

Powerful Words

James 3:1-12 | Jonathan K. Dodson

Words can be potent. Consider these familiar sayings: Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me—really? She speaks out of both sides of her mouth. Words cut like a knife. The pen is mightier than the sword. This morning we are looking at the power of the tongue, the potency of words, and how to tame them.

Power of the Tongue

“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.” Why would James begin a passage on the tongue with an exhortation to teachers? He tells us why in verse 2: *For we all stumble in many ways.* The reason teachers need to be careful is because we all stumble when we speak in various ways. The word *stumble* ranges in meaning from a misstep to sinful speech. Many indicates not just volume of verbal sins but diversity. Put it together and you’ve got a good reason to start with teachers: *Someone who speaks more than others should be especially cautious with the tongue since they have more opportunities to stumble in speech.* Now note that James does not exclude himself in this warning. He says “we who teach...and we all stumble.” I, and the rest of our elders, and by extension our city group leaders, should be very cautious with our words. The tongue is a very world of sin, on fire by hell itself. We are meant to guide people to Christ. **The tongue is so powerful; it can rip a person to shreds, cynically dismiss the most important truths, and wonderfully lift a person up.** Words are powerful. It is a fearful thing to stand up and say, “This is what God says.” Too many young men desire the to opportunity to teach and preach the church, without an equal or greater desire to pastor the church. **Speaking is for shepherding.** If you’re not pasturing in the church, you’re not qualified to preach to the church (1 Tim 4:16). Teachers bear an enormous responsibility for the spiritual welfare of others (Luke 12:48). There is a great weight and honor to the word. **Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching”** (1 Tim 5:17). This honor and respect should be conferred to all elders, not simply because they speak, but because they speak and lead on behalf of God. The weight of words. James is taking wisdom that comes from above right down into everyday conversation, for everyone: “For *we all* stumble in many ways.” Now he will show just how powerful the tongue is. Two Metaphors show us how powerful the tongue is. They are taken from the Greek context, James knows his culture, so they are a bit out of step for people who don’t travel on horses and ships. First, he compares the tongue to the tiny bits that go in a horses mouth. They have an incredible power over an extraordinarily strong beast, sending it wherever the rider wishes. Small but powerful in its effect. Like the trigger of a gun, the tongue is a tiny instrument that can inflict great harm. “So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.” He compares it to a *great* forest set ablaze by *small* fire. Just take a drive through Bastrop to see all the charred and lifeless trees, two years later, still ruined by what began as a tiny flame. The tongue is a Small instrument that can inflict Great damage. Most of us know this personally. A wound from a spouse, gossip from a friend, a cutting remark from a coworker, or worse, verbal abuse from parents growing up. Some of you wound others on a regular basis with your words. Excessive sarcasm,

critical spirit, defensive redirection. And you have your excuses. I'm not going to censor how I feel; that's inauthentic. I'm going to be honest and true about how I feel. Other people just need to deal with it. They need to get thicker skin. But that's not what I hear James saying. While there is certainly a place for honest conversation about hurts, and the Lord knows those, *James isn't addressing your hurts; he's addressing your words*. You aren't responsible for what others have done to you, *but you are responsible for what you do to others*. Remember the destructive power of the tongue? When you lash out, through FB, Twitter, texts, or in person, you aren't really being *authentic*. You're not being true to your self, not your true self. You're not acting a recipient of God's undeserved mercy and grace. You're not speaking like a new creation in Christ, like a child so well loved by the Father that you have nothing to prove. You're actually acting outside of yourself, being *inauthentic* to your true identity in Christ. When we freely sling criticisms, stinging words, slurs, cynical speech, we are out of step with the Spirit, who creates kind and gentle words. Words are like arrows. They hurt going in, but heal when pulled out. To do this, you need to ask forgiveness *specifically*. Specific apologies can act like a balm on an inflicted wound because they allow forgiveness to seep in. Not "I'm sorry, honey." But "Honey, please forgive me for saying you don't care and that you're selfish. I was angry and unkind, please forgive me." It's amazing how a verbal wound can begin to heal when we do this. I am always impressed how my children respond when I ask them to do this to one another. The offended child will stand there facing their sibling, lingering, waiting, for the specific apology to come, for the arrow to be pulled out. Some of you need to pull some arrows.

Taming the Tongue

That's the power of the tongue, how do we tame it? "[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](#)" (7-8). I guess we should give up? But what was that about faith without works is dead? Works include our speech, what we say to others and how we say it. *Words are works*, that's James point. He's saying don't just be hearers of the word but doers. Be people who press into true religion, not just by caring for the poor, but by keeping your speech unstained from the world. James isn't saying no one can tame the tongue; he's saying that it's incredibly hard to do, but it can and should be done. James selects his metaphor carefully—bridling the tongue, pulling the reins, putting on the breaks in your speech. Are you willing? Or will you remain double-minded, "believing" the gospel while speaking injury? Blessing God and cursing people made in his image? There are a couple of ways to tame the tongue. Some people have to be tamed by life circumstances. They are so stubborn, so proud, so self-important, so cynical that they refuse to restrain their speech. Think of the pushy CEO, the bitter woman, the complaining wife, the sarcastic father who has to learn through the school of hard knocks, has to be humbled by life circumstances, when they lose their job, their spouse, the respect of their children, the affection of their friends. Now think about yourself. Will you have to be humbled by circumstances or will you choose to be humble now, to tame the tongue? The second way to tame the tongue is through effort, discipline, action. Are you opposed to effort because Jesus isn't. He is opposed to earning but demands our effort in pleasing him, honoring him, lining up our actions with our identity in him, [for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks](#). If you are going to have an abundance of grace your words, then you're going to have to an

abundance of grace in your heart. **To tame the tongue, you need to fill the heart with Christ**, the very Word of God, full of truth and grace. We need to expend effort in a Godward direction, to get on your knees before God and know him, to read and meditate on his word to hear from him, to make a deliberate choice to restrain your tongue from evil.

To tame the tongue, you need habits of the heart. Our hearts express our greatest loves through habits. If you love being fit, you exercise regularly. You can't live without it. If you love food, you eat without restraint—dinner, drink, dessert, and another drink. You create habits around your heart longings. You discipline follows your devotion. Now, you may be scared of this kind of devotion. You don't want to become a radical, excessive, after all you're a pretty good guy (and self-righteous). People in the city are scared of being devoted to God, because of what it might cost them, so you don't discipline yourself, you don't expend effort in a Godward direction. What if he asks me to go to Africa, Montréal, to give more time to the church, more income to the poor, more time to study, more effort to be holy, time to disciple others? That kind of fanaticism could get me trouble, taint my image, ruin my life in the city. C. S. Lewis knows your struggle. He describes a voice inside our heads, during church, that urges caution. It tells us to be careful, to not go too far with spiritual things, to keep our heads. We don't want anything to happen that will run up *too big a bill to pay*. This voice of caution tells a truth and a lie. It is true that people can be carried away in religious emotion, a wild, irrational, enthusiasm that actually belittles this life, but that is not your temptation is it? The lie the voice of caution tells is that best protection is in spiritual moderation, to watch our pocketbook, and have a healthy regard for our indulgences. That is false. Our real protection is sought in moral theology, steady rational thinking, good friends and good books, advice of a spiritual director. In Godward habits of the heart. Swimming lessons are better than a lifeline to the shore. Lewis is advocating an abandonment to the Sea, where you can swim freely, and not to wade in and bob holding onto the side. There is more joy to be had by surrendering all to God and plunging into the Sea. The voice of caution would have us dabble, splash, even wade into the shallow end, but not jump in. The wise man lets go of the side and dives into the depths of God's grace. He fills his heart so that he can fill his lips with grace. The tongue has extraordinary power, to hurt yes, but also to heal, to lift up. [Discovery] Powerful words, encouraging words. My goodness, the whole Bible is a word of encouragement over you—forgiven, blessed, accepted, welcomed in Christ, the very power and wisdom of God. The wise person loses his life, jumps in, swallows up the Word of God, gets lost in his Presence, is in touch with his grace. This person, the person who expends effort in being with God, will speak like God. When soaking in grace, you speak with grace. You'll want to tame the tongue, and even when you don't feel like it, you'll try to do it anyway, and when you fail, you'll come back to the same God of grace for forgiveness, who pulls the arrows out puts on the balm. How do we tame the tongue? Look at Christ the wisdom of God, come from above full of good fruit, without doublemindedness, faithful to the end. Follow his example, the wisdom of God. And when we fail? Look at Christ, the power of God, the good and perfect Gift come from above, who took our arrows and gives his forgiving grace. Who rises from the dead to give us resurrection power to live as new creatures, be your new self, tame the tongue, steward the potency of words for one another, and for the Lord of Glory.

