, alarmed at the fact that people do not live their lives like they should. And it shows up in how they talk about themselves, their plans, and their futures. James would agree with our title today: Be careful little mouth what you say about yourself.

Talking About Our Talk

This is week three of five in our journey to learn about the tongue. Two weeks ago we learned about the importance and the power of words from James 3. Who could forget James's strong warning – "The tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:8).

Last week we dialed into the issue of the way in which we talk **about other people**, and we learned the following truths:

- **The motivation for good words is the glory of God**
- **We should talk to others in a way that is spiritually helpful not hurtful**
- **Hurtful words come from frustrated passions and desires**

This week we are going to take another step in learning about how we communicate by examining how we talk about ourselves. Our base text will be James 4:13-16, but we are going to look at a number of different texts with the hope of getting our minds and hearts around what the Bible says about the various ways that boasting can take over our lives.

Three Truths About "Self" Talk

Using James 4, Proverbs 27, and ending in Romans 3 I want to shed some light on our "self" talk. In particular, I want to look into the subject of boasting. There are three concepts or truths that I want you to consider as you talk about yourself:

1. Self-centered talk is very common

After defining the problem of the tongue in chapter three and identifying problem of passions and desires in 4:1-12, James targets the problem of self-centeredness in the last part of chapter four through 5:11. His pastoral concern is for the worldview of the people to whom he is writing, and what he hears coming out of their mouths. Their talk is window to their thinking.

James's tone is direct and confrontational. Leading the paragraph is the phrase "come now," and its intent is to be shocking. The NIV renders it as "Now listen" while the Living Bible translates it with the colloquial statement "Look here." Or, to put it like you or I might say it: "Hey! Listen up." Now when does a person talk like that? Most of the time this kind of tone is appropriate for moments when a group of people are not paying attention: your kids are laughing when you are trying to give instructions, the soccer team won't stop shooting goals when you've called them together, or when two people are arguing and you are trying to get them to listen. The words and tones are designed to wake a person up to what is going on. And that is exactly what James wants to do.

His concern is the regular drumbeat of how people talk while they live their lives, and it is remarkably self-centered and self-sufficient. James talks about people who speak very definitively

and presumptuously about what they are going to do. *"You who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit (James 4:13, ESV)."*

This is the way that most of us talk. We look to the future; we look at what has happened in the past. And we make plans, and at a certain level there is nothing wrong with this. Yet James identifies two problems with talking this way:

- **Life is uncertain** - *"Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring" (4:14)*. James tells them what they really know – tomorrow is uncertain. Yet in their talk it seems as if this reality is not even a factor. They may talk about the future but it is really uncertain.
- **Life is vulnerable** – *"What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (4:14)*. James highlights the frailty and the limits of being a human being. Life is far more vulnerable and unstable than what we often realize. He identifies that when you are living your life it feels like you are going to live forever. Yet James reminds them that life is short, limited, and vulnerable.

Now the challenge with these two thoughts is the fact that the uncertainty and vulnerability of life is not new concept. We know, theoretically, that life is uncertain and vulnerable. But over time and without major issues, you can easily forget this fact. You get up, work, go to bed, get up, work, go to bed and this is how you live life day after day. The pattern and predictability feels, at times, like a natural law – a given. And you can become accustomed to the predictability, the normalcy, and the pattern of life – even thinking that this is the way life is supposed to be.

Part of growing up and becoming mature is realizing that despite the predictability, life really hangs by a thin thread. My wife and I were watching a group of young boys ride their bikes on vacation recently. The young boy was riding his bike with no hands, no feet, and looking down at how cool he looked, not realizing that a car was coming right for him. We held our breath as he nearly crashed. And my wife – as the mother of three boys – said something very insightful: "It is a miracle that any boy lives beyond his 10th birthday." Little boys do not comprehend the reality of life's uncertainty and vulnerability.

However the ultimate issue is not just life's uncertainty or vulnerability, it is the fact that the life would teeter completely out of control if it wasn't for God's providential care. James says as much in verse 15: *"Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'*" Now James is not suggesting that you annoyingly add "if the Lord wills" to every statement. Rather he is hitting on the attitude of self-centered over confidence.

James helpfully identifies a core problem with humanity: self-sufficiency. This issue infects every area of our lives and it is hard to navigate. The reason that this is a challenge is that from a theological standpoint, self-sufficiency is the essence of sin – rebelling against our need to obey God. On the other hand and from a cultural standpoint, it is one of the building blocks of the United States of America. Self-reliance and rugged individualism are very much connected to the fundamentals of freedom. And yet we can take a good thing too far. This self-reliance theme is so

much a part of culture that I just want you to realize that self-centered and self-sufficient talk is common. It is part of the cultural air that we breathe.

2. Boasting is the absence of God in our talk

Now what James says next is really remarkable. Look at verse 16 closely: *“As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.”* James tags the former conversation as “boasting.” I find that to be fascinating because at first glance the statements in verse 13 do not necessarily fit our definition of boasting. Usually we think of boasting as talking about oneself in an overly favorable light. The traditional definition of boasting is “to speak with exaggeration and excessive pride, especially about oneself.”¹ James expands our definition.

The Greek words are helpful to understand here because they shed light on what the real problem is. Let’s look at them:

- The word translated as “**boasting**” is the Greek word *kauchaomai*, and it can also mean “to rejoice” or “to glory.” It can be a very positive word when the object of the rejoicing is worthy: God (Rom 2:17), the Lord (1 Cor 1:31), Christ (Phil 3:3), the cross (Gal 6:14), and tribulations (Rom 5:3). The word derives its worth and validity from the object it glories in.
- The second word helps us see why the boasting in James is bad. The word translated as “**arrogance**” is the Greek word *alazon*, and it means “one who makes more of himself than reality justifies or promises more than he can perform.”² In the context of James 4, it is clear that he has in mind arrogance in thinking that one controls the future.

Put these two together. I’ll try to translate 4:16 – “Talking this way is over-confident rejoicing in the future when you have no real ability to make it happen.” And if I put it together with what James said in verse 15 about saying “If the Lord wills”, I come up with this definition: **Boasting is simply talking as if God is not part of the plan.** This really changes things!

You see we often think of boasting as saying something about ourselves that is overly positive. That is clearly wrong. But here is another definition that widens the application. Now boasting is talking as if God is not essential to everything we are doing.

What connects these two definitions is the fact that boasting, at any level, comes from the same source – a self-sufficient attitude. Both expressions fail to get the right perspective on God and us. Pride may express itself by talking as if you are better than others, acting as if you made yourself the way that you are. Or pride may express itself by talking about the future as if life were not entirely dependent upon God. In both cases the issue is God’s role versus ours.

This is not the only place that we find this idea in the Bible.

¹ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/boasting>

² G. Delling, “*alazon*,” in Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1985), I – 226-227.

- Proverbs 27:1 warns us about boasting about tomorrow **because** we don't know what a day will bring. Boasting ignores our real limits.
- 1 John 2:16 warns about the problem of pride in possessions. The danger here is that we would begin to think that we got all this stuff ourselves. Pride in possessions is not so much a love of stuff as it is a love for what stuff says about your success or power or position. Things are emblems and symbols of what we want people to think about us. Like the Greek mythological character called Narcissus who fell in love with his own image in a pond, our stuff is a mirror that reflects back an image. Pride in possessions is thinking that you did this, you bought this, or you earned this!
- Proverbs 27:21 cautions us about praise – *“The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but man is tested by the praise he receives” (NIV)*. What is tested in praise? When someone pays you a compliment the test is whether or not you will take autonomous, Godless credit for what they are commenting on. The test is whether or not you see the gift, the ability, the talent and the success as something that you did autonomously or if it only happened because of the good grace of God. The test is whether the praise will terminate on you or if it will terminate on God.
- There is one more important text in 1 Corinthians 4:6. Paul is very upset that people in the church are taking sides and becoming groupies around him, Apollos, and Peter. To counter that Paul says:

6 I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. 7 For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? (1 Cor 4:6-7, ESV)

The problem in Corinth was that in their divisiveness they had forgotten that all their abilities, opportunities and blessings were from God, so they should not boast.³ Paul makes a very significant and helpful statement that I hope you do not miss: **“What do you have that you did not receive?”** What a huge and life-altering statement! Look around you. Look at your kids, your job, your home, your stuff, the family you were born into, the circumstances that lined up to get you where you are today. Do you think you did that? Look at your personality, your talents, the way your brain thinks, the way you process life. Do you think that you did that?

Certainly you were active. You did some things, a lot of things. But there is a difference from viewing yourself and talking about yourself as being active versus being autonomous. What do you have that you didn't receive? Nothing!

³ ESV Study Bible note on 1 Corinthians 4:7

When I put all of this together, I get a very different view of the expressions of pride in my life and it sobering to think about how easily we can fall into a pattern where we express our self-sufficiency. I think we do this most often in two ways:

1. **Talking arrogantly.** This is active pride. In this way we talk about ourselves that is, frankly, unrealistic. We take credit for more than we should. We compliment ourselves or fish for them from others. We slant stories to be more favorable or positive. We receive praise that we don't deserve. We present ourselves as more than what we should. It is the presence of self that gets us in trouble.
2. **Talking autonomously.** This is passive pride. In this way we just leave out God in the equation. We speak with over confidence. We talk as if we know the future. We plan as if we are the ultimate determiner of our destiny. It is the absence of God that gets us into trouble.

The contrast, of course, to all of this is humility. And a definition of humility that I read recently helped me to really understand the horror of proud, arrogant, God-absent talk:

"I think that the way that you experience humility is by not experiencing it – which is **self-forgetfulness**. The really humble person is not thinking about himself. He should be thinking about two other things: one is how glorious God is, and the other is how he could help the other person..."⁴

Humility then is an awareness and love for God and others that creates a self-forgetfulness. It is living in such a way that self is not part of the equation. It is to be so transfixed with the glory and beauty of God and the importance of others that there is no room for self. John Calvin said that Christianity is first, humility; second, humility; and third, humility.⁵ Christians ought to be the most self-forgetful people on the planet!

I was greatly helped in my understanding of this by seeing humility as forgetting about myself and pride as forgetting about God.

In light of that let me ask you so penetrating questions:

- Do you really know – I mean really know – that everything you have is only because of God's grace to you?
- Do you see your possessions as gifts that God has given you or as the stuff that you've earned?
- Do you talk about your future with a noticeable absence of reverence for God's providential care?
- Do you plan, analyze, and prepare not just to be a good steward but because it makes you feel in control and safe?

⁴ John Piper and Justin Taylor, [The Power of Words and the Wonder of God](#), (Wheaton, Illinois: 2009), 152.

⁵ Ibid.

- Do people's compliments create gratitude in your heart to God or does it just make you feel good?
- Do you live and talk with a level of overconfidence in your plans, your abilities, and your ideas?
- When hard times come do you panic, get angry, or depressed because you are not in control?

Being careful about what we say is not only an issue of what we say about ourselves; it is also an issue of what we fail to say about God. James is not suggesting that you add "If God wills" to everything you say, nor is he demurring good planning. The issue here is the place of self and the place of God in how we talk and what we say. Boasting can be as simple as talking as if you are God.

So that begs the final question as to what we should do about this. And for that we have to look at Romans 3.

3. Boasting is silenced by the gospel

Paul was reflecting on the beauty of the gospel in the third chapter of Romans. Specifically, Paul is recounting the central truth of justification – that God counts me forgiven and as perfectly obedient in Christ. Listen to what he says:

20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. 21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:20-26, ESV).

Let me summarize what he is saying here:

- No human being is justified by works of the law (v 20)
- Real righteousness comes apart from the law through faith in Jesus (v 22)
- Everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's glory (v 23)
- Justification is a gift that God gives and applies based upon the work of Jesus (v 24)
- Through Christ's sacrifice God can be both holy and merciful (v 26)

In other words the condition of humanity is so bad that every one of us by the very nature of who we are have sinned and fallen away from God. The more we try and the more laws we hear, the worse it gets. The only hope – the hope of the Gospel – is that God pours out his wrath for our sins on Jesus and then he grants to us (imputes) Christ's obedience. The good news is that God has

applied your sins to Jesus and he has given you Jesus's righteousness. And what do you do?
Receive it by faith!

Therefore your spiritual standing before God is entirely, completely, and eternally a gift. And not only did you not earn it; you received it despite what you actually deserved. This is not just kindness; this is mercy. This is grace!

Then Paul asks the ultimate question: "When what becomes of our boasting?" (3:27). And the answer is so important. **"It is excluded."** There is no boasting because everything we have, we received. Everything is a gift from the hands of a gracious God. Everything.

For some of you the real problem in your life is not that you talk too much about yourself. That is a problem, but not the problem. The ultimate problem is you don't realize that everything – especially the condition of your own soul – is dependent upon God's graciousness to you. Your self-sufficient, autonomous heart is what is ruining your life, creating proud words out of your mouth, and – to be very frank – damning your soul. The gospel excludes all boasting because there is no self in salvation. And it may be that you finally see it now.

For those of you who know and love this gospel, I would simply ask you if you live and talk in a way that fits with the mercy that you've received. Do you have an elevated view of God? Do you see how great and merciful he is? Do you see that everything you have comes from him? Do you factor God into the equation of your life?

Do you see everything through the lens of self-forgetfulness and God's – sufficiency? Boasting is far more than speaking too highly of yourself; it is the noticeable absence of God in how we talk. Boasting is more than just talking arrogantly; boasting is talking autonomously – about life as if it is certain; the future as if we can make it safe and our gifts as if we created them.

Oh be careful little mouth what you say about yourself while you ignore what should be said about God.

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