

The Truth about Words

Warnings about Words

James 1:19-20, 1:26-27, 3:1-12

A few years ago I realized that I grew up in a family in which everybody ended up talking for a living. My dad was a pastor, my mom was a high school Latin teacher, my oldest brother is an attorney, my next oldest brother taught high school in international schools all over the world for 35 years, I'm a pastor, and my younger brother is a college math professor near Boston. When we get together we talk and talk and talk; after a few minutes there's not enough oxygen in the room. Brenda grew up in a much less verbal household. The first time she came over for a meal with my family she was basically shell shocked. We just had an aggressive way of talk to each other and about each other.

All that to say, I did not grow up considering how I should talk and shouldn't talk. Like most people, I suspect, I just talked (usually saying whatever popped into my mind). Consequently, I developed some rather careless and even foolish habits of speaking. And such habits are hard to break. That's true because of what we talked about last week in Matthew 12, namely that ***our words flow from our hearts***. Foolish habits of speaking flow from a foolish heart, from a heart that isn't wise about many things.

Today we are going to consider three passages in the book of James in which James warns us about foolish ways of speaking. In light of the fact that ***our words flow from our hearts***, we shouldn't mistakenly think he's merely giving us conversational techniques or "talking points." Heeding the warnings in James involve allowing God to change our hearts in some deep, foundational ways. I'll try to point out the heart changes implicit in each passage. Note: Today's passages are largely negative, explaining what we should avoid with our words; next week we'll consider Ephesians 4:29 which gives a positive vision for our words.

A quick **disclaimer** before we look at these passages. . . I don't know all of you here today, but I do know many of you. And I've had recent conversations with many of you. I realize that as I make comments about these passages and give examples of what to avoid, the thought might cross your mind, "I wonder if Steve talking about me. . ." Just to put your minds at ease, the answer to that question is, "Yes, I am talking about you." And I am talking about me. The Scriptures we'll be considering are relevant to every single one of us.

The first warning involves:

Hearing, Speaking, and Anger. *James 1:19–20 (ESV)* In these verses James gives

19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;

James gives three simple commands to ***everyone***, not merely to a few in the church. For the church to be healthy, all of us need to live out these commands. First, ". . .be quick to hear." The idea is that we should be eager to "get" the message that others

(including God) are trying to communicate. If we are quick to hear, we will show it in all sorts of ways: we'll seem interested because we are interested, we'll ask honest questions, we'll show it with our facial expressions and body language.

Second, “. . . be slow to speak.” Whereas we are to be eager to hear, we are to pause before we speak. We don't quickly say the first thing that pops into our minds because it might not be true, it might not be kind, or it might not be the need of the moment (Ephesians 4:29). We “taste our words before we speak them” (as Elizabeth Eliot once said). We consider carefully what we're going to say. Proverbs 18:13 says that “If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.”

Third, “. . . be slow to anger.” James seems to imply that when we're quick to speak, we're especially prone to use angry words. Of course, anger can be expressed in many different ways - sarcasm, insults, snide remarks, shouting, etc.

In verse 20 James gives the reason we should be slow to anger.

20 for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Anger isn't always a sin. We are told that Jesus got angry on at least a couple of occasions (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 3:5). But while Scripture acknowledges that there are times when we imitate God by being angry about something that angers Him, the dominant, overwhelming emphasis in Scripture concerning human anger is that our anger is most often sinful and destructive and the opposite of what the Spirit wants to manifest in our lives. [For example, “outbursts of anger” is listed in Galatians 5:20 as one of the “deeds of the flesh.” By contrast “patience” is mentioned as an aspect of the fruit of the Spirit a few verses later.]

Our anger does not accomplish God's righteousness/justice; it doesn't produce what God wants in the life of the person who is angry or in the lives of the people who experience their anger. A better course of action is to imitate God who is “**slow to anger**, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth” (Exodus 34:6).

We could list several reasons why being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger is wise and healthy relationally. For starters, if we really listen to other people, we could learn something. Proverbs 1:5 says that's what wise people do: “The wise hear and increase in learning.” We tend to think that a wise person is someone who knows everything; Proverbs says that a wise person listens and learns.

Another reason to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger is because when people feel heard they feel respected and/or loved. When we don't care what the other person is saying and dominate the conversation with too many words, they feel disrespected and unloved.

When we do premarital counseling, we have one session on communication. We do this exercise where the couple turns and faces each other, and one person tells the other person “one thing I wish you would do more often.” The ground rules are that the person

receiving this “wish” can’t defend or explain him/herself; their only objective is to try understand as completely as possible what the other person wants them to do more often. This little exercise is often incredibly insightful.

Here’s how it might go (and this is purely fictional, honestly).

Woman: “I wish you were show up on time. If you tell me you’re going to pick me up at 6:30, I want you to show up at 6:30 at the latest.”

Man: “So you want me to show up on time?”

Woman: “Yes.”

Man (to me): “How did I do?”

Me: “Ask her a ‘feeling’ question.”

Man: “So how does it make you feel when I’m late picking you up?”

Woman: “I feel disrespected, like an afterthought, like I’m a pretty low priority in your life.”

Man: “Why would you go there in your thinking and feeling?”

Woman: “Because my dad was never on time growing up, and that’s the way I felt.”

Do you see what happened there? Because he was quick to hear, she was willing to share a pretty deep fear with him (that she didn’t want to feel about her husband what she’d felt about her dad). He never would have gotten there if he had been quick to speak or quick to anger.

This week, if you’re willing, try this out in a conversation: when somebody shares something with you, be quick to hear. . . see how much you can learn about what they’re talking about (information, opinions, feelings). Ask questions, express interest, and do not talk about yourself. If you make that a habit, your relationships will deepen.

The second warning involves:

Controlling the Tongue. (*James 1:26-27*) Here in verse 26 James says that failure to control our speech reveals something rather sobering about a person’s faith.

26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.

James has us imagine someone who honestly says, “I consider myself to be religious.” To our ears “religious” sounds like “self-righteous,” but it just means pious or devout; in our day someone would say, “I consider myself to be a spiritual person.” But that person doesn’t “bridle their tongue.” Many Scriptures suggest that just as you bridle a horse to control where it goes, you should bridle your own tongue to control what you say. You refrain from saying things that hinder people from knowing and seeking God; you say things that encourage people to know and seek God.

James says that the person who cannot control his tongue “deceives his own heart” and “that man’s religion is worthless.” You are self-deceived in your heart if you think that you can simultaneously be God-honoring AND have an uncontrolled tongue. Those two things are incompatible.

In chapter 3 James will explain that an untamed tongue is “a restless evil and full of deadly poison.” If you go around poisoning people, making them sick with your words, you are a liability to God, not an asset. Paul made basically the same point in 1 Corinthians 13. There he said that lovelessness nullifies a person’s knowledge, wisdom, giftedness, and sacrifice. Loveless is often expressed through words that are arrogant, unkind, vengeful, etc. This is the brutal truth about our words: if we cannot control our tongue, our religion/spirituality is worthless. Again, this is an issue of the heart.

I’ve seen this over and over: gifted people who have a tremendous amount of knowledge and wisdom and experience lack influence in the lives of others because they cannot control their tongue. Again, it’s not a matter of conversational technique; it’s a matter of the heart. Arrogant words come from an arrogant heart. The same is true if words are judgmental, condescending, or self-promoting. It’s a matter of the heart.

We don’t have time to discuss verse 27, but there James talks about what is true of the person whose religion is worth something (as opposed to worthless): they give tangible help to the vulnerable and overlooked, and they keep themselves unstained by the world.

Proverbs 21:23 (NASB95) says:

23 He who guards his mouth and his tongue, Guards his soul from troubles.

Proverbs 10:19 (NASB95) says:

19 When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, But he who restrains his lips is wise.

The third warning involves:

Destructive Words. (*James 3:1–12*) This is a very sobering and even pessimistic warning about the tongue; it’s one we all need to take seriously. I’ll summarize all but a couple of verses.

After giving a warning to teachers in verse 1, James points out that something very small can control something very large, like a bit in a horse’s mouth or a rudder on a ship. In the same way, the tongue is a rather small part of the body, but it can control the whole course of your life. James says that the tongue is like a spark that sets an entire forest on fire. The tongue can be an instrument of incredible destruction. He says that the tongue is “set on fire by hell,” meaning that destructive, damaging words are one of Satan’s core schemes. In verse 8 James says:

8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

James leaves open the possibility that God can tame our tongues through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Unless God renovates our hearts (and therefore our words), we will spew

out deadly poison. Our words will be death-dealing instead of life-giving. That just shouldn't be the case:

9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

There's a fundamental inconsistency in blessing God with our words (as we've been doing this morning) and then turning around and cursing other people who are his image bearers. How would you feel if I praised you and then turned around and cursed your children (or your parents or your siblings)? Cursing people is the opposite of what God calls us to do. 1 Peter 3:9, for example, speaks of . . .

9 not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.

Most of the time we feel fully justified in insulting other people, don't we? "They insulted me, so I have a right to insult them." Not if you're a follower of Christ. We were called to imitate Christ who loved his enemies and prayed for those who persecuted him. It may feel good when you return evil for evil or insult for insult; but it's a betrayal of your calling in Christ.

Some of the biggest regrets I have over the past 40+ years as a believer involve things I've said that I wish I hadn't - careless words, hurtful words, and self-promoting words. I've had to apologize for my words more than anything else as a pastor, husband, dad, and friend.

I want to loop back to something we discussed last week, namely, ***three simple ways we can respond to the warnings James gives about our words.***

Pray. Last week I encouraged you to pray what David prayed at the end of Psalm 139, "Search me, O God, and know my heart. . . show me what you already know about my heart." This week I'd like to suggest another prayer, one found in Psalm 141:3.

3 Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!

It's as if David was inviting God to place armed guards outside the door of his mouth so that arrogant or careless or hurtful words don't escape from his mouth and commit a crime. I pray this prayer when I'm on my way to worship (where I can have 10 or 20 brief conversations with people over the course of 5 hours), when I'm on my way to a meeting, when I'm about to hang out with friends. The premise behind this prayer is that our words need to be restrained because of the damage they can do.

Listen. Notice to the conversations you have this week. In light of what we've learned from James, notice when you:

- * Interrupt people
- * Fail to ask honest questions when people are sharing something with you

- * Fail to be interested in the other person's experience because you're so eager to talk about your experience.
- * Slander other people - say things that make them look bad in the eyes of others
- * Gossip about people - "bearing bad news behind someone's back out of a bad heart" (Matthew Mitchell, *Resisting Gossip*, p. 23); maybe you want to make yourself look good by comparison or maybe you just want to be perceived as "in the know"
- * Talk too much - dominating a conversation
- * Critical and negative comments about others or yourself.

See where you need to grow in relation to the categories we've discussed today.

Treasure. Treasure up Scripture in your heart that help you heed these warning in James. Obviously you could meditate on the Scriptures we've discussed this morning. You could treasure up the book of Proverbs which has much to say about the tongue and speaking.

We're now going to sing the song, "Yet Not I but Through Christ in Me." This song reminds us that any progress we make in honoring God with our words is because Christ is at work within us. Only the Holy Spirit (Christ in me) can give us so full of compassion and contentment that it's second nature to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. . . self-control needed to "bridle our tongues" and speak only words that are profitable.