

A Restless Evil, Full of Deadly Poison
James 3:1-12
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Read James 3:1-12

"The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times." (Psalm 12:6)

Introduction

First Church was excited to be sending a summer missions team to help with the kids' programs and work projects being run by an Inner-City Hope ministry. As the van full of teens and adults pulled into the parking lot where they would be staying for the week, the youth pastor reminded them that they would be representing Jesus everywhere they went and in everything they said and did. All the team members nodded, smiled, and then went to claim their bunks.

- The girls picked their bunks carefully, with the popular ones excluding the less popular ones, telling them not to choose the bunks near them.
- The boys made jokes about who would be snoring, who would be least likely to get a girlfriend, and who were the best and worst athletes among them.
- What started as friendly banter with kids from the other youth group turned negative and the other group was offended and stomped off, unwilling to talk about the issue, avoiding each other the rest of the week.
- The work projects were going well early in the week until the team had to wait for supplies. Then the complaining kicked in, questioning the competence of the Inner-City Hope leadership.
- After the first day, one of the volunteer parents blasted the team in several areas, accusing them of being lazy and inconsiderate, failing to point out the positive ways they were acting.
- Later in the week, one of the homeowners overheard some of the high school girls talking about how "ghetto" it was around this neighborhood and was highly offended, letting the project leader know.
- On the second to last night, some of the adult leaders slipped away to eat at a nice restaurant; the leaders who weren't invited complained among themselves that they had been left out.
- By the end of the week, people's nerves were frayed, and even trying to settle on a restaurant on the drive home brought complaining and conflict.

When they got back home, they all said they had a wonderful time, reported back to the church how meaningful it was and how much good they had done... and very few of them ever went on a short-term mission trip again!

That trip didn't actually happen, that was a composite of things that I've seen, heard, and even participated in on the fifteen mission trips that I've participated in. I greatly support short-term mission trips, so many wonderful things happen on them. But we have to acknowledge that even when Christians attempt to do good and bless others, their tongues and their attitudes can undermine their efforts. St. Francis is often quoted as having said, "preach the Gospel at all times, if necessary, use words." To paraphrase that, I would say, "Your words preach your gospel, and it's necessary to use them wisely." Today's passage focuses on how we use our tongues and the great damage we can do with them. Proverbs 18:21: *"Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits."* Do we really believe that words have the power of life and death? James argues that they do and that the tongue is the best measure of Christian maturity.

If you remember back to the end of chapter 1, James laid out three things that constituted worthwhile religion - care for widows and orphans, keeping unstained from the world, and controlling the tongue. Here he doubles down on that last one. The first verses says that

I. Our Words Will Be Judged (v. 1)

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

I don't think that James is talking about all kinds of teachers in this verse, though certainly school teachers, coaches, corporate trainers, etc should think carefully about the impact they have on students. I think he's specifically speaking of the church, and most likely preachers, the ones we call Teaching Elders. Why does James start with this warning to Bible teachers? Wouldn't it have been easier for him to lash out at the crude, profane men in the city who use their tongues for evil, or the politicians who speak sophisticated lies with pleasant smiles? Well, yes, it probably would have been very easy for him to start outside the church. But as with a lot of things, to paraphrase Jesus, we want to take the logs out of our own eyes before we point out the specks in anyone else's eyes.

A man named Robert Murray M'Cheyne was a Scottish preacher in the mid-19th century. He went through schooling and the trials of ordination to become a minister. Before he preached one of his early sermons a woman walked up to him and asked, "Do you have a word from the Lord for us?" That seems like a pretty standard, innocuous question, but M'Cheyne was struck to the core. He realized that these people had actually come to hear from God and that he was the mouthpiece through which they would hear the gospel and God's truth. He trembled realizing how great a weight that put on him. I had a similar shock and reminder that what I do is weightier than I often think of it when someone a while back took a quote that I said in one of my sermons and posted it as a meme on Facebook. Again, not that big a deal, but it just hit me hard; I was used to seeing things that John Piper or R.C. Sproul or somebody who was a big deal get the "meme treatment," it was unsettling to see something that I said. The weight of it just hit me.

An elder in one of my past churches shared his view of preaching with me: if you don't put your all into your sermons, don't even bother getting up. He'd rather you not even get into the pulpit if you're unprepared or not offering God your best. Now, that may actually be crippling for beginning preachers, you have to be bad before you can be good. And every pastor is going to have good and bad weeks, but I appreciate that, it's a good reminder and challenge that we will be judged for what we say and how we approach feeding God's word to people. Jesus warned that "*to whom much is given, of him much will be required*" (Luke 12:48). Notice that James says that "*we who teach will be judged with greater strictness,*" which implies that everyone will be judged for their words, but teachers of the Bible will be judged more strictly.

I don't think that James is trying to limit the number of teachers in the church, I don't think that we've ever had too many pastors. But he does not want people who become pastors or elders or even Sunday School teachers/small group leaders for the wrong reasons, for the prestige, for the ego trip, for the expectations of others. And with all of the New Testament admonitions against false teachers, it was important that teachers be both godly in their speaking and in their lives. There is always the balance that if God has given you a gift, He expects you to use it, don't hide it under a bushel - so if you have the gift of teaching, you should look for ways to exercise that gift. But if you're not called to it, don't do it for the wrong reasons, and certainly don't do it poorly.

If a young man wanted to go into pastoral ministry, my advice would be something along the lines of, "if you can teach the Scriptures as true and the words of God that will change people's lives, and

hold your own life to its standards, then you should pursue ministry. If you will not stand firm in the conviction that the Bible is perfect how it is, and you will bend it and twist it or abandon it and pick and choose what you like, or what fits the culture; please find a different profession!" This is not just for pastors, anyone who is teaching the word of God should be careful about this, even when you teach children. Sometimes there's a thought, "Well, it's just kids I'm teaching, I can wing it." But who needs better instruction in God's word than our children and teens, who are still learning and growing and sorting out what is true and what's not? I'm not saying you need to read Calvin's commentary and spend days working on it, but our kids are worth the effort.

Ultimately, teachers are held to a standard because they use words. Next, we see that

II. Our Tongues Have an Outsized Impact (vv. 2-5a)

² 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. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ 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. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

The USS Eisenhower boat weighs over 91,000 tons, is nearly 1,100 ft. in length, has a 280,000 horsepower engine, carries nearly 100 aircrafts, and holds over 6,000 people on it. All of that is steered by a rudder that is one-tenth of one percent of the ship's size.¹ Control the small piece and you control the whole structure. The tongue is the command center of the body, the steering wheel. If you can control it, James says that you have the ability to control your whole body. Someone who is undisciplined and careless in how they speak to others is most likely undisciplined and careless in trying to curb their behavior in other areas. And the inverse is true, those who speak wisely and thoughtfully are most likely disciplined and godly in other areas of their lives.

James starts this section with "*we all stumble in many ways.*" And then his focus is on our tongues. If we avoid stumbling with our mouths and words, he says we're perfect – not meaning sinless but mature. All that to say that words have extraordinary power. Our premarital counselor told us to never even mention the 'D' word, divorce, in our marriage. Because once you say it, even joking, it becomes a possibility. Your words signal to those around you your inner thoughts, your intentions. James is not saying it's impossible to use your tongue in a controlled way and yet be hiding secret sin; that's very common. But it's a general tip-off to a person's character the way they talk.

Sonship Ministries has a challenge that they call "The Tongue Assignment." For one week, try to keep these five "rules" – each has a negative and a positive aspect:²

- 1) Don't gossip, but do speak good about others
- 2) Don't complain, but do thank God for the things in your life
- 3) Don't make excuses or blame shift, but do own your mistakes and confess your sins
- 4) Don't defend yourself, but rejoice that you're worse than you think
- 5) Don't boast about anything except in your weaknesses

The point is to help you realize how poorly you do in any of those areas, that you can't make much improvement until you realize how short you fall.³ But if you can start replacing the sins of the tongue with words that bring life, see how it completely steers your life in a different trajectory.

¹ Sam Allberry, *James For You*. (USA: GoodBook, 2015), p. 91.

² <https://medium.com/the-mustard-seed/this-assignment-will-cause-you-to-live-on-your-knees-before-the-cross-d549a9534344>

³ Tim Keller's sermon "Lifestyle of Self-Mastery, Part 1" from January 28, 1996 from [The Tim Keller Sermon Archive](#).

We each have to realize that

III. Our Words Have the Potential to do Great Damage (vv. 5b-12)

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

I read of a man in Australia, Shane Wilmott, who taught his pet mouse to surf, starting in the bathtub and then moving to the beach. A rabbit named Bini has been trained to paint on a canvas, brush a person's hair, and play video games.⁴ As James says, we can tame every kind of creature. But the one animal that is almost impossible to be tamed is a human being because of that small red thing in their mouth. Our tongues set things on fire, and verse 6 tells us where that fire comes from: hell. Our tongues are full of deadly poison. You could devastate someone with just a sentence or two aimed at exposing their greatest weakness and humiliating them. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words do the real damage. Maybe you think, "Sometimes our words can get away from us, but really, James, setting on fire the entire course of life, set on fire by hell? Isn't that getting a bit carried away?" But you could point to so many people who have been destroyed by just a sentence. I remember a woman who said her dad told her when she was a young girl that she was "susceptible to getting fat." And it burrowed deep in her mind that she had to stay thin for her dad to love her, she had eating disorders and struggled with her weight, needing years of therapy to undo the impact of that one conversation.

You'd think that PCA pastors and elders would have mastered the art of speaking winsomely and in a godly manner. But, oh man, when some of them get to their keyboards and take on others that they disagree with, it can get ugly. The hymnwriter and pastor, John Newton, said "Of all people who engage in controversy, we, who are called Calvinists, are most expressly bound by our own principles to the exercise of gentleness and moderation." It's not that we can't disagree and express opinions, it's all in how we go about it. Few people are persuaded to another point of view through insult and ridicule.⁵ John Calvin said back in the 16th century: "A man will steer clear of adultery, of stealing, of drunkenness, in fact he will be a shining light of outward observance – and yet will revel in destroying the character of others; under the pretext of zeal ... a diet of smear and censure."⁶

How much does it ruin our witness to the world when we are known as Christians who praise God on Sundays but then run our mouths and say negative things the rest of the week. I remember going to IHOP a long time ago and sitting with some guys from my church. The waitress knew I was a pastor and said something to the effect of, "Those guys go to your church?" They had been rude to her and she was very surprised that they were churchgoing men. I said something like, "Yeah, they need Jesus too, right?" We can so easily damage our witness as believers. If we claim to love God, we have to speak lovingly to His image bearers, to all people, believers and unbelievers.

⁴ <https://listverse.com/2018/04/01/10-amazing-animal-accomplishments/>

⁵ Adapted from Philip Ryan's blog "Where are the Peaceable Presbyters?", www.reformation21.org/blog/where-are-the-peaceable-presbyters

⁶ John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 274.

Patty Griffin is a singer-songwriter with a song called “The Long Ride Home” where a woman is reflecting on her married life after her husband’s funeral. The stanza that kills me is: “Forty years go by with someone laying in your bed / Forty years of things you wish you’d never said / How hard would it have been to say some kinder words instead.” I don’t want to have those kinds of regrets with my wife, with my kids, with anyone. I want to speak words that give life, that build up and don’t tear down, even if I have to die to my own desires and demands.

Verses 10-12 are basically restating Jesus in Matthew 12:33-35- “*Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.*”³⁴ *You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*”³⁵ *The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.*” David Platt tells the story of a man who had an apple tree in his backyard that only produced rotten apples. He really wanted to make a delicious apple pie, so he realized that he needed to stop getting rotten apples and get good healthy ones. So he made a plan and went to the grocery store and bought a big bag of shiny, excellent red apples. Then he got his heavy-duty nail gun and started nailing them to the tree. He fixed his problem, right? That rotten tree now had healthy fruit, right?⁷ That’s not at all a true story, but points to the ridiculous idea that you can just treat the outside of the tree and expect different results. But we all know the problem is deeper, the tree is rotten, its roots are dead, it’s not going to produce good fruit. In the same way, a heart turned away from God will speak evil, a heart content and nourished by God’s word will speak life.

Conclusion

In Isaiah chapter 6, the prophet (Isaiah) found Himself in the presence of the Lord, there’s this amazing description of God on His throne in glory surrounded by angels. Isaiah felt awe and fear. And he didn’t say, “I am unworthy, because my heart is sinful; or because my mind or my will is corrupt,” though he could have said any of those things. No, he said, “*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of **unclean lips** and I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips*” (Isaiah 6:5). And God sent an angel to touch his mouth with burning coal, saying, “*Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.*” (Isaiah 6:7). This is a picture, just an illustration of God’s healing, saving work in our lives. Now, this is not a pattern - God doesn’t save us by putting coal on our lips. But how interesting that Isaiah said his lips were unclean, so God touched them as a way of purifying them. Isaiah goes on in that passage to respond to God’s question, “*Whom shall I send?*” with, “*Here I am, send me.*” And God sent him, giving him instructions to speak to the people the words that He would give him.

Verse 8 says that “*no human being can tame the tongue.*” Then why is James going to such lengths to point out that we need to control our tongues if we ultimately can’t do it? Because we need someone outside ourselves to tame our tongues. We need to face the reality that we are sinful, that our own our hearts are deceitful and our mouths are unclean, out of control, dripping poison, starting fires. But Jesus saves us through His actions and the words of the Gospel that we hear and respond to. Jesus lived a perfect life, never sinning once in all He did or said. He never once shaded the truth or used His words to tear people down in a sinful way. And then He was wrongly convicted on the basis of lies and false accusation. And He willingly died in our place on the cross, so that people of unclean lips and hearts could be saved.

And the saved, redeemed people begin to use our lips to praise God, to glorify Him and acknowledge Him for His greatness. And then God sends us out to speak words of life, to bless those around us, to

⁷ David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in James*. (Nashville: Holman, 2014), p. 78.

build others up in love and encouragement, ultimately pointing them to the great hope they have in the love of God. When we are grateful for our redemption and captured with the beauty and majesty of God, then we can start to obey Ephesians 4:29 – *“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.”* You may not be called to teach, but you are called to use your tongue, your words in the most constructive, God-honoring, kingdom-building way that you can. Amen.

Benediction

Numbers 6:24-26 – *“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.”*