

James IRL, Say What? James 3:1-12, 10/29/23

Riddle: What is incredibly sharp yet can't even cut through paper, can heal without medical intervention, and has even toppled a powerful ruler without using a single weapon? Answer? Well it's small, wiggly and resides behind your teeth, it's the tongue. And it's the subject of James 3 today. If you are tracking with us you may recall that James has already introduced the tongue in **1:26 Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.** Remember what James has been doing throughout this letter, showing us the difference between a mere profession of faith and a real possession of faith in Jesus¹, that was last week's message...those who possess real faith in Jesus ought to evidence their faith in real life by how they use their tongue, their speech. So today from James we are going to see **3 Warnings about the Tongue** and then talk practically about how to heed James' warnings in real life. Now I often tell you that all these sermons, to varying degrees I first need to preach to myself, because I'm a fellow struggler like you...never let the microphone or the title fool you into thinking I have some exemption from that. This message I specifically prepared for myself because often, those who have been gifted with speaking skills- there comes with that gift a shadow side, a danger of using that gift selfishly, or carelessly, or out of anger to hurt. So this message is a warning to your pastor (who is also a husband and a father). But I suspect in preaching to myself this morning, that you all will benefit because people speak an average 10,000 words a day- that's 4 chapters in a novel every day- so how we use our tongue matters to God, and matters to the people in your life.

Warning #1 The Tongue Is Disproportionally Powerful.

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ² We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

³ *When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.*

⁵ *Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.* Notice James starts his warning about our speech by addressing teachers. *Not many of you should become teachers....* This is a good place to start with this warning not only because teachers use more words than most people. But also because those who teach, and I believe James is speaking particularly about teachers of the Word of God, exercise authority, they are in positions where their words can hold tremendous influence over the lives of others. Occasionally, I will have someone from years ago reach out to me and say, Pastor Nate, you may not remember me, but you gave a message and you said this particular thing (and I often don't even remember specifically saying that) and it changed the course of my life in these ways. Wow...words, especially words of those in positions of authority, are disproportionately powerful. We likely have no idea the ripple effect of the words

¹ Phrasing from Tim Keller sermon on James 3, 1997.

we speak in other's lives, for good or bad. Consider the authority you hold, your sphere of influence: schoolteachers, counselors, mentors, coach, managers, subject matter experts, if you are a husband or wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, a parent, you're popular at school? You are good on the sports field? Whatever your influence is: that is a stewardship, a responsibility and you are accountable to God for how you use it, so James says think twice before you jump into a role of authority- you will be judged more strictly. And this is true both eternally, God holds us accountable, something I take seriously, but we will also be judged by others based on what we say.

James goes on to use some illustrations from everyday life to demonstrate **the disproportionate power of our words**. James talks about the horse bit, any horse people here? If you are, you know what this is, the rest of us like me before this sermon thought these were ancient handcuffs for children...but this is a horse bit. This small device can take an enormously powerful and scary animal, they are just all muscle...you ever look a horse in their faces? Their eyes tell me- I will kick you across the room if you mess with me... and this little contraption directs the entire animal where to go. This little muscle can direct our entire lives- getting us into and out of trouble.

In case that illustration didn't do it for you, James gives another- the rutter. **USS Eisenhower**- 91k tons, 280k horsepower, carries 100 planes. Rudder is a 10th of 1% of the ships size, and yet it controls the entire navigational direction of the ship. The tongue is less than half 1% of our bodyweight, and yet it has a massively disproportionate impact on the direction and control of our lives and the lives of others. A bit, a rudder, James says just in case you aren't getting the point, one more: In vs 5, James compares the tongue to a flame. Massive, destructive fires in our world are started by the smallest of flames. We all saw this illustrated in **Lahaina, Maui** didn't we? They believe on August 8th it all started with one severed power line, a single spark on some dry grass. And yet within a couple days we were all watching horrifying videos of people abandoning their cars swimming out into the Pacific Ocean to avoid the growing inferno. It is the worst natural disaster in the state's history. Lives lost. Hundreds injured. Thousands of homes, destroyed. All of that *from one spark*. The tongue is like that, James says. Think about the destruction that has come into the world through words. It's been said that 125 people died for each word of Adolf Hitler's manifesto, *Mein Kampf*. We know about the horror of the holocaust ... but we often don't think about how it all began with *words*, not with weapons.² On the other hand look at the healing power of the words from MLK Jr.'s *I have a dream* speech as just one of many examples.

Proverbs 18:21 says the power of death and life are in the tongue. Every child that comes into this world is like an empty canvas, and throughout their lives, words spoken to you or about you paint on that empty canvas that form a portrait of who we believe we are. Can you think of words that someone said to you that painted on the canvas of your life either in a way that brought life or in a way that created pain or damage? Maybe a parent or coach or teacher who really believed in you and saw something in you (a talent, a gift, or character trait) that no one

² Adapted from JD Greear message on James 3, <https://summitchurch.com/message/its-hard-to-lick-your-tongue>

else saw that has shaped the trajectory of your life, maybe even the career you are in now? Or maybe it was something painful or damaging that has caused you to believe a lie about yourself, or lead to depression, self-destruction of some kind, put you in counseling. Your words have a disproportionately powerful affect, for life or death.

Warning #2 The Tongue is Tough to Tame

⁶ *The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*

⁷ *All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

Wow, these are strong words aren't they? James is using some colorful, hyperbolic language to point out a truth: one of humanity's greatest challenges is taming the tongue. We can tame all kinds of creatures... True story: 1938 in Amarillo Texas a prisoner in solitary confinement trained a cockroach to smuggle cigarettes under his cell door from another prisoner. [Picture] He would whistle tie the cigarette to the cockroach's back, and then send him on his mission back to the prisoner in solitary confinement...you can't make this stuff up.³

[Warning #2] We have trained cockroaches to carry smokes...and yet a former leader of the free world can't train himself to not say something foolish on social media. We can think of famous/influential people whose careless words got them cancelled...but it's not just famous people. James says, that thing in your mouth, which is set on fire by hell; it would be easier to tame a spitting cobra than it would be that tongue of yours. It is full of deadly poison and strikes at the most inopportune times. Some of you may have lost a job or a promotion because of careless words. If your marriage has fallen apart, chances are it was due, in large part, to words. I once heard the marriage researcher, John Gottman, say that when there are 10 or more critical comments for every 100 comments in that relationship, it is the greatest predictor of divorce. Training the tongue is hard even in these less extreme situations. Have you ever thought, I'm just going to keep my mouth shut...and then you suddenly find yourself entering an argument and having to apologize an hour later? Or think everyone knows you are just playing around and you aren't serious but others are offended? Shannan will sometimes remind me, just because you think it's funny, doesn't mean you have to say it. Why is the tongue so hard to tame? This leads us to James **Warning #3 The Tongue Reveals our Heart.**

⁹ *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.*

¹¹ *Can both fresh water and saltwater flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*

What these illustrations show us is the hypocrisy, the irony of our words- how is it that we can be worshipping the Lord on a Sunday, be so encouraged and filled up and saying to each other,

³ https://www.weirduniverse.net/blog/comments/cockroach_trained_to_carry_cigarettes

“Be blessed.” “God is good all the time, and all the time God is good.” And then get into our cars and start yelling about the traffic in front of us, or get in a fight with our spouse or sibling and say something hurtful? It shouldn’t be, and yet it sometimes is. Why is that?

I used to find it funny when I was a kid when, during a checkup with the family doctor he would tell me to stick out my tongue, when I was always told not to stick out my tongue. And then the doctor would grab it and look around in there. He seemed to be able to tell a great deal about my health by looking into my mouth. According to James, your words are the single best indicator of the spiritual health of your heart. A tongue problem is ultimately a heart problem.

James is saying the same thing as Jesus, **Matthew 12:34 *The mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart.*** Have you ever said something mean to someone, name call them...and later you’re embarrassed by it, and you go back to apologize, you always go back and say, “I didn’t really mean that. That’s not really me.” But in the moment, you did mean it and it was you, because if it wasn’t really you, who was it? No, the truth is that you’re frustrated at yourself for not filtering it, but just because you successfully filter it doesn’t mean it’s not still in your heart somewhere. What are your words revealing about your heart that needs to be addressed?

Warning #1 The Tongue Is Disproportionally Powerful

Warning #2 The Tongue is Tough to Tame

Warning #3 The Tongue Reveals our Heart

How do we heed these warnings practically in real life? Let me give you just one practice with each of these warnings. **Because the Tongue is disproportionately powerful, we should be slow to speak.** This is counsel straight from James himself, James 1:19. **Proverbs 10:19 *In many words sin is not lacking.*** We all know people who just talk too much, conversations are one sided...if you don’t know someone like that, it’s probably you. Abraham Lincoln famously had a drawer full of letters he regarded as the greatest letters he had ever penned, but never sent. When someone would make him mad, he would promptly sit down and write a letter then he’d put it in a drawer and wait until his anger cooled, and then he’d re-read it and inevitably he’d change it or just not send it all. He said thank God I never sent most of these letters, because his presidency would have been so much different if he had.⁴

Before you speak, or send that email or social media comment, ask yourself, does this need to be said? Do I really need to have the last word? Have I really heard what my wife or husband or child or coworker has said? Does this add anything important to the conversation? Maybe what you need to do is go into a season of listening and asking other people questions. Maybe you need to go into a season of not speaking your mind. Especially if you know that you hold influence in someone else’s life, ask yourself- am I sure that what I am about to say is true? Is this word really constructive criticism or is it just criticism? Helpful? Wise? Encouraging? Be slow to speak.

⁴ Thanks again JD Greear.

Because the Tongue is Tough to Tame, sow encouraging words. James just a few verses later says ¹⁸ *Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.* James says, when we sow peaceful words, we reap a harvest of righteousness. Jesus is the ultimate sower of encouraging words. *John 6:68 To whom else shall we go? Who else have the words that bring eternal life?* Jesus' words sown into our lives reap eternal life. I am the way, truth and the life...

When we speak encouragement into other people's lives we sow, we plant seeds that can reap life. Who is someone in your life that needs encouraging words sown into their lives? Maybe it is someone the Spirit has convicted you that you have been critical toward. Here's a challenge every day this week sow encouragement into their lives. Write an encouraging note, notice a strength or character quality. Let them know you prayed for them. Tell them you are thankful for them in your life. See how words sown produce life.

We not only need to sow words of life in other people, we need to speak them to ourselves. If you have been hurt by powerful words spoken to you and have believed lies about yourself, you need to speak true, encouraging words that God says about you. If things people have said or not said to you have caused you to believe that no one sees you or would care about you, sow the words of the Psalmist that you are fearfully and wonderfully made, and that you are chosen by God, his workmanship for good works. If someone has told you that you are unlovable, sow the words of Romans 8:39 *nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* If someone painted on the canvas of your life that it's too late for you because of your past. You paint over the canvas 2 Corinthians 5:17 *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.* Sow encouraging words.

Because the Tongue Reveals our Heart, we need a renewed heart. When James uses the illustration of saltwater and freshwater in verse 11, he may have in mind a story from Exodus 15. Moses and the children of Israel are wandering through the desert, they are thirsty; their water supply has all but dried up, and they come upon an oasis! At last, here is water! So they plunge into the water begin to drink, but immediately spit it out because the water was bitter. And in despair they cry out, "What are we going to do?" God tells Moses to have them cut down a tree and throw it in the water, and when they do that, it says, "the bitter waters became sweet." This story of deliverance, as well as the larger story of deliverance in the Exodus account, all point to the ultimate deliverance of Jesus Christ. God took another tree, the wood of the cross where Jesus died, and plunged it into the bitter waters of our hearts where sin and evil dwells, and in fact separate us from a holy God, and through his sacrifice, our bitter hearts can be cleansed from the inside out. The Bible says we are given a new heart, one that longs to please God and can, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can learn to tame our tongue. Will we do this perfectly, no...it's a daily battle, but one that is worth fighting, and one where there is victory when we humble ourselves, and there is forgiveness when we fail. And one day, when Jesus returns- our tongues will be completely transformed because the old heart, the old tongue and all its wild and poisonous tendencies will be gone forever- replaced with praises to our God forever and ever. Until that day let's pray that God will for our tongues be done on earth as it is in heaven.