

Speech

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[0 : 0 0] Well, words are powerful, aren't they? Words can quickly and easily be used to do good or to do ill, to criticize, slander, to encourage. And a normal part of our culture these days is to use words in a harsh way. And so our public discourse, I think you'll find, is increasingly toxic and uncivil. And I think we've probably seen that this week if we've been following the news and read or seen comments made about Kate Forbes by the media, the vitriol and the hatred seems to be accepted as a normal part of life and quite natural for someone to criticize somebody else.

But I think it is a serious matter of public concern that our speech and the words that are used are used so badly, so often. And why do words matter? Well, words are powerful, aren't they?

They have an influence and the influence can spread far and wide. I'm sure we've all heard the cliché, sticks and stones may break my bones, but words, words will never hurt me. And if you're like me, you probably heard that when you were a young child and somebody said something nasty to you, sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. But we know it isn't true, is it? Because words do hurt. Words are like a powerful weapon that come from our lips. And that's why James tackles this whole area of speech as he goes through his letter. Because if we are going to have a faith that works, remember that's the title of our series in the book of James, if we're going to have a faith that is applied to all aspects of our lives, then our faith will need to impact the words that we say, our speech, our tongues. And this is not just because of the dangerous power of the tongue, but because our tongues actually reveal what we are really like as a person. I can remember going to the doctor when I was young and the doctor would always say, stick out your tongue. And I could never figure out why I had to stick out my tongue until I grew a bit older and realized, well, the tongue can reveal something deeper or more serious going on inside with us. Because what we say with our tongues reveals what's in our hearts. And so our speech is essentially an indicator of our spiritual health and well-being. Now speech is a theme James has highlighted already. James chapter 1 verse 19, he says we should be slow to speak. James chapter 1 verse 26, he says we need to keep a tight rein on our tongues. And so he expands upon this in chapter 3. And really we see why our speech matters.

It matters for you. It matters for your family. It matters for your colleagues, your children. And it matters for our church. How we speak to one another can do great harm or it can do great good.

And so I'd like us to look at three headings as we look at these verses this afternoon. The first is the dangerous power of the tongue in verse 1 to 5. The second is the deadly poison of the tongue in verse 6 to 8. And then thirdly, the deeper problem of the tongue in verse 9 to 12. So the dangerous power, the deadly poison, and the deeper problem of the tongue. First of all, the dangerous power of the tongue. The tongue has this dangerous power. So James begins by saying, we'll essentially be judged for what we say. Verse 1 and 2, 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. So James here is beginning by warning the teachers in the church. Since teachers influence their listeners, then teachers need to be careful what they say. And so this is a word for preachers and teachers, those who have got the privilege of preaching or expounding God's word. But with that privilege also comes a huge responsibility.

[4 : 17] Because we will be judged, James says, with greater strictness for what we say. We're accountable before God for what comes from our lips. But before you think you're off the hook, James is addressing anyone who teaches God's word. So elders, children's workers, youth leaders, and so on. In fact, every Christian will be speaking, teaching, telling people about Jesus. And so the sobering truth is that we'll be judged for what we say. And teachers will be judged more strictly. Because those who claim to speak for God or about God will closely be scrutinized by God. And now James says here, we all stumble in many ways. And notice that he's including himself in this. He's well aware that he stumbles and sins and fails too. But he says, if we can keep control of our mouth, then we can keep control of our whole body. James says the person who's able to control what they say is perfect. In other words, if we're self-controlled in our speech, in our use of words, then it will lead to the kind of life that God wants for his people. The kind of life that is perfect, whole, complete, one that is harmonious, where what we say matches what we do, where our heart and our lips are one. And so the reality is that our tongue has the power to affect the whole of life. Because what we say has a huge impact. And so James uses three illustrations to drive this home. Verse three to five, look at what they are. 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. And each illustration essentially saying the same thing. It's saying something small can have a massive impact. The bit in a horse's mouth can control the whole animal. The rudder on a ship controls the direction of the ship. And then the small spark can set a huge forest on fire. So all three examples are making the same point. The tongue has this enormous power that is out of all proportion to its size. And we know this, don't we? Either because of something we have said or because of something somebody has said to us. It only takes a few words to do a great deal of damage and harm. And so Winston Churchill, the former prime minister, he led our nation to victory in war with some tremendously inspiring words. People can come to know Jesus through some good words. And so words can do great good. And yet a few ill-chosen words said in a brief moment can have a massive impact and cause deep offence and hurt. A number of years ago in the English Premier League, Luis Suarez, the Liverpool player at the time, was charged with racially abusing Patrice Evra, who played for Man United. And in his apology, Suarez admitted saying a word once and only once. And lots of years and lots of money later, he apologized for what he had said.

And I wonder how many times we have carelessly said something and it has caused untold damage. Words said about us or against us can hurt us. It's interesting, isn't it, that our self-image largely comes from what people say about us. Where over the years, the words that have been said to us make a lasting impression on our lives. So as parents or teachers or coaches, classmates, friends, they may call us names, they make comments about us, and all of these things come to us. And in some sense, they shape the kind of person we see ourselves to be.

We may be called good or bad, promising or useless, great or weird, a delight or a disappointment. And it's probably all the criticisms rather than the compliments that make the deep impression on our lives, isn't it? Let me give you an example of when I was at school and I attempted to join the choir in primary three. So I must have been about age eight. And the music teacher, Mrs. Garden, came along to class one morning and she said, would anyone like to join the choir?

And for some odd reason that I can never understand why, I put my hand up and volunteered to go and join the choir. And so Mrs. Garden then took me and a number of my classmates and frog marched us along the corridor to the music room to get us to audition for the school choir. And so there were a group of us standing up in a line. And for the audition, we had to sing Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star. And so I was maybe third or fourth in the line. And I can remember a few kids before me, they got to sing basically the whole song, Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star. And it got to me. And after I said the first line, Twinkle, Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star, she said, Jonathan, stop there. Thank you very much.

You won't be joining the choir. You can't sing. You just go back to class now. Thank you. And then off I walked. I don't know why you're laughing, but it's made a huge impact on my life.

[10:10] My singing career has never quite taken off since those days. I was crushed. And I think still I can't sing. And the reason is, it's because a few ill-chosen words made a deep impression on me.

And so can you see what James is saying here? The tongue is this small part of the body, but it has an impact that is disproportionate to its size. It makes great boasts, says James.

And just like a forest can be set on fire by a small spark, he tells us, well, so our tongue can ignite great damage if the words are badly chosen. And so given the power of our words, it is hardly surprising that James says we'll be judged for what we say. And so that's the first thing, the dangerous power of the tongue. And the second is the deadly poison of the tongue in verse 6 to verse 8. Our tongues are full of deadly poison, he tells us in verse 8. And so James here outlines the damage the tongue can cause. Damage not just for the listener to the words that come from our lips, but damage also to the hearer, to the speaker, to us, the one who says these words. And so let's look at the speaker first of all. In verse 6, he says, So he's saying the tongue is a fire that can rage out of control and destroy everything.

James describes it, you notice, as a world of evil. He says it corrupts or it stains the whole body. He says it sets the whole course of one's life on fire. And it is set on fire by hell. He couldn't be any stronger in his language, could he? He's saying your tongue can corrupt you. Your tongue can ruin your reputation. Your tongue can destroy your life. Because evil speech, he tells us, comes from the pit of hell. And that is why it is so destructive. Now just remember who James is writing to. He is writing to Christian believers. He's writing to people who go to church, who meet together to worship. And so the implication is that our tongues can speak to people in such a way that church can seem more like hell than it can like heaven. Because our speech can be evil. And so our tongues can cause all kinds of destruction and damage and devastation. And I guess we might think, well, a few loose words here and there, what harm can they really do?

It really isn't any big deal how I speak. I don't really need to watch what I say. And we might brush off our language, our speech, our words by thinking, well, it's just a tiny bit of gossip. Or it's only banter. Or, well, I did feel it needed to be said. I was only speaking the truth. But James is saying here, well, you need to watch what you say because your tongue can damage you. You're the one who will be judged for what you say. And it's your life that can be ruined by your speech. It can cause you so many problems. And I guess we can all think of people whose speech has actually been their downfall.

[14 : 01] So James is telling us not just to consider the impact our words have on others, but to recognize the impact our words have on us. And surely, I know I do, we need to pause and remember that my tongue is a fire. It can corrupt and destroy me. And so what I say is not without consequence. It does have seriously big consequences. But our tongues aren't just damaging for us, the speaker.

They're obviously damaging for the listener too. And that's what James is saying in verse 7 and 8. He says, 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. And so again, it's another great image that is easy to understand. All kinds of animals have been tamed, but nobody can tame the tongue. And so it is a lethal weapon that spreads deadly poison. Its impact is as devastating as one of those oil spills in the sea and the damage it causes to all the wildlife. And James calls the tongue a restless evil. Why? Well, because it doesn't sit still. The tongue doesn't keep quiet.

The tongue is always ready to go, always ready to say something. That's why James already warns us in his letter that we should be slow to speak. Because if we aren't slow to speak, the deadly poison in our tongues will be let loose. To do what? Well, to gossip, to slander, to complain, to manipulate, to lie, to boast. All of which cause damage to those around about us, those who are listening. Because what we say with our tongues spreads far and wide, but it also goes deep. Just take young children as an example.

They're like sponges and they soak in whatever we say, whether it's good or bad. They're like wet cement, where our words leave a deep and a lasting impression on their lives. And they can drink in the poison of our words just as quickly as they can drink a can of Coke. And so we know the damage an untamed tongue can cause. It can start fights. It can destroy relationships. It can damage marriages.

It can divide families. It can impact mental health. It can ruin reputations. And it can end careers. And churches have split because one or two people couldn't control their tongues. In fact, I think if you wanted to destroy Christchurch Glasgow, you could do it by using a few carefully chosen words, unkind words or untrue words or angry words, and just see the deadly poison spread and the damage it causes. There's a story of a woman in a small village who felt guilty because she'd been spreading gossip about various people all around the village, including the minister of her church. And so she went to the minister because she felt sorry for what she had said. And the minister forgave her, but he said, well, I'd like you to do something for me. And he told her to go and place a feather on the doorstep of every person who'd heard or been affected by her gossip. And so what she did was she went around the village, put a feather on every doorstep, and then she went back to the minister and told him that she'd done what he had asked. And then he said, well, there's just one more thing I'd like you to do.

[17 : 52] I'll let you to go around the village and collect every feather that you've laid on every doorstep. And she said, well, it's impossible. The wind would have blown them everywhere. And the minister said, well, the same has happened with your words. They have spread everywhere. And there's no way to undo the damage that they've caused. And so can you see what James is saying here? An untamed tongue with unwise words is deadly. And so surely as we apply this, well, we can't just confine James's words to the spoken word, to what we say, because there are also written words and there are also digital words. And so controlling the tongue surely means we've got to be careful with what we say or put out there on social media, because it all counts and it all has the power to damage ourselves, but also damage our audience. That's why the imagery James uses for taming the tongue is spot on, because we all know and we all have experienced how wild, how uncontrollable and how dangerous the tongue can be.

And so that's the deadly poison of the tongue. First, the dangerous power of the tongue. Second, the deadly poison of the tongue. And then thirdly, the deeper problem of the tongue.

So whilst controlling our tongue, our speech, our words is a problem for all of us, it actually reflects a deeper problem, one that is beneath the surface in our hearts.

So verse 9 and 10, 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. What James does here is basically tells us you're not as spiritual as you think you are, because our tongues reveal our inconsistency and our tongues reveal our hypocrisy.

He says we use our tongue to praise God, but we use that very same tongue to curse other people, human beings. And so just picture the scene. There we are in church one Sunday. We're singing praise to God with great gusto, great words from our lips directed towards God.

[20 : 27] Then after church, having coffee, maybe in the car, driving home, or maybe over a meal with their family or other people. And the same tongue that was praising God an hour ago can then so quickly be cursing somebody else, perhaps moaning about somebody, or criticizing the preacher, or complaining about the music leader, or bad-mouthing somebody else. James says this should not be. Praise and cursing, he tells us, should not come from the same mouth. We can't praise God one minute and then in the next curse somebody who is made in the very image and likeness of God. Praising God and then cursing one of God's people is inconsistent, isn't it? And so James is highlighting the hypocrisy that we all have, and we all know what he's talking about. And I'm ashamed of the times that I've done this. How can these lips be used to praise God and then lambast someone who's made in God's image? It's hypocritical, it's inconsistent, it's wrong, it's evil. But we can't blame it on a slip of the tongue, because James is saying in this chunk, the problem is the source. And he illustrates this in verse 11 and 12.

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.

He's talking here about a natural order to things or a normal process for how things work. So it's obvious, isn't it? Fig tree doesn't produce olives, a grapevine doesn't produce figs, and a salt spring doesn't produce fresh water. And so he wants to highlight there is a natural order, and the point is, well, the fruit is always going to be a consequence of the root, or it's going to be the source that determines the output. And so what pours out of our mouths is a consequence of what lies within our hearts. And so a heart changed by God should be producing good speech rather than bad speech, shouldn't it? Because it's our words that reveal our hearts, what is beneath the surface that nobody else can see until we speak? And then they know. Somebody put it this way, the tongue is the heart's publisher. I think that's a good way to describe it. And Jesus himself, more importantly, said, for the mouth speaks, but the heart is full of. And so whether consciously or unconsciously, we reveal our true selves more than we think by what we say, in our good moments, of course, but more often than not, in our bad moments, we're telling the world, we're telling those close to us what we're really like. We're displaying our heart. Our heart is published for people to see when we speak.

And so James wants us to recognize the deeper problem of the tongue is the heart. And what is interesting is that the apostle Paul, when he speaks about our fundamental problem as human beings, the problem of sin, the way he describes it in Romans chapter 3 is focused on speech. So he says in Romans chapter 3, all have turned away. And then he expands on this turning away from God by quoting a number of different Psalms and saying, 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. And so it's clear we've got a speech problem because we've all turned away from God. And yet there is good news for the problem of sin, which impacts our speech. And the good news is that there's one person who never said anything wrong. He never did anything wrong. Jesus is the only one who lived a perfect life, whose life was perfect. And so his speech was also perfect. And it needed to be because Jesus came to live the life that we could never live, a life without sin, a life without doing anything wrong.

And Jesus came to die the death that we deserve, to die death for our sin and wrongdoing. And the prophet Isaiah puts it like this. He says of Jesus, he was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. And so the prophecy of Isaiah is pointing to Jesus as the one who would come and willingly suffer and die in our place to take the punishment for every wrong thing we have ever said and thought and done. And that's why we must put our faith in Jesus Christ, because in Jesus alone did we receive the forgiveness we need for all we've ever done, including forgiveness for the words that have come from our mouths. And so it's only as the beauty and the grace of this gospel of Jesus Christ sinks into our hearts that our lives will ever be any different. And then the Holy Spirit, when we believe in Jesus and put our faith in him, comes to dwell within us, to transform us from the inside out, to transform our life and therefore our speech. Because our speech won't ever change just by us trying harder. It won't work if we go tomorrow and say, I must be better at how I use my words.

[26 : 51] It's never going to work. Because James says, no human being can tame the tongue. So you or I cannot tame our tongue by ourselves. And that's why we will never ever manage to speak perfectly. And yet, through the good news of Jesus and through the forgiveness of our past sin, we have the spirit to help us live in a way that pleases God in what we say and think and do. Because the product of a renewed heart has got to be renewed speech, hasn't it? And so let's let James's message do two things.

First of all, let's let his message diagnose our speech problem. And then secondly, let's take the action that James prescribes. And this is how we'll close. So the diagnosis first, and then a prescription.

So the diagnosis, let's think of diagnosing our speech in four areas of life. God, family, people, and church. So God first. How is our speech when it comes to God? How often do our lips praise God? How often do our lips pray to God? How often do our lips, our tongues, speak to others of Jesus? And then family, how is our speech when it comes to our families? How do we speak to our parents? Do we honor them with our words? How do we speak to our spouses? Are our words loving and kind? How do we speak to our children? Do our words build up or do they tear down? At home, is our speech gentle, gracious, compassionate, forgiving? And then people, how is our speech when it comes to other people, friends, neighbors, colleagues, classmates? Does what we say complement or contradict or claim to follow Jesus? Do our words represent Christ well or badly? Can we be trusted with the words that we say? Do we use our tongues to complain, grumble, gossip, tell lies, speak ill of other people? Or is our conversation full of grace? And then what about church? How is our speech when it comes to church?

How often do we speak harshly or critically? Do encouraging words come from our lips? Do they ever come from our lips? Do we tend to speak well of others? Or do we constantly complain about others?

Can you see how in all of these different spheres of life, we need God's help? And James wants to diagnose our problems so that we go to God and get help. And so we may need forgiveness for the way that we have spoken or the things that we've said, in which case we seek God's forgiveness. We may need to speak into a particular situation or to a particular person. Well, go and seek God's help to speak as we should. So that's James's diagnosis. But also, let's see the action that James prescribes.

[30 : 09] And these verses are going to come up on the screen. So the first verse, and these are all verses in James that speak of our speech and our tongues. So he says, be quick to listen and slow to speak. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. And secondly, watch what you say. James 1 verse 26.

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves and their religion is worthless. Then thirdly, don't speak against others. James chapter 4 verse 11.

Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. And then fourthly, don't grumble. James chapter 5. Verse 9. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. And then speak the truth. Fifthly, James chapter 5 verse 12. Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple yes or no. Otherwise, you will be condemned.

Now, it sounds so simple, doesn't it? If only we did it more. Wouldn't it make a huge difference to our lives, to our relationships, to our church, to our world if we applied the truth that James is telling us we need? Because if we're someone who has experienced the grace of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in our hearts, then we ought to be someone who speaks that grace to others.