

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. As you will notice, today's passages are largely negative, explaining what we should avoid with our words; these Scriptures are primarily profitable for correction and reproof. Next week we'll consider Ephesians 4:29 which gives a positive vision for our words; that Scripture is primarily profitable for teaching and training in righteousness.

The first warning involves:

Hearing, Speaking, and Anger. James 1:19–20

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.

Proverbs 1:5 says that what wise people are skillful in hearing: "The wise hear and increase in learning." We tend to think that a wise person is someone who knows

everything. Wise people do know things; but Proverbs also tells us that a wise person listens and learns.

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, raised voices, 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 is such a thing as “righteous indignation,” whereby we are angry about something that angers God. But ***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). If we are true disciples of Jesus, we will be passionate about knowing and doing the will of God. Since anger does not produce the will of God, we should be passionate about being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. What we’re talking about here is a core aspect of our discipleship.

Again, this is a heart-level issue; it’s not a technique. Therefore, I need to ask you a question. On a heart-level, do you want the people in your home, in the church, in your workplace, in your friend group, and random people you encounter throughout the week to experience the will of God (God’s best for them)? If so, you invest spiritual energy in wanting and learning to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

In my experience, it is very rare to come across people who are skillfully and joyfully quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. It is so rare that it is striking. The norm is to blow by what you’ve said, or begin talking about themselves, or take the conversation a different direction (in other words, to be quick to speak and slow to hear). If you lock in on what somebody is saying and ask them thoughtful questions,

they will walk away from that conversation feeling loved and respected. I can stress this enough: this is not a technique; it is a way of speaking with people because on a heart-level you legitimately care about them.

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. This is 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 in detail, but there James talks about what is true of the person whose religion is worth something (as opposed to worthless):

27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Before God the religion of those who don't bridle their tongues is worthless. By contrast, the people described in verse 27 give tangible help to the vulnerable and overlooked,

and they keep themselves unstained by the world. Their religion is a delight to the heart of God the Father.

If you read the book of Proverbs you will find numerous verses that reinforce James' warning about controlling the tongue. Here are a couple:

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.

Again, the goal isn't merely to grit your teeth and say fewer words, all the while internally longing to talk and talk and talk. No, the goal is to become the type of person who simply doesn't need to talk so much; you don't need to have the last word, and you don't need to impress people with your knowledge. The goal is to become a person characterized by peace and patience and self-control.

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, tells us:

9 Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain 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 are 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 45 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. James' warning about destructive words rings very true to me.

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 even yourself)

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

Treasure. Treasure up Scripture in your heart (as the psalmist did in Psalm 119:11) that will help you heed these warning in James. I'd recommend that you memorize James 1:19-20 about being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Instead of an afterthought, it could become a light that the Holy Spirit shines on every conversation you have.

As well, I would commend the book of Proverbs to you; it 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 fill our hearts 1) with compassion and contentment so that it's second nature to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, and 2) with self-control so that we are able to "bridle our tongues" and avoid words that are destructive to others in our lives. I hope you can be with us next week as Sam teaches about "The Purpose of Words."