



What Did You Say?!
James 3

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In the summer of 2011, the Austin area had endured a year-long drought. On Labor Day weekend of that year, Tropical Storm Lee blew in from the gulf with 30-40 mph winds. The winds snapped tree limbs and downed power lines. It is believed that sparks from power lines set dry brush on fire and caused the devastating Bastrop County fires. The fire began on September 4 and was not officially extinguished until October 29. It was the worst fire in Texas history.

Over 34,000 acres were burned, over 1,600 homes were destroyed totaling \$325 million in damage, and two people were killed in the fire. One of those killed was a fireman. I met his partner the day after. The two men had been fighting the fire over 24 hours. At one point, they were trapped. Their firetruck was engulfed in flames. One fireman got out, but his buddy did not. He told me this story while waiting in line for assistance because he had lost his home in the fire.

One spark caused all that destruction.

In the New Testament, James, the brother of Jesus, wrote about another kind of fire. “What a great forest is set on fire by a small spark,” and then he said, “the tongue is such a fire” (James 3:5-6). A single spark can ignite a roaring fire causing devastation and destruction. And so can a single word. Words have power. James also said, “From the same mouth come both blessing and cursing” (James 3:10). We can use words to insult or inspire, to build up or tear down, to criticize or celebrate. We can use words to blame, accuse, and attack or we can use words to comfort, love, and bless. Words have power.

King Solomon said, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21, NAS). Words can bless and words can wound.

I’ve never been beaten up physically. No one has ever punched me in the face. But I have been punched with words. And that’s probably true for you too. Some of the most painful moments in life are the result of words. As Solomon said, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21).

James agreed. “From the same mouth come both blessing and cursing” (James 3:10). And Jesus explained why. “For the mouth speaks from that which fills the heart” (Matthew 12:34, NAS). Words are not just a reaction to people or circumstances, words reveal what’s on the inside. Words reveal our character, our spiritual maturity, our emotional state, and our personal insecurity. Words are inseparable from the person. You are the choice of your words and the tone you use. “For the mouth speaks from that which fills the heart.” Words always express what’s really in the heart. Therefore, *what shapes your heart shapes what you say*.

THE WARNING ABOUT WORDS

James wrote this letter to Jews who were new to the Christian faith, and who were also being persecuted. So, he wrote this letter to encourage them to persevere and to be faithful. He

also found it important to talk about the power of the tongue, to warn people about the words they use.

His first warning was to teachers. “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1, NIV). James reminds teachers of the word of God that they will be held accountable for what they teach. As a teacher of the word of God, I will be “judged more strictly.” Therefore, I must focus more on pleasing God than pleasing people. Pray for me, and all who teach, that we would be faithful to this book and faithful to Him.

Then James applies his warning to everyone. “We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who does not stumble in what they say is perfect, able to bridle their whole body as well” (James 3:2). All of us sin with words. Whether it’s lying or profanity. And Jesus said, “The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart” (Luke 6:45, NAS). And then He also added this. “Every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment” (Matthew 12:34-37, NAS). All of us sin with our words. That’s why King Solomon gave this advice in Proverbs. “He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles” (Proverbs 21:23, NAS).¹

Then James gave 3 examples of the power of the tongue. “When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 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. 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” (James 3:3-5, NIV).

James is talking about the power of small things. We see it in nature. The ant has the power to carry 100x its body weight. We see it in technology. This computer chip is smaller than a thumbnail. There is power in small things. A powerful horse can be controlled by a bit in its mouth. A massive ship can be steered by a small rudder. A raging forest fire can ignite from a single spark.

James was so vivid with his warning. “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 ... It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:6, 8, NIV). The tongue has so much potential for sin – meanness, profanity, dishonesty. Words just spill out sometimes, and we’re even surprised at some of the things that we say. Where do those words come from? Jesus said, “For the mouth speaks from that which fills the heart.” Words always express what’s really in the heart. Words are not just a reaction to people or circumstances, words reveal what’s on the inside. Words reveal our character, our spiritual maturity, our emotional state, and our personal insecurity. The words you speak are inseparable from the person you are.

James goes to imply that it is impossible to tame the tongue. Verse 7, “All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue” (James 3:7-8, NIV). Almost every animal on the planet has been tamed. Circus lions and tigers, dolphins at Sea World, squirrels that can ski, talking birds, and my favorite heroes are military and police dogs. When Kathy and I went to Thailand a few years ago, we went

to a show and saw elephants playing soccer, and one elephant even had a paintbrush in his trunk and painted a picture of a tree. Almost every animal on the planet can be trained, except cats.

Animals can be trained to do amazing things, but human beings cannot tame the tongue.

In verse 9, James writes, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God. Out of the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brothers, **this should not be**. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water” (James 3:9-12).

Inconsistency, duplicity, hypocrisy. “This should not be.”

Remember the question I’ve been asking each week. I believe it’s the question James is challenging us to ask. **Does the life I live reflect the faith I profess?** And from this chapter, do the words I speak reflect the faith I profess? Do the words I speak reflect a heart where Christ lives?

Jesus said it’s a matter of the heart. “For the mouth speaks from that which fills the heart” (Matthew 12:34, NAS). “Whatever is in your heart determines what you say” (NLT). Words are not just a reaction to people or circumstances, words reveal what’s on the inside. Words reveal our character, our spiritual maturity, our emotional state, and our personal insecurity. The words you use are inseparable from the person you are. “For the mouth speaks from that which fills the heart.”

Paul David Tripp writes about this battle within. “Beneath the war of words, people are not my problem. Situations are not my problem. Circumstances are not my problem. **My problem is my heart** ... Sin does something terrible to me ... Sin makes me obsessed with my wants, my needs, my feelings ... Sin causes me to love me more than anything else ... It causes me to be obsessed with what I want, how I want it, when I want it, why I want it, where I want it ... Sin makes my life little more than ‘I want, I want, I want, I want, I want’ ... (and because of that) my heart is filled with entitlement.”²

USING WORDS AS WEAPONS

And when emotions flair up, we use words as weapons. Solomon said, “Rash words are like sword thrusts” (Proverbs 12:18, ESV). His father David said that words are like a “sharp razor” (Psalm 52:2, NAS).

Some things we say are accidental. Like the time Kathy and I were celebrating our anniversary at a quaint French restaurant, and I leaned over during our candlelight dinner and said, “Honey, you sure look good when the lights are low.” I thought I was being romantic, but she took it as me saying she looks better in the dark!

And we’ve heard the saying, “Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt you.” But they do! “Rash words are like sword thrusts.” Words are like a “sharp razor.” And sometimes, often times, what we say is intentional. We mean to jab. We mean to wound. Once the toothpaste is out of the tube, you can’t get it back in. Once words are spoken, they cannot be unheard.

One woman wrote about the day she and her husband used words as weapons.³

“We sat across the room from one another. He sat in his leather chair, and I sat on our worn sofa. We looked past each other. We had just completed a twenty-minute screaming match. *We used our words as weapons*. We were vicious. We said the meanest and coldest things to each other. We’d been married for years and knew exactly what to say to hurt each other and pull the scab off old wounds. But this time, I knew we would never be the same. But he deserved it. And he thought I deserved it. So we sat there, sitting just feet apart and feeling a million miles of separation. What happened? How did we get to this point? How can you hurt someone, hurt someone so badly, that you love? I looked at him. He saw the tears running down my face. And I knew he was waiting for me to apologize. But not this time. Never again.”

When someone attacks us or blames us, when someone criticizes or disrespects us, we use words as weapons. We use words in retaliation and in self-defense. But even when some great principle is not at stake or our character is not being attacked, we still use words as weapons when someone annoys us; whether that’s someone at work, in our family, or someone who cuts us off in traffic.

“Out of the same mouth come both blessing and cursing ... and this should not be” (James 3:10).

WAYS WE SIN WITH WORDS

I want us to take an honest look at ways we sin with words. As I walk through this list, let the Holy Spirit identify the one or ones with which you struggle.

- dishonesty – shading the truth when it’s to our advantage
- gossip – talking about people behind their back
- slander – spreading negative things about someone
- profanity – crude language
- impurity – lewd, indecent, sexual talk
- harshness – being intimidating or mean-spirited
- anger – attacking with the intent of wounding
- bitterness – edgy words that come from our own wounds or unhappiness
- insult – demeaning or putting others down
- sarcasm – making fun of or mocking someone
- passivity – withdrawing and not saying anything
- criticism – always pointing out what someone else is doing wrong
- complaining – always voicing dissatisfaction
- argumentative – the need to be right and to win the issue
- demanding – controlling and insisting that others do what we want

- boasting – whether overt or subtle, trying to be important
- exaggeration – inflating the truth to make us look better

This is how we sin with words. Do you struggle with any of these? If you don't know, I'm sure someone in your family will be glad to tell you.

WAYS TO WIN WITH WORDS

Those are ways we sin with words, so what are the ways we can win with words?

In studying for this message, I found list after list telling us how to control what we say. There were 7 ways to do this and 8 ways not to do that. It was all good advice. But the problem is that no one can remember a list in the heat of an argument. A list is useless when emotion is stirred up.

The only way to win with words is to let God shape your heart. We can try harder to hold our tongues. We can promise not to yell next time. But I'd don't think willpower is going to help. The only way to tame your tongue is to let God shape your heart.

Solomon said, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1, NAS). To do that you have to have a gentle heart. Paul said, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Ephesians 4:29, NIV). To do that you have to have a pure heart. Paul also said, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:31-32, NIV). To do that you have to have a compassionate and forgiving heart.

Words always reveal what's in your heart. A hard heart intimidates. A wounded heart blames. An insecure heart controls. A jealous heart accuses. A prideful heart attacks. An arrogant heart boasts. A tired heart complains. It's a heart thing. It's always a heart thing.

And the only cure is the Spirit-filled life. The only way to control our words is to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. Paul said, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). If the Holy Spirit is in you, these things will flow from you ... especially in what you say and how you treat those around you.

I believe God wants us to do something from what He has taught us this morning. So here's a heart exercise. You can remember it with A-B-C. ***A is for apologize.*** Who do you need to apologize to? Who did you hurt with your words? Then go apologize. ***B is for bless.*** Think of how you can use your words to bless those around you. How you can express appreciation to your wife. How you can tell your kids that you are proud of them. How you can tell your parents that you love them. How you can encourage a friend or co-worker. Think of how you can bless those around you. And ***C is for control.*** Ask God to help you control your tongue. All of us need His help. So ask Him to shape your heart, because what shapes your heart shapes what you say.

NOTES

¹ See also Psalm 34:13 and Psalm 141:3.

² Paul David Tripp, “War of Words: Getting to the Heart for God’s Sake,” chapter one from *The Power of Words and the Wonder of God*, John Piper and Justin Taylor, pages 32-33.

³ Avalon Hendricks, “We Used Our Words As Weapons.”