

James' Letter

5: Watch Your Mouth

We now move into the third main teaching of James' letter where he points out the power that our words possess and how difficult it is to control what comes out of our mouths. James writes:

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.

And then he goes on to say:

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.

According to Scripture, words are a powerful weapon that can be used to hurt others quickly or subtly. And so, one of the ways that the authenticity of our allegiance to Christ is tested is in how we use the weapon of words.

What comes out of our mouth exposes what resides in our heart.

James will hit on this theme again in chapter four where he talks about the habit of condemning others (4:11-12) and then again in chapter five when he stresses the importance of telling the truth (5:12).

Stumbling in What We Say

Here in chapter three, James describes how our words and the way in which we use them can dominate our lives and the lives of others. The things that we say and how we say them have a way of controlling, consuming and contaminating our character if we aren't careful in harnessing their power.

Like a bit in the mouth of a horse or a tiny rudder that possess the power to control a massive ship, our words possess the power to guide the course of our lives either for good or for evil. We often overlook this fact, but the things that we say and how we say them will directly influence and impact the direction that all of our relationships end up taking.

And as our words possess the power to control the course of our life and our relationships, they also possess the power to destructively consume everything in their path when used carelessly. Like a spark that sets a forest on fire, words that are spoken carelessly rarely, if ever, remain isolated into one particular area or stay contained within the one initial moment that they were spoken. James tells us that they can be a source of destruction that is leveraged by the spiritual forces of hell to cause massive destruction that spreads like wildfire.

There's a popular saying that goes like this, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." It sounds noble, but unfortunately it is simply not true and actually contradicts what Scripture has to say about the power of our words. As Christian parents and adults, let's not patronize our children or anyone else with any nonsense that says words are powerless over us. We have great power to hurt others with our words, and we ourselves will inevitably be hurt by the words of others so let's not pretend any different.

If we truly want to protect and encourage others to overcome the harmfulness of words then let's have honest discussions about the hurt experienced from harmful speech. Telling the lie that *words should never hurt you* can lead those that are hurt to feel as if they are weak or the ones who are in the wrong. They can falsely accuse themselves of being too defensive and then begin the destructive habit of concealing their hearts and covering up their hurt because they are charged with "taking things too seriously."

As followers of Jesus, we need to watch our mouth and realize the power that our words and conversations have on our relationships and our own character.

How many miseries could we bring, how many hearts could we break, how many tears could we cause, how many reputations could we ruin, how much bitterness could we arouse, how much shame could we bring, and how many destructive paths could we lead others down simply through the things we chose to say at any given moment?

We are all one careless comment or conversation away from ruining a relationship or even our entire reputation.

Taming the Tongue

James points out that man has the ability to tame all sorts of wild animals, but yet seems powerless when it comes to taming his own tongue. He describes the tongue as restless and wild. It is always wanting to break free from its cage and say something.

According to James, the tongue is a world of unrighteousness and a restless evil that is full of deadly poison and a desire to run wild. We can be praying and praising God with it in the morning but then gossiping and attacking others with it by the afternoon.

So how are we supposed to be able to control something so reckless?

We need help.

We as corrupted creatures do not possess the ability or the strength to harness the power of our words without the help of the Holy Spirit who transforms the source from which all our words flow — our own hearts.

Jesus taught his disciples this principle when teaching about false teachers. He said:

“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorn-bushes, nor are grapes picked from a

bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”¹

What comes out of our mouth exposes what resides in our heart.

And without the Holy Spirit’s help in transforming our hearts, our words can become a deadly poison that hurts others and contaminates our character.

As corrupted creatures, we naturally gossip, manipulate, lie, exaggerate, belittle, criticize and deceive others by the things that we say. And James points out how we even fall into the disgusting hypocrisy of praising God and cursing others with the same mouth in the same day. This kind of worship of God contaminated with contempt towards others is unacceptable and should end up becoming unnatural behavior for followers of Jesus who are being transformed into new creatures by the work of the Holy Spirit.

We need a new heart full of a passionate love for God and a radical love for others. We need the kind of heart that we were intended to have from the beginning. We need a heart like Jesus.

Just as a salt water pond cannot produce fresh water; a corrupted heart will not produce a pure tongue. And just as salt should never flow from a fresh water spring; neither should reckless comments and conversations flow from a heart like Jesus.

¹ Luke 6:43-45

The apostle Paul encouraged followers of Jesus in Ephesus with these words:

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.²

If we wish to tame our tongue then we must recognize the power that it possesses, repent of using it carelessly or too casually and then ask God to help us. Then we will find ourselves able to harness the power possessed by our words and be able to use that power to glorify God and to bless others.

James' warns us to not speak too quickly lest we stumble in what we say. And so let's avoid approaching moments of confrontation or even just casual conversation without considering our words cautiously and carefully.

None of us have the right to just say whatever we want to say because we will all be held accountable for the words that we choose to use. Therefore, let's heed James' warning and accept responsibility for our words harnessing these small flames to warm the hearts of others instead of burning them down.

² Ephesians 4:29