

Series: James

Sermon: James 3 - Let My Words Be Life

James 3:2-12

We all make many mistakes. If anyone does not make a mistake with his tongue by saying the wrong things, he is a perfect man. It shows he is able to make his body do what he wants it to do. 3 We make a horse go wherever we want it to go by a small bit in its mouth. We turn its whole body by this. 4 Sailing ships are driven by strong winds. But a small rudder turns a large ship whatever way the man at the wheel wants the ship to go.

5 The tongue is also a small part of the body, but it can speak big things. See how a very small fire can set many trees on fire. 6 The tongue is a fire. It is full of wrong. It poisons the whole body. The tongue sets our whole lives on fire with a fire that comes from hell. 7 Men can make all kinds of animals and birds and fish and snakes do what they want them to do. 8 But no man can make his tongue say what he wants it to say. It is sinful and does not rest. It is full of poison that kills. 9 With our tongue we give thanks to our Father in heaven. And with our tongue we speak bad words against men who are made like God. 10 Giving thanks and speaking bad words come from the same mouth. My Christian brothers, this is not right! 11 Does a well of water give good water and bad water from the same place? 12 Can a fig tree give olives or can a grape-vine give figs? A well does not give both good water and bad water.

Sermon:

For the record, Saddam Hussein DID have a Weapon of Mass Destruction. I have one, and so does everybody here. It's the tongue, a powerful weapon that can hurt or heal. This month we are working our way through the New Testament book of James, the focus of which is to encourage God's people to *act* like God's people. James is a study in the pursuit of holiness. For James, a faith that does not produce real life change is worthless. More than any other book in the New Testament, James shines a spotlight on the necessity for us, as believers, to act in accordance with our faith. The entire book focuses on the idea that a life of faith impacts every area of our lives and affects how we interact with other people. How well do your actions mirror the faith you proclaim? Our scripture today is from James chapter three, where the focus is the tongue, or more accurately, our words. James is deeply concerned about the integrity of speech. What comes out of our mouths is morally and ethically a matter of great importance.

We live in a world where bullying and road rage are every day events, but acts of kindness make national news. As people of faith, now more than ever before, we must think deeply before we speak, speak kindly, and act honorably. As Christians we think this should come naturally. So why is it so hard?

Words are powerful. Even when we are not face to face we are constantly "speaking" on Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, YouTube, Tumblr, and the list goes on. There have never been more opportunities for us to set the world on fire, to unleash our own personal weapon of mass destruction on the world. Words can build up, encourage, and motivate, but they can also hurt and leave lasting scars. When I was in the first grade, I was as wide as I was tall. I had 3 chins and coke-bottle end glasses. My mom was convinced that my naturally curly hair really needed a

home permanent. When I came home from school in tears from the teasing and name calling, my parents would say "sticks and stones can break your bones but names can never hurt you." What a lie THAT was!

Did you know that words can change your brain? Physically, change your brain. Scientists have discovered that hostile language sends alarms to the brain and shuts down the logic and reasoning centers. In fact, if we put one of you into a Functional MRI, a type of imaging machine that measures oxygen and blood flow in the brain, and flashed the word "NO" in front of you for just one second, you would see a sudden release of a whole wave of stress-producing hormones and neurotransmitters. Your normal brain functions would be disrupted immediately,

stopping normal processes and impairing logic, language processing and communication. The more you focus on negative words and thoughts, the more you can actually damage important parts of your brain that regulate your memory, feelings and emotions. The same thing happens when you listen to arguments on the radio or TV, or see a violent scene in a movie. That particular part of your brain can't tell the difference between fantasy and fact – it assumes that a real danger exists in your world. Negative thinking is self-perpetuating; the more you are exposed to it, your own or other people's, the more your brain will generate negative thoughts and feelings. And the more you engage in negative dialogue, the more difficult it is to stop.

Does the opposite work in the same way? Can positive words change you as well? Research points in that direction. Positive and optimistic thoughts stimulate frontal lobe activity. Positive words like "peace" and "love" can strengthen areas in your brain and promote cognitive functions. The longer you concentrate on positive words, the more it begins to affect other areas of the brain. Functions in the part of your brain responsible for language processing start to change, which changes your perception of yourself and the people around you. Over time, positive words can change the way you perceive reality.

James might not have known the scientific explanation, but he understood the dangers posed by words spoken carelessly, or worse, with bad intention. Basic human nature has not changed; our tongues are still the spark that causes forest fires in our lives. We praise our Lord with the same mouth with which we belittle and slander our fellow humans who are made in the image of God.

So how do we tame these slippery little tongues of ours? How do we change our words, our thoughts? How do we use that slimy little rudder to steer ourselves into a life where our words mirror our faith?

In Chapter 3, James goes on a rant about the uncontrollable nature of the human tongue. Verse 8 makes it clear: "No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." Earlier, in Chapter 1, James says that we should be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. In other words, think before you speak. If you can control what you say, you can control what you do – that is how greatly our speech influences our lives. Cultivating our tongue's potential for good must become a daily practice.

Based on the admonitions we find in James Chapter 3, here are a few reminders that will help all of us make our words reflect our faith:

Develop an attitude of gratitude. It is easy to get into a habit of complaining about what we don't like about our lives. We complain about our spouses, our jobs, our kids. The good news is that this habit can be broken by just taking a moment and giving thanks to God for the things that are going wrong. The first thing James tells us in Chapter 1 is to "Consider it pure joy... whenever you face trials of many kinds..." I don't want to gloss over the fact that bad things happen; we need to acknowledge pain and hurt and deal with it. But we all have a lot to be thankful for. Eight years ago this month my husband Ron was diagnosed with an aggressive form of throat cancer. It was at stage 4, and the doctors would not give me any kind of hope for his survival. Every night, before I went to sleep, I forced myself to count my blessings. It was not easy. At first I couldn't really think of any, that is how awful those days were. Eventually the list was pretty long. What I discovered was that this practice made a difference in how I was able to face the next day. It gave me the strength I needed to deal with my complicated and traumatic world. Ron lived. I still count my blessing every night, one of which is the blessing of still having him around.

We need to read God's word daily. Who is familiar with the acronym GIGO? It is computer world lingo that means Garbage In, Garbage Out. The quality of the input determines the quality of the output. We know that a constant diet of pizza and ice cream has repercussions on our bodies, but we don't always think about the effect of violence, negativity, and just plain mental junk food on our minds and hearts. A few moments of reading scripture every day can have an amazing cleansing effect. Where does a busy person fit this in, anyway? And it's a big book, where do you start? The same electronic devices that bring us the daily update on the Kardashians can deliver daily devotions. Yes, there is an app for that! The Upper Room is a quick solution; we have copies

in the lobby, right outside Lesli's office. They also have an app, or they will send you daily emails. If you want to read a book that can get you interested in Bible stories I recommend "Crazy Stories, Sane God" by John Alan Turner. Remember the Judges series we did during Lent? Some of those weird stories are in his book. It is entertaining as well as inspiring. It might just help you develop a healthy habit for your heart that is easier than eating celery or jogging. We need to refrain from gossip. Like the film clip we saw, we can't pull the words back once we say them. The only thing harder than unscrambling an egg is unspeaking a rumor. Believe only half of what you see and even less of what you hear. Remember what your mother told you: "Those who gossip to you will gossip about you".

We need to use words that build up people around us. Every day we will have an opportunity to lift someone up with an encouraging word. We can touch the life of a total stranger or our closest friend and it will make all the difference. You just never know.

Develop the practice of listening more and talking less. Other people's words are important. In all the stories I have read about Jesus, I never remember him saying, "What did you say? I wasn't listening." When someone was talking to Jesus they had His full attention. Listening is an active process. We quiet the noise in our heads, abandon our assumptions, and listen with respect to precisely what is being said. It shows we value the other person. I don't know about you, but I sometimes find myself forming my response before I have completely heard what is being said to me. If we are fully present when we are listening to someone, we might be able to hear "between the lines". If we want to be like Jesus, we need to listen like Him.

Our words have the ability to light a path to Jesus for someone who is seeking Him. The music video we played at the beginning of the service speaks to our need to keep our words pointing to Jesus. The chorus of that song is amazing: "Let my words be life; let my words be truth. I don't want to say a word unless it points the world back to You." It is a powerful reminder that, as Christians, people are watching us and listening to us. You are here today because somebody, somewhere, told you about God. It might have been your Grandmother teaching you "Jesus Loves Me", or a neighbor's invitation to Vacation Bible School. Maybe you visited a church and felt at home because people welcomed you and treated you like you belonged. Our words are part of that distinctive fruit that we need to cultivate so that people recognize that we belong to God.

We are in control of the words we speak. Here is something I came across to help us evaluate whether what we are about to say might be better left unsaid. When in doubt, just THINK:

T: is what I am about to say true?

H: is it helpful?

I: is it inspiring?

N: is it necessary?

K: is it kind?

If what you are about to say does not pass this simple test, then don't say it.

Is your tongue a Weapon of Mass Destruction? Does it seem daunting to bring your words up to James' standards? Jesus can help you with that. He is in the business of transforming lives. Read His word daily, keep His words in your heart. Let the words you say echo the sound of His grace.

Who knows? Minding your words might become a habit that is hard to break.