

Tongue Tied
Words Really Matter
Discovering Practical Christianity (James) Series - Pt. 5
Sept 17/18
James 3:1-12

Introduction

- **How much time do we put into thinking through what we say?** – I'm not talking about learning how to speak well and how to communicate effectively, I'm talking about the spirit of our words. How much time do we set aside to reflect on the words that are coming out of our mouths?

Words can RAISE Up or TEAR Down

- **The Biblical way to say it** - Proverbs 18:21a – “Death and life are in the power of the tongue,…”
- **Starting with the Positive** - The passage we have today focuses on the damage that our words can do, but before we get into that I want to share with you the other side as well, the beauty and power of Godly words.
- **The Prophetic Voice (of a Leader)** - I wrote a lesson in 2006 about the Valley of Dry Bones, to share with EMF/KLOVE that I later adapted for WJU (2013) and then Real Life Church (2015). Interestingly I don't believe I have taught it at Bridgeway, maybe I have. **It all hinges on the premise that God wants to speak through His people.** When God speaks through them it's called prophecy. Now, we are going to talk more about prophecy in our next series, but for now just think about it like **God wanting us to speak His words in His way.** It could be when we give godly wisdom advice to a friend at a coffee shop. It could be when we share a thought the Lord gave us at our Missional Community. It could be reading from the Bible in a small group setting or class. Whenever we are sharing the words of God it's prophetic¹.
 - **David Said** - 2 Sa 23:2 – “The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue.”
- **The Power of Words (especially with Christians)** - Every Christian should be sharing God's heart with people². As I said, we'll get into that in our next series. But, for today we are going to talk about the power of words. **I think we believe that what we say is of little consequence.** I think that most of us say whatever comes to mind at the time. Unfortunately, that means that we are saying a lot of things that are not only possibly damaging, but also untrue. Think about the last verbal argument you had with someone. Did you say anything in that altercation that you regret, or that on reflection wasn't entirely accurate or conveying your thoughts the way you should have shared them? Does it matter?

¹ 2 Pe 1:19–21 – “And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

² 1 Co 2:10–13 – “...these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.”
1 Th 2:13 – “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”

Shouldn't everyone just be able to move on and ignore it? Shouldn't we be able to shake off things that people say to us? Maybe, but most of us can't. Truly, I think if we all did a deep dive, all of us can't. Why? Words are really important.

- **The Difference with Christians** – **Christians are even more accountable for their words.** Why? Because we not only have the Holy Spirit living within us but we are ambassadors for heaven. I'm not trying to make you feel guilty, I'm simply emphasizing that our words are not just our own. We don't get to simply say whatever we want. We carry a bigger responsibility. Our words can carry life or death. Truly anyone's can but when you have the Holy Spirit breathing through you, everything takes on a much more significant tone.
- **The Valley of Dry Bones Story** – In Ezekiel, chapter 37, the Bible recounts a super weird story about a prophet who had a **bizarre vision**. God took him out into a valley that was full of scattered dry bones of dead people. After a little tour God asked him a question: "do you think these bones can ever live again?" The prophet replied, 'only You would know that, Sovereign Lord.'
 - **Prophecy to the bones** - Then God said to the prophet, **"Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! 5 This is what the Sovereign LORD says."** And he tells Ezekiel the plan that they can rise to life and Ezekiel is supposed to speak that over them and raise them up.
 - **Ezekiel did it** – So Ezekiel prophesied just like he was commanded and while he was talking there was a rattling and the bones came together and tendons and flesh showed up and there lay a huge field of now human bodies of flesh. But there was no life in them. So, God said, 'prophesy to the breath and call the four winds and bring life into them. So Ezekiel did and they all stood up on their feet and he looked across a vast army.
 - **The Contextual Point** – hopelessness and death in Israel coming to life by the Words of God through the prophets.
 - **The Power** – **God did it THROUGH the WORDS of Ezekiel.** Ezekiel's words made things happen. Why? Because He was being used by God. **The Power of speaking the words of God is that it's God speaking.**
 - **God Could have done it Himself but He didn't want to.** He used Ezekiel to do it. God wants to speak through His children to raise things to life. God loves partnering with His kids.
 - When Jesus fed the 5,000 and the 4,000 He didn't give the bread and fish to the people, He gave it to the disciples to give to the people.
 - When God wanted to bring fire down to shut down Baal worship, He called a man named Elijah to bring it down for Him.
 - When God wanted to restore a nation He sent His prophets.
 - When God wanted to rule Israel He put in His king
 - When God wants to share the gospel, He taps us on the shoulder and points to our neighbor.
 - When God wants to heal someone He gathers us to pray.
 - **God May want to Heal Somebody**
 - **God May Want to Save Somebody**
 - **God May Want to Raise the Dead (Raise the Body of Somebody)**
 - **BUT HE may want to use SOMEBODY and that SOMEBODY IS US!**

- **On the Other Hand...** Words have the power to Destroy...
- **James is a little intense here** – Not sure why he’s so intense. Clearly, it’s a passion for him and he’s seen a lot of damage done. Maybe the church has been having some gossip problems. Maybe someone in the leadership had been harming people with their words. But something must have happened because the word choice that James uses isn’t tame. He’s fired up.
 - **My Passion in Preaching** – That makes me feel like I need to clarify that I’m not mad today. I’m not angry at how people’s words are being used at Bridgeway in this season. Are we great in this area? Meh. But we aren’t in a season of heavy gossip. We walked through that in the pandemic but it’s kind of mellowed out lately. So, hopefully we can have a pre-emptive warning by Pastor James here. But I do try to preach in a way that matches the author’s intensity, so if I get a little loud today...I’m sorry about that. 😊

Lesson

- **The Short-Leashed Instructor**
 - **Teachers are Treated with Greater Accountability**
 - **James 3:1-2** – *“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”* 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.”*
 - **Why would someone want to be a teacher?** – Because they are the people of influence. They get to direct how people see reality. They get to shape and control people’s lives. Some people are drawn to the idea of being influential and a leader. It makes them feel valuable. In the early church, like in any tribe, there were leaders and many of those led through the concept of sharing truth, which made them teachers. It was like Jesus being a rabbi and other Greek orators that would tell people what life was like. So it was popular in both Jewish and Greek cultures to be a teacher. James knew that all sorts of people, with all sorts of motives would want to be one, so he puts in guardrails.
 - **The Accountability of Being a Teacher** – there’s greater accountability for teachers. Why? Influence upon others.
 - **We all stumble in many ways** – We are Spirit-filled-Christians living in a broken world with broken bodies, and living in faith. Of course we are going to struggle with things.
 - **If you can order your words, you can order your life** – James knows that because of how difficult it is to control what we say, that if we could do that somehow, all the rest would be easy in comparison.
- **Tiny Dynamite**
 - **Tongues Are Small but Powerful**
 - **James 3:3-5a** – *“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 directs³. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.”*

³ “In the case of horses and ships the Greek verb literally means, “We make the horses change their direction,” and, “The ships are made to change their course,” i.e., big as they are, we turn them this way and that by such little means.” NICNT Commentary, James Adamson

- **Bits & Rudders** – Small parts that control the whole – [explain bits and rudders] – my story with Emerald.
 - **The Tongue is small but wow, it's a problem!**
- **A Viper's Tongue**
 - **The Tongue is Dangerous**
 - **James 3:5b-8** – “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 members⁴, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast⁵ and bird, of reptile and sea creature⁶, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue⁷. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”
 - **The Chaos and Devastation Fires/Words Can Cause** – James likens it to a forest fire, which we are all VERY familiar with here in Northern California. One tiny spark devastates so much. But at the same time one gossip, one opinion, one news article, can hurt so many people and ruin so many lives.
 - **Power of Words Illustration – the two frogs in the pit (one is deaf)**
 - **The Tongue is evil** – James describes the tongue as “a world of unrighteousness”, “setting the course of our life on fire”, “straining the body”, “restless evil” and “full of poison”. Dang, James, how do you really feel? [Answer why this is so intense]
 - **Set on Fire by Hell** – Interestingly, along the way, James highlights that a tongue that is destructive is set on fire by hell. In what way? Is he saying that our tongues are being used by Satan and his team? Or are they saying that disobedience to God, which ultimately sends us to hell, is what lights it up? OR, is it that he's saying that being in a broken world, with so much pain and dysfunction is that makes us so harmful with our words? Perhaps he's saying all three.
 - **The Terrible Truth**
 - **We Simultaneously Speak Life and Death**
 - **James 3:9-12** – “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.”
 - **The Terrible Truth** – We use our mouths for praising God and cursing people. **Shouldn't that bother us more?**

⁴ “We may find ourselves unsympathetic with James’s attack on that little member, the corporal tongue: such a text as Prov. 11:13 or Sir. 5:9 seems to put the blame fairly on the speaker, not the tongue; but in Hebrew thought the distinction between the man and the guilty member, e.g., tongue or hand, is not so clear, wide, or rigid as with us. To them, my tongue is, as it were, a part of my ego, or an alter ego of me;... The transition from the man to the member is easy to the Hebrew; and even with us we sometimes hear the excuse, even in extreme cases, “My hand slipped,” as if you were not to blame for what your hand did or caused. In our approach to James we should give due weight to this Hebrew custom of thought.” NICNT

⁵ ““Beast” in the NT is used only of undomesticated animals.” NICNT

⁶ “Sea-creatures, here only in the Bible, is common in Greek poetry and late Greek prose.” NICNT

⁷ “His characteristically Hebrew emphasis on the mischief of the corporal tongue is not intended to minimize in any way the guilt of the man who is using it, any more than the versatility of the helm excuses the negligent or even malevolent steersman: the case is not parallel to corporal weakness beyond our control. To James the tongue is not merely a disease.” NICNT Commentary

- **The Two Great Responsibilities of Words – 1.) Representing God well with our words⁸; 2.) Building up His Creation and not hurting those He loves.** On one hand we have the responsibility to use our words wisely since we are representing heaven. But on the other hand we have the responsibility to not hurt people. God made people in His image therefore to tear them down is to tear Him down.
- **The Distortion of Reality –** Just like a spring doesn't give good water and polluted water at the same time and just like trees of one type don't bear other fruit, and just like a saltwater body of water is not also simultaneously fresh, how in the world do our mouths pour forth good and bad? James' point is that **there is something really wrong** with that. It's distorting reality.
- **Honest Talk About Hurtful Words –** Let's cut away all the other noise and talk honestly about why we say mean things. What's going on there? Why do we want to hurt other people? Why does it make us feel better that they suffer too? Why do we want to get them back? Why do we lash out? Why do we gossip, complain about, insult and tear people down?
 - **Sometimes it's jealousy –** when we feel hurt and are torn down, we don't want them to get ahead and do well. We want them to hurt too. It bothers us that they would be able to do whatever they want without consequences and continue thriving while we have to deal with our garbage.
 - **Sometimes its selfishness –** we want more good and when they hinder good stuff happening to us we get mad. When our kids ruin our day by what they do, when our spouse is less than helpful, when our parents say another annoying, nagging thing, we lash out. Why? They are ruining our happiness. It's tough to maintain happiness in a broken world and we are barely getting there ourselves. They are making it harder.
 - **Sometimes its pride –** When someone agitates us and we feel contempt for them, it's because we believe that they don't DESERVE to do that to us. WE DESERVE to feel better. How dare they impact us negatively and make our lives harder.
 - **Sometimes it's the overflow of woundedness –** have you heard the phrase, '*hurt people, hurt people*'? It's true. We have so much pain that we can't handle any more. It's like being bruised on your arm and someone bumps into it and causes more pain on top of the ache you already had. We lash out as a defense mechanism to emotionally bark them back away from us. [the wounded animal syndrome]
 - **So much anger comes from undealt with pain –** if you are an angry person, whether anyone sees it or you keep it internal, take some time alone and reflect on why you are so angry. What's the reason. You know that you FEEL angry, but why? Usually if you dig deep enough you will find that you are sad and disappointed with someone or something. If we are ever going to be less angry, we need to deal with that.

⁸ Matthew 12:36 – giving an answer for every idle word.

- **We have a responsibility as Christians to deal with our brokenness.** We cannot just let it fester and bleed out on other people. We need to bring it to the feet of Jesus and let Him heal it.

Conclusion

- **Words Matter, a LOT!**
- **Interactive Prayer Time**
 - Asking forgiveness for the words that we have said
 - Getting cleansing for the words spoken to us and over us.