

As we continue our study of the book of James, we're looking at a topic that applies to every single person here. It doesn't matter how old you are; it applies to you. It doesn't matter if church is your thing or not; it applies to you. The topic today is our speech. It's something that all of us do and something that all of us use every single day. And it has a profound impact on our life and our life with others.

I love words. There is power in words. There is beauty in words. Winston Churchill, the famous orator, determined early in his life five key elements of good public speaking. One of the key elements is choosing the best possible word. If you are familiar with some of his speeches, you know how well he used the best possible words. Mark Twain said, "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter – 'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning." The writer of Proverbs wrote a lot about speech. Proverbs 25:11 says that the right word is like apples of gold in settings of silver. The point is that there is something beautiful about the right word in the right setting.

Words have power. Words have influence. There's the famous line from Henry David Thoreau, "I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow life." Those are great words. Words stir the heart, like the line from the movie Lilo and Stitch, that says, "Ohana means family and family means that no one gets left behind or forgotten." And of course, words have been used to bring about change. Probably most famously is Martin Luther King, who 50 years ago in Washington, D.C., said, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed that 'we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.'" These are words that spoke to a need for change and called forth a better future.

Words have power. Your words have power. Words can be used for good, but we also know that words hurt. Words can bring pain. When I was a kid growing up, I wasn't the most popular kid at school. Kids made fun of my glasses or my hair. We had a saying then that still exists today: "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." But here's the thing, that statement is a lie.

Our words can hurt. We all carry scars from things that have been said to us. There've been times in my life where if someone gave me the option to hit me with a stick or say something hurtful, I would have taken the stick. At least the pain would only last a moment. And there have been words that you have spoken to others that have inflicted pain, words that you wish you could erase from existence. Maybe you're carrying the scars of words that were said to you or about you. Perhaps you're carrying the shame of words that you've said to or about someone. We

have this dichotomy with our speech: our words have the power to inspire, encourage, and call for change, but our words can also hurt.

How do we move forward in a better way? That's going to be our passage for this message, in the letter of James. If you want one statement of where we're headed, it's this; words are small things that have a large impact. And my hope at the end of our time is that you would use your speech to build each other up rather than tear each other down. If we do that, we will see people from a new perspective as made in the image of God.

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 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. James 3:1-2

We all stumble. If you think every word that you say is always right, helpful, loving, and kind, then you would be without sin; you would be perfect. We know we're not. Everyone in this room is included in this. We all stumble. We all say things that we know we shouldn't. We all say things that hurt other people. We all say things that are not true. And our words have an impact on what happens around us.

James then tells us that those who teach will be judged more harshly. This seems like an odd thought with which to start this section, but the point is this: our words have influence. When leaders speak one way but live another, many people are impacted. Think about the news of religious leaders who say one thing and live in contradiction. Think of the impact on people due to their false words. We have the responsibility to speak the truth because our words have power.

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. vv.3-5

Next, James gives us three object lessons about the power of our words, how words are small things that have a big impact. First, a bit in the mouth of a horse. A bit is how you steer the horse. A bit is small relative to the size of a horse, but a bit can direct a large animal. Second, James gives the lesson of a rudder on a ship. It's a small piece of material relative to the size of a ship, but the rudder makes the ship turn. Third, imagine a spark of fire. This hits home for us living in Northern California. All it takes to start a great fire is a small spark. The point that James makes is that words are small, but they have a large impact on

our life. We can do great things with our words, or we can cause harm. Next, James gives us metaphors for how words can be destructive.

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. 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.6-8

This is strong language. Think about a time when someone's words to you felt like evil or deadly poison. Words that hurt your heart and destroyed your self-confidence. We can all think of an example and replay it in our minds over and over again. It's easy to remember the times that we have been hurt, but think about when you or I have spewed deadly poison at someone else. Our words have power, but sometimes that power is dangerous, and we use our words to tear others down rather than build them up. Why do we all stumble in many ways? That's what we see in the next set of verses.

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

The issue is our divided humanity. James describes two aspects of the division in us. The first issue is the loss of the perspective that people matter. People are valuable to God. He says that out of the same mouth, we praise God and curse human beings made in God's likeness. You could sit here and sing these songs or pray these prayers or listen to these words and then go home and tear someone down. James says that's not the way things should be. Something is deeply wrong in us where we've lost sight that people matter to God.

Paul has a fascinating passage in 1 Corinthians 8:11-12. Paul is teaching about people in his day who ate food that was sacrificed to idols. Some people worked out their theology and said they wouldn't eat the meat that was sacrificed to idols. But other people didn't have that same conviction. Paul's counsel was not to damage the person, their brother, or sister for whom Christ died.

When someone hurts you, it's not easy to remember that they are made in the image of God. But that's what James is saying. We can't celebrate God in one breath and tear people down who are made in his image with the next breath. The first division that James sees is that we lose sight of the value of people.

The second division he talks about is a corrupted source. Salt can't produce fresh water, nor can a fig tree bear olives. Our words have a starting point. The source is corrupted. Something needs to change in us - not external, but internal.

This is what Jesus talked about when He talked about words. In Matthew 15:18, he says that things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile a person. In other words, what you say every day is not a product of external circumstances but internal corruption. It's not because someone's forcing you to say it. It's not because a situation occurred, and you felt compelled to say something. What you say starts in you. And if our words begin in us, and we sense something hurtful then something about us needs to change.

The beauty of the gospel is that this change in you is what Jesus died for. The prophet Ezekiel talked about a day when God's Messiah, God's agent in the world, would give people a new heart and a new spirit (cf. Ezekiel 36.26-27). That is what happened for you through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

What can we do with this teaching? How can we live in new ways? Two actions for you. First, who can you build up this week? Maybe that's a text, an email, or a card that you write. We need to be people who build one another up instead of tear each other down. Proverbs 15:4 (NET) says, "Speech that heals is like a life-giving tree, but a perverse tongue breaks the spirit." Who can you give life to this week? You are someone who has the opportunity to give life to others.

Second, how can you shrink the gap between your intent and your impact? Sometimes there is a gap between what you intend to say and how it's received. There are two aspects to your speech. One is your intent - what you desire to say. The other aspect is how your words are received. And here's what you need to know: you own both. You own your intent. If there's a gap between what you intended and how the other person received it, that's something that you need to own and resolve with that person.

Think about a situation at work. Maybe you're leading a team, and you have a big project coming up in the first quarter. You're probably thinking now about the details of the project. That's good. But you also need to think through the best way to communicate so that the team is inspired and gets on board. You own both. You own what you intend to do and also how it's received on the other side. And if there's a gap, find ways to shrink that. Find ways to say, "I apologize. Here's what I was trying to say; is there a better way that I could say it next time?" So, two things. First, who can you build up with your words this week? And second, how you can shrink the gap between your intent and your impact? Your words matter.

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

© 2019 Central Peninsula Church South, Redwood City, CA
Catalog No. 1439-6SC