

James 3:1-12 “Faith and Speech”

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Thesis: Most of us are familiar with the saying, “Sticks and stones can break my bones but words will never hurt me.” Research by the BBC showed that even the stiff-lipped British revealed they experienced more painful memories related to words than physical pain.

Words empower, encourage, edify, but can also cut, crush, and discourage. Words reflect how we see life, what is in our heart, who we represent, and spiritual maturity. There are three precious commodities that you can't get back: time, opportunities, and spoken words. Let's learn the importance of words, how to glorify God, and bless others with our words...

Subject: Faith and your words

Object: Glorify God and bless others with your words

1. The Power of Words [1-6]

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. ² For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he *is* a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. ³ Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may

obey us, and we turn their whole body. ⁴ Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. ⁵ Even so the *tongue* is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! ⁶ And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.

Your words should represent Jesus [1-2]. *My brethren* [1] is a reference to believers that James is warning about the responsibility of teaching the Bible, *let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment* [1]. Bible teachers are held to a high standard for what they say, because they represent God to people and help people to understand doctrine regarding God and man.

For we [2] signals that not only teachers, but all of Jesus' followers are responsible to represent Him well. We *all stumble in many things* including our words. James is not referring to a faux pas or embarrassing remark, or lack of finesse as a public speaker, rather the problem that we all say things that reflect our sin nature and shouldn't be said. *If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body* [2] reveals that your words reflect your spiritual maturity [1:26]. *Perfect* refers to being complete or spiritually mature, rather than absolute flawlessness.

Your words have significant influence [3-6]

A tongue is very small relative to the human body, but like a bit in a horse's mouth can turn the horse, and a small rudder can steer a big ship, a tongue can do great good [3-4]. "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" [Pr. 18:21]. "Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression but a good word makes it glad" [Pr. 12:25]. Our words can encourage, edify, equip, empathize, praise, pray, honor, reveal Jesus, and communicate love.

Conversely, your words can also do great harm [5-6], *See how great a forest a little fire kindles! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.*

Four times, James likens the tongue to *fire*, with the capacity to burn a forest [5]. The tongue *defiles* [6] referring to spotting or staining. Jesus declared, we are not defiled by what goes into us, in the sense of foods that are not kosher, but we are defiled by what comes out of us - the things that we say [Matt. 7:15]. James observes that *the tongue is set on fire by hell* [6]. In essence, if our words dishonor God or His people than the enemy of men's souls is represented, and God is misrepresented.

Slander, gossip, lying, manipulation, provoking to wrath, angry outbursts, profanity, flattery, boasting, and being unduly critical are all words that pull down rather than build up.

As you look back on your life, you can see the influence of parents, teachers, friends, mentors, children, employers, and other people of significance. You realize the value of those that built you up,

the damage of those who tore you down; and that people who don't speak into your life are better than those who hurt, but unfortunately, they don't influence for good. We've also likely discovered that most people, including each of us, tends to be a combination of build-up and tear-down. We all likely want to make progress to become better at building-up and avoid tearing down with our words but how can we do it?

2. The Problem of Words [7-8]

⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. ⁸ But no man can tame the tongue. *It is* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

God must change your heart: mankind has trained and tamed all kinds of wild animals, but not the tongue. We've all heard stories of people taming wild animals and then they turn on their trainers and do great harm, because they were never really tamed and remained wild at heart. On the other hand, God tamed lions for Daniel, tamed a raven to bring food to Elijah, and tamed a great fish for Jonah. Jesus declared, "Out of the abundance of the heart a man speaks" [Matt. 12:34-37]. The answer to a clean mouth isn't brushing your teeth and tongue, but a changed heart.

God must change your tongue: *it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison* [8]. When your tongue is controlled by your flesh or old sin nature it will do more harm than good. Even if you're an amazing kind, moral, encouraging "good" person, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in your life no one will

seek to glorify God or represent Him with their words. When God changes your heart and tongue, your words glorify God and bless others more often.

3. The Paradox of Words [9-12]

With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus, no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

Our words reveal our two natures.

From the same mouth, we bless God and then curse men made in God's image [9-10]. As *brethren* or followers of Christ, *these things out not be so* [10]. Just as a spring brings forth either fresh or salt water, and trees bear fruit according to their kind [11-12], the fruit of our lips should consistently reflect a life surrendered to Jesus. Yet, in practice we all realize that we say things that are contrary to God. This is the paradox.

Our words reveal whether we are controlled by God or the flesh. To the extent that our words more consistently reflect Jesus, the more we are growing in Christ. When our words reflect that our flesh is dominant it reveals our need to yield to Jesus so that our words reflect His nature.

Our words should reflect our true identity. In Ephesians, Paul uses the first three chapters to help believers understand their identity in Christ. Paul then transitions to explain how believers should live in light of their identity in Christ. In the final three chapters, Paul has much to say about a believers' words, but I find the following verses particularly insightful:

“Speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head - Christ...” [Eph. 4:15].

“Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers” [Eph. 4:29].

As we remember our identity in Christ, our speech is more likely to reflect whose we are; and be characterized by love, truth, grace and edification. Thus, our words glorify God and bless others.

Study Guide Qs

Q1. How did the words of significant people in your life build you up, or positively influence you?

Q2. How did the words of significant people in your life tear you down, or negatively influence you?

Q3. How has God changed your heart and tongue through the years?

Q4. How would you like to apply this lesson to your life?

Digging Deeper

1. Here is an interesting article by Michael Hyatt on the influence of words, <https://michaelhyatt.com/how-our-words-impact-others/>

2. Read Ephesians. In the first three chapters, discover your identity in Christ. In the last three chapters, learn how to live for Christ. Consider how many times the exhortations relate to our words. What did you learn about God and your words?