

We are continuing our series in the book of James. We are looking at a text that deals with the potential of our words to create both positive and negative realities. Language is an interesting phenomenon, isn't it? Consider the fact that right now, I am talking to you, and based on the different vibrations, tones, rhythms, etc. that I use; I can communicate all sorts of different ideas. Through air vibrations coming from my mouth, they are being perceived by your brain and transformed into thoughts.

Because of this ability, we are able to transmit incredibly diverse and complicated concepts. And through language, I am able to implant bizarre thoughts into your head that you have never thought of before. Imagine a squirrel, dressed in a tuxedo, serving hot dogs to all your friends. Another one you could have never have thought, this one is a bit dark but go with me, imagine the Dodgers actually winning a World Series.

Those ideas that I have now communicated to you are not something you may have thought before, but because of the words that I use, you have now thought those things for the first time. All languages function in a similar way. Each of the 7000+ different languages on the planet has differing vocabularies, grammar, cultural background, etc. And those languages carry new ideas and differing structures.

But embedded within language is more than the mere transfer of knowledge, but also meaning and understanding of the world. How we speak shapes how we think. This then begs the question,

### **Does language shape the way we think?**

First, consider arguably the most famous love story of all time, Romeo and Juliet, and more specifically consider what is thought of as the most romantic scene of all time, the famous balcony scene. Romeo and Juliet just met at a party at Juliet's house. Romeo doesn't want to leave her estate, so he leaves his friends and hides out in the back orchard. Juliet comes from the Capulet family, whose sworn enemy was the Montague family, to which Romeo belongs.

The young love-struck couple was banned from being together. Juliet was forbidden from associating with her love, Romeo, because he was a Montague. In wrestling with this lovers quandary, out of frustration and distress, Juliet famously quips, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." What Juliet is wrestling with is the relationship between the words we use and the reality we experience. What relationship do our words have with reality? Juliet's answer? Not

much of a relationship. Words are just holders of some sort of objective reality.

Her point is straight forward, names, language, all of it is simply labels for material things. If a rose were called any other name, it would still smell just as sweet as any other rose. The same is true of her love. If Romeo had any other last name, it would not make a difference in who he was, but because he had the name of his family's enemy, their love was forbidden.

### **Consider a second example,**

"To speak a second language is to possess a second soul." - Charlemagne. Charlemagne, the 9th-century emperor of Rome, seems to make a much different connection between language and reality. Charlemagne draws a direct link. To speak a different language is to be able to have a second soul, to view the world completely differently. A bold statement about the ability and power of words.

"The limits of my language are the limits of my world." - Ludwig Wittgenstein. For Wittgenstein, an Austrian-Philosopher, language and words are intimately connected and cannot be separated. The language we use and understand gives form and shape to the world around us.

Okay, enough philosophy. But think through this with me, because this isn't all that different from the story of the scriptures. Consider how the creation narrative is told, God speaks, and the world came into being. There is a distinct relationship between our language and the world we experience, the way we think, and how we understand reality.

The bottom line I want you to note is our words have the potential power to shape reality, either positively or negatively. It makes sense, therefore, that God would have something to say about how we use our words. If our words are central to what it means to be human, then I would think we would all want to understand how this reality fits into life in the kingdom of God.

What I find fascinating about the discussion of the tongue and the connection of our words to our broader discipleship to Jesus, is the prolific and central position the Bible places on our words.

Gen. 3:12 - *The man said, "The woman you put here with me - she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."* The first sin following "the fall" was a sin of speech - adam's lie and deferring of responsibility to Eve.

Rom. 3:13-14 – *“Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.” “The poison of vipers is on their lips.” “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”* At this point in Romans, Paul is making the case that all are unrighteous, and without exception, everyone is marked as having contributed to the brokenness of the world. The way he does this is to point out that their throats are open graves. It should also be noted that he is not making these claims isolated to his own thinking, but is pulling from the greater scriptural tradition by quoting three different texts from the Psalms.

Is. 6:5 – In explaining his alienation from the presence of God, and his marked difference from God, the Prophet Isaiah, when confronted with the presence of God, cries out, *“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips...”*

1 Pet. 3:10 – *“Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech.”* In response to the assumption that all Christians want a fulfilled life with God, Peter remarks, by quoting the Psalms, that the way to a flourishing life is through keeping the tongue from evil.

I am going to assume that not many of us would have placed this sort of weight on the power of our tongue. In the company of Genesis, Paul, Isaiah, and Peter (hard to get bigger heavy-weights in the corpus of scripture than these), we explore the importance of the tongue in unlocking our ability to live whole and complete lives to the holiness and Christlikeness God has called us. James has already said something about this earlier in his book.

**“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry,” – James 1:19**

Quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. What an interesting indictment on our cultural moment. In a world saturated with noise, words, and constant outrage, where if we were to re-write this in to be more realistic to where our culture is, it might say: My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be slow to listen, and quick to speak, quick to be outraged.

**Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. James 3:1**

### **The Warning Against Teaching**

There is a special sort of irony and fear when you are tasked with preaching this particular verse, and it is not lost on me. The reality is that the profundity of words and the power of words can most easily go astray in people like myself, who assume a sort of authoritative position. And if I am honest, it is verses like this that do render a humility and fear about the position in which I take. Because I know that I have a greater opportunity to go astray based on the reality that I have a greater likelihood to use words improperly.

James opens this discussion on the tongue by warning that not many should aspire to become teachers. At the time of James' writing as well as today, the office of teaching was an important aspect of ministry. And James warns against the aspiration to teach because of its propensity toward arrogance. It means that the teacher is more susceptible to failure and is, therefore, open to a stricter judgment. Every time I step into this pulpit, there is an insidious temptation to think more highly of myself than I ought. And in all honesty, it is something I wrestle with and continue to wrestle with. Teaching, therefore, is not so much a privilege as it is a responsibility to be managed. The constant use of words and the tongue means that we can easily fall into sin and at the same time, lead others astray in the process.

### **The Relationship Between the Tongue and the Body**

**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. v. 2**

In other words, while James is specifically talking about teachers in verse one, he also declares the universality of the difficulty to tame the tongue. In this way, his admonition is for all of us, teachers, or not. *“We all stumble in many ways.”* I think, if we are honest, we all understand and wouldn't contest this claim. Right? While this is a universal statement, James has in view that all of us succumb to the failure of our words to curse rather than bless.

It should be noted that James is not speaking about cursing. He is not policing specific sins with words, but rather, is defining the tongue more broadly to understand the way in which it can bring about life or death, blessing or cursing. By using the word *“perfect,”* James is referring to the completeness and maturity that marks the follower of Jesus that God intends for us to progress toward. The sins of speech are many, hasty words, untruthful statements, sly suggestions, quick gossip, innuendo, impurity, and hasty tweets.

To James' point, if one is able to control what they say, they are able to attain a holiness that pervades the entire being. James will return to this point at the end of the text. But for now, it is important to note the emphasis that James places on one's ability to control that which comes out of the mouth. As Jesus notes, *“For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of”* (Luke 6:45b).

### **Positive Potential of the Tongue**

The outset of this text, however, is not a warning against the negative potential (that will come) but actually is informing us of the positive potential of our words. The power of controlling the tongue has the positive potential to bring master-control of ourselves and our lives. Let's turn to James' discussion on the positive potential of the tongue now.

**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. vv. 3-5a

### Bits and Rudders

Each of the examples will demonstrate this move toward the positive potential that is latent within our tongue. The metaphors are pretty straightforward to understand.

Horses & Bits: In the same manner that a very small bit in the mouth of an incredibly strong animal - a horse - can control and dictate the direction of that it, so too, the tongue is small in comparison to the rest of the human. But the tongue can guide and control.

Ships & Rudders: The same proves true in the example of the ship. A massive ship that is moved by powerful winds is steered whichever way the pilot deems necessary by a small rudder. The rudder, like the bit, is tiny in comparison to how big the ship is, but it is no less influential.

"Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts..." The boasts of the tongue are not hollow. In the same way that the influence of the bits and the rudder are also not hollow. The bit in the mouth of the horse really does move the horse. It actually masters the violence of the powerful horse. The rudder on the ship actually does move the ship; it actually does tame the violence of the storm. A few things to notice about the metaphors:

1. Both actually do something. It can be easy to reduce our words to mere words and nothing more. But the taming of our tongues actually does something. It actually controls the horse, the ship, and our whole selves. 2. Both are about controlling the whole. Taming the tongue is not an end unto itself, but rather it is the means to which the entire direction of your life is turned.

The Bible Scholar, J. Alec Motyer said,

**"The tongue is so much more than what we actually say out loud. In fact, actual speech is probably only a small percentage of the use of the tongue. We cannot think without formulating thoughts into words ... we cannot write a letter or a book without 'talking it through' our minds on to the paper; we cannot resent without fueling the fires of resentment in words addressed to ourselves. ... But if our tongue were so well under control that it refused to formulate the words of self-pity, the images of lustfulness, the thoughts of anger and resentment, then these things are cut down before they have a chance to live: ...The control of the tongue is more than an evidence of spiritual maturity; it is the means to it."**

It is the means to spiritual formation, because, if you are able to control your tongue, it is because you have controlled the place

from which it flows - namely, your heart. And it is that center, which is cultivated, that gives birth to your words.

But the tongue does not only have the potential for positive, but it also has incredible potential for negative as well, and to this, James now turns. Let's look at the second half of verse five.

### Negative Potential of the Tongue

The tongue's capacity to change is not merely positive, but James is realistic about the tremendous potential for harm as well.

**"Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 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." vv. 5b-6**

Notice that the metaphors have shifted. It is no longer productive things, but destructive things - from bits and rudders to sparks and flames. Notice also that it has shifted from passivity to activity. The bits and the rudders are passive items that are waiting to be utilized for good, and the tongue as a fire is an active, "a force in its own right." Bits and Rudders have inherently a sense that they operate from the master of an outside source. Whereas a fire is not mastered from outside itself but has a life of its own. In the same way, the one who has mastery over their tongue maintains control.

The veracity of the fire is that once it is set, it takes on a life of its own. It is multiplying and spreading quickly, consuming everything in its place. One careless ember can start a wildfire; one careless word can ruin lives. Motyer notes four specific aspects of the negative potential of the tongue from this verse.

Character: "A world of evil among the parts of the body." The imagery that James evokes here is intriguing. "A world of evil" would seem to suggest that which is currently opposed to the things of God. The word for world is the Greek word *cosmos* and was a sort of euphemism about the "aggregate of things earthly." Meaning, more the spirit of the world, not the physical world itself.

Influence: "It corrupts the whole body..." This is the opposite effect to the one able to tame the tongue having mastery; if the tongue gains control, then it controls the entire body.

Continuance: "sets the whole course of one's life on fire..." So much of our maturity and discipleship can be understood as growth through time. As we grow older, we can often change as our hearts are aimed toward God. But this is not so with the tongue.

Affiliation: "Is itself set on fire by hell." The tongue's vicious strength is associated with hell ("Ghenna") itself. It is from there that this sort of speech comes — strong language here by James.

**All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the**

**tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.**  
vv. 7-8

James asserts the wild nature of the tongue. Wild animals can be tamed, but your own tongue, not a chance! There is an allusion here to the Genesis narrative and the role given by God to humans to rule over all the animal kingdom. James is reminding, albeit subtly, of their original purpose and noting that even with all of that power, they cannot tame the tongue.

Again, the power of the tongue actually has the ability to infect reality. It is full of deadly poison. It has the potential to destroy, to tear down, to affect others negatively. "It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

**"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig-tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water." vv. 9-12**

Our words reveal our hearts. James relates the mouth that both praises God and then, in turn, curses fellow humans to a freshwater stream, producing saltwater. If a freshwater stream produces saltwater, it isn't a freshwater stream! The same is true of our words. We have to own the fact that what we say, the thoughts we produce, and language we employ toward others, the words we type and send, actually are a better barometer of our hearts and of who we truly are.

This echoes Jesus' own teaching in Luke.

**"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn-bushes, or grapes from briars. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of." - Luke 6.43-45**

It is clear that what James and Jesus don't mean is that if you tame your tongue, all your other issues will go away; but rather, that in the process of us seeking to tame the tongue, we are brought into the very epicenter of who we are, our heart.

Our words reveal who we truly are in our heart, and this is good news. For example, you don't have to wonder if you are an angry person or not, you will know it by your words! You don't have to worry if you are patient or not, because it will manifest in your

words. What drives your mouth is your heart, and what drives your heart is your identity. Dallas Willard stated:

**"...we must realize that deep in our orientations of our spirit we cannot have one posture toward God and a different one toward other people. We are a whole being, and our true character pervades everything we do. ...James rules out the blessing of God and the cursing of human beings, 'made in the likeness of God,' coming from the same mouth."**

What Willard is saying here, what James and Jesus are both teaching, isn't you shouldn't speak both blessing and cursing from the same mouth. They are saying it is an impossibility. "Our true character pervades everything we do..." As we recognize the ability, our words have to drive us to the center of our identity; we are then transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Church, the message of James here is to pay attention, to listen to your own words. What are they telling you about your heart? Because our hearts have the power to shape reality, either with blessing or with cursing.

### **Two questions to consider and a suggestion**

What do your words reveal about you? Our words come from somewhere, they are not flippant, or from nowhere, they come from a source. Are our words shaping reality for others as blessings or curses? Your words have real effects that actually shape reality for other people. Things taken to be true are true in their effects, regardless of intent.

Our words not only demonstrate our hearts, but they also hurt others. And so we need to seek forgiveness from God but also seek forgiveness and own up to what our hearts have revealed about ourselves to others. This means being quick to seek forgiveness from your wife, your children, your friends, your co-workers, or your roommates, etc.

What if we, as a church, began to understand the gravity of our words to shape reality? What if we became known for encouragement and joy? This is the invitation to start moving toward people with words of blessing, not cursing, words of affirmation, not defamation, and words that build up rather than tear down. This can only happen when we are willing to stare down the reality of our hearts because our words are pulling back the curtain of who we truly are, leaving us exposed and vulnerable.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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