

Talk – James 3:1-12 – Taming the Tongue

Central Truth

Words Matter – use them well.

Purpose

In this sermon, I want the listener to think about the way they use their tongue and encourage them to teach well, speak carefully, and to use words well to speak about Jesus.

Outline

3:1-2 Words that Teach

v1 – those who teach will be judged for their words

v2 – all stumble

3:3-8 Words have Power

Don't *underestimate* the power of your words.

v3 – Words control like a small bit over a powerful horse.

v4 - Words control like the small rudder over a large ship.

v5a – Words of the tongue make great boasts over the whole body.

Be warned of the *destructive* power of your words.

v5b – Words damage like a small spark over a great forest.

v6 – Words from the tongue corrupts the body like a fire of evil.

v7-8 – Man tames the animal, but no man tames the tongue.

3:9-12 Words that Matter

v9-10 – The tongue can praise and curse

but, the tongue...

v11 – should be used well.

Reading

James 3:1-12

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CHECK TIME

Talk

Let's take a moment and just quieten our hearts and minds so we might be ready for God's Word.

WAIT

Prayer

Lord and Father,

I am about to speak, what I dearly hope will be your words – very aware that teachers will be judged more strictly.

So as a man, who is not even close to being perfect and as someone who is often at fault in the way I say things, I pray for your help.

And humbly, I ask, that you would work clearly by your spirit through what I say now – for the benefit of us all.

In Jesus. AMEN.

Words Matter

- As we commission our Global Partners tonight, it strikes me that N & R (I won't use their names as this is being recorded) – live in a context where Words Matter – and they need to use them well.
 - To start – they need to be able to converse in a language that is different to what they speak around the family dinner table.
 - Then they need to watch the particular words they use – given that they work in a country where it is not favourable to be Christian, it is not permissible to speak openly about Jesus, it is not safe to proclaim his name.
 - Then they live under the commission of our Lord, to indeed speak as his witnesses and in doing so call people to respond to the gospel and become his disciples.
- Words matter – we are saved by them as easily as we are destroyed by them – so we need to use them well.

Context

- James Chapter 3:1-12 is our passage tonight – and as there are so many here who have come just this week for the commissioning allow me to put the passage into context.

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- In the last two verses of Chapter 1, James calls believers in the Lord Jesus to live out their faith by watching their *mouths*, using their *hands*, and protecting their *hearts*.
- And in Chapter 2, he develops the idea of using our *hands* to perform deeds which show what we believe.
 - A Christian's faith should be obvious by the way they use their hands.
- In Chapter 4, he will develop the idea of protecting our *hearts* so that our faith is not compromised.
 - A Christian's faith should seek to grow in friendship with God before friendship with the world.
- And it is in Chapter 3 where he develops the idea of watching our *mouths*.
 - A Christian's faith should be obvious by the way we use our tongues.
- James is such a practical guy – so he doesn't shy away from telling believers to get real about how they live. And he looks for the fruit of their faith.

3:1-2 Words that Teach

- So let's look at James 3, it is not that complicated – it starts with a warning, that should make people like me pay extra attention.
- '*Not many of you should presume to be teachers*' – why? – because those who teach will be judged for their words.
- Be you a Pastor (and I know there are several here tonight), chaplain, Home Group or Bible Study leader, evangelist, discipler, Global Partner – what James wants to get across is that if you take the role of teaching others, then make sure you do it well.
- Inherent in the whole discipline of teaching, is the idea that you shape and direct others to follow the instruction that is given.
- It matters if you teach error.
- If what you teach misleads, or misdirects another – then it is by your words that they are put in harm's way.
- The whole reason why our Home Group Leaders do the training they do,
 - and our Ministers in Training do the training that they do,
 - our Global Partners do the training that they do,
 - and our Pastors do the training that they dois to ensure that when they teach, they do it well and without error.
- And the risk for those who are taught by them – is that they, *might* get it wrong.
- But the risk to teacher in question, is that they will stand before the Lord, and be *judged for what they have taught!*

PAUSE

- Now, just before the teachers among us, start formulating their resignation letters and our Global Partners cancel their flight tickets - can I point out a couple of things:

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- James doesn't say these things to discourage people from teaching at all – he says these things to ensure that *we all* recognise the importance of what is being taught.
- If the teacher is being judged more strictly, then surely what they teach must be important.
- And what the teacher in James should be teaching is the good news about Jesus – that perfect, royal, word of truth (1;18, 25; 2:8) – which must be told, and heard, and acted upon by anyone who knows they are saved by it.

- The second thing I want to point out is that James is fully aware that there is no perfect teacher, in fact in verse 2, he says that *all* stumble in many ways – and so he is clearly not suggesting that when someone teaches, they must do it perfectly.
- I take it, that James is saying that what *motivates* a teacher is as important as *what* they are teaching.
- The church around the world is dying from a lack of *good* teachers – but also from a lack of teachers with *good* motives.
- So friends, Words matters – teach them well.

PAUSE

3:3-8 Words have Power

- Next from verses 3 to 8 James turns his attention to the Power of Words – or more specifically, how we use our tongue.
- First, he says – don't *underestimate* the power of your words.

- Looking at a powerful horse or a large ship – he says do you realise that for all their power they are controlled by something as tiny as a mouth bit which allows you to turn a large horse in any direction you please – or a tiny rudder which turns the entire ship to port or starboard at will.
- The tongue in your body should not be underestimated, it has the ability to make great boasts and to give direction far more powerfully than any physical activity that you can exert.

Explanation

- Christians should not be surprised by this.
- We should live by God's word – which is powerful, yet seen to be so insignificant in the eyes of the world.
- We live in a world that is created by a Word – when 'God said – and it was so' (Gen 1)
- We live by the Word that is promised, that by believing in the name of Jesus we are saved. (Rom 10)
- And it by the use of our tongue that we most clearly speak that Word about Jesus.

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Application

- Words, my friends, are powerful – and we must not underestimate that Words Matters – and when it comes to God’s words, we must speak them.
- Yet for all the good that can be said using our tongues, James also wants us to be warned of the *destructive* power of our words.
- Verse 5 – consider how great a forest fire can occur as a result of such a small spark.
- The tongue runs the same risk – from what we say, we can do a lot of damage.
 - I have never understood that school yard saying ‘sticks and stones my break my bones, but word can never hurt me’
 - Because it seems to me that the deepest hurts most adults experience (in our context), are the ones where things are said hurtfully.
 - Most of us have been on the receiving end of words used badly – be that gossip, anger, slander, deceit, flattery – all forms of words which damage.
 - Maybe we have been responsible for dishing out these words that damage.
- And James says, our tongues unlock a world of evil.
- They take the lead and run ahead of us and in doing so they set the course which runs the risk of corrupting all of the body.
- Consider the curse that we all live under – it came because of *destructive* words.
 - The woman in the garden was told by the serpent, ‘don’t believe the word God spoke to you’ – and she didn’t, and with her tongue convinced the man to follow suit (Gen 3).
 - It was by the tongue that the whole body was corrupted and it set the whole course for those who would follow.

Illustration

- In England, I saw a man call his pet falcon from across a football field – and with a massive wingspan of over two metres it flew to him and landed on his arm.
- In India, I saw a snake charmer draw a cobra out of a basket to dance in time with his music.
- In Sydney, I saw a zoo keeper instruct a killer whale to jump through a hoop.
- In each case I was impressed at the ability of a person to control an animal
 - But James says, verse 7, there is something that a man cannot control – and that is his tongue.
- Be warned of the *destructive* power of our words.
 - It is restless, it is waiting, and without notice it can spring to action and attack.
- Words, my friends, are powerful – but they run the risk of being destructive.

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Application

- I have been a Christian for 25 years and in Pastoral Ministry for almost twenty.
- There has not been a week that has gone by when I have thought – I have used all my words well this week?!
- Despite every intention, and a desire to get through a week without saying something unhelpful, or too abruptly, or in anger, or ungraciously – I am yet to get through a single week – a single week!
- What James says to me, is your Words Matter – speak them carefully
- Friends, consider how you use your tongue. Don't gossip, don't use it in anger, don't slander, don't lie, don't flatter.

LONG PAUSE

3:9-12 Words that Matter

- Finally, in verses 9-12, James addresses the *motivations* behind how we use our tongues.
- He says – do you notice that out of your mouth, that wonderful outlet for your soul, you can both sing the glorious praise of God and then just as quickly turn to your brother or sister and curse them?
- That should not be!
- For what comes out of a person tells you something of their heart – and you should not be double-minded.
- If it is impossible for a natural spring to produce both fresh water and salt water, then it should be unnatural for you as a Christian to speak both in praise of God and in curse of another.
- And similarly if you were a fruit bearing plant then you will produce the fruit that is in accord with your nature – a fig tree, figs and a grapevine, grapes.
- So brothers and sisters, when you open your mouths and put that tongue to work, James says, it will produce the fruit that is consistent with what motivates you.
- Now that is a scary thought!

Would it be better if we never opened our mouths?

- One of the interesting things about the letter from James, is that he mentions Jesus very infrequently – and in our passage not at all.
- That said, being the brother of Jesus, there are a lot of allusions to what Jesus had previously taught – and we see that in this fruit tree analogy offered in verse 12.
- Would you turn back with me to Matthew 12 (page 967). *WAIT*

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- In verse 33 and following, you can see that James picks up the fruit tree making the observation that out of a good tree comes good fruit and out of a bad tree come bad fruit.
- In fact, in verse 34 Jesus says *‘out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks’*.
- I suspect – James is recalling this kind of imagery.

- What is going on in this chapter is that Jesus is presented with a man who was mute (so someone who couldn’t use his tongue) – given our passage that could be seen to be a blessing. (verse 22)
- Yet Jesus heals him. Jesus decides is it better to give him a tongue, to give him the ability to speak.
- The Pharisees who witnesses this accuse him of healing in the name of Beelzebub (the prince of demons) – to which Jesus responds by saying that if he was of Beelzebub, then he would not have healed the man as that clearly would undo the bad that Beelzebub had done!

- Instead, Jesus was there to do what was good.
- Jesus gives the power to speak to a mute man.
- And then he called for those listening – verse 30 – to stand with him as one who heals and forgives each person’s sin and blasphemy.
- He goes as far as saying – in verse 32 – that those who have spoken against him (the Son of Man) would be forgiven.
- Friends, if you think that your tongue has got you into so much trouble – or has done so much damage – that you are *not worthy to be a follower of Jesus* - then you would be right.
 - None of us are worthy enough to be a follower of Jesus.
- But yet what Jesus does is calls people to himself, despite how unworthy they are – and saves them, forgives them – and in the case of this mute man – gives them a voice!
- The question is whether you want to live like a Pharisee or you want to live like a disciple!
- Jesus says to those who want to be his disciple he will forgive.
- And it is to them that he will look to see good fruit.

- When James tells Christians that Words Matter – he says that because he knows that are saved by Jesus. So he says use your words well because when you do you show that you live for Jesus and not against him.

Application

- N & R, your Words Matter – teach them well, speak them carefully, use them well.
 - and use them to speak about Jesus.

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- And to all of us, our Words matter - teach them well, speak them carefully, use them well.
 - and use them to speak about Jesus

Closing Prayer

Lord and Father, whilst we are unworthy, you give your word.

And with your Word you reveal to us your salvation in Jesus.

Your Words Matter – so help us to teach them well, speak them carefully, use them well - and use them to speak about Jesus.

In his name, AMEN.