

Wisdom and Words

James 1:19-21 (26; 2:12-13; 3:1-12; 4:11-12; 5:12)

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Words are powerful. Some words are powerful because of the meaning people have invested in them over time. Or because they touch us by the way they describe reality. Some are powerful because they come from the source of all power and wisdom. Words like: "In the beginning God created"; "The Lord is my shepherd"; "For God so loved."

What are some other words that carry great meaning? How about, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Or, "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union."

Poets use words to stir up various feelings and images: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood" (Robert Frost).

What about the words "once upon a time"? What memories and feelings and anticipation do they conjure?

Other words are powerful, they have meaning, because of the people who say them, the relationships where they're said. Just the right word from the right person can make your day or bring you down. What we say to each other can have that kind of impact. Words can hurt or heal, blast or bless.

Someone has said that the shortest distance between two people is straight line—a straight line like, "I love you" or "I'm sorry" or "I forgive you" (Bob Benson, *Come Share the Being* 79-80).

Words and relationships. What we say and how we get along. These themes run all through the letter of James. James deals with the power of speech, speech and judgment, controlling our tongues as a sign of self-control, and the need for speech and action to go together. There's a large section on "pure speech" in 3:1-4:12. At the heart of that section is a discourse on wisdom (3:13-18). If we're going to have pure speech, if we're going to have right relationships, we need God's wisdom—that good and perfect gift that comes down from the Father of lights.

James introduces the theme of speech in chapter one. After showing that God is the source of wisdom, and of every good and perfect gift, James lifts up pure speech as an aspect of wisdom (1:19). The wise person, the one who has benefitted from God's goodness and who has new life, will be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. Angry outbursts don't produce God's righteousness. They don't lead to right attitudes or right relationships or the justice that God desires.

James may have had in mind the violent speech of the Zealots as they called for rebellion against Rome and for dealing violently with Jewish leaders who cooperated with Rome. That wasn't the way to achieve God's justice.

For us, aggressive, angry outbursts don't help build up relationships. Such outbursts rarely achieve what we might expect them to. James says it's better to listen and then to speak out of a heart that's purified by God's word. His themes start blending as James gives practical guidance. Not just hearing, but doing God's word requires pure or wise speech, generosity, and purity of life (1:26-27). Real religion involves keeping our tongue under control. So our speech helps express the reality of our relationship with God.

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment. (2:12-13)

Here James reminds us of the coming judgment. We need to be aware of God's judgment when we speak and act. James may be echoing Jesus when he said, "But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36-37). Jesus and James both recognize that speech and action have to go together. They're not promoting simply saying the right words without doing anything. But they are saying that what we say and what we do reveals what's in our hearts. We want our

hearts to be full of heavenly wisdom that's pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Not the earthly, unspiritual, devilish wisdom that produces envy, selfish ambition, disorder and every evil practice (3:15-17).

In 3:1-12, James deals with the power of the tongue and the need to control it. "Tongue" here stands for all our speaking. First, he makes clear who he primarily has in mind. "Not many of you should become teachers ... because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." James identifies himself as a teacher and issues a warning to those who would share that ministry or would try to put themselves forward as teachers in the church whether or not they're called and gifted. Because of the impact of teaching on the church's life, teachers will be held accountable by God for what they teach. It's not something to rush into without a call from God and a real sense of the seriousness of the task.

At the same time, there may have been problems with divisions in the church. The angry and spiteful talk James addresses would be part of the problem, especially if teachers were doing some of the gossiping, attacking, and fighting.

So James has teachers in mind all through this section. But he's also addressing everybody. He says, "*We all* stumble in many ways."

Then James declares that the ability to control what we say indicates complete self-control. The person who's never at fault in what he or she says is perfect (that is, mature and complete).

Now James illustrates the power of the tongue, the importance of what we say. He uses several examples to get across his point that though the tongue is small it's significant. We can control a whole horse with a small bit in its mouth. Although a ship is large and driven by strong winds, a small rudder steers it where the pilot wants it to go. The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

The point of these examples isn't that the tongue controls the person, but that an uncontrolled tongue means an uncontrolled person. Though small, the tongue is powerful and important. What we say may seem insignificant, but it's actually important. As parents, we sometimes discover that our children have been listening to things we've said that we didn't

really intend for them to hear—or we didn't think they'd pay attention to. Why don't they give that same attention to the things we say that we want them to listen to?

James slowly shifts from the tongue's power to the evil of the tongue to the need for proper control. The main point is not that the tongue steers the ship, but that often the right helmsman isn't in control. A heart of wisdom is what can control the tongue.

Here's another example of the tongue's power. Think of a great forest fire started by a small spark. The tongue is like that. It's a fire that sets ablaze both the person speaking and the people listening. Think of some of our expressions when someone says something that makes us angry: "That burns me up! "That really makes my blood boil!"

The fire of hot, burning, angry speech spreads quickly and is difficult to quench. You can't put that toothpaste back in the tube. You've probably heard about the gossip who was told to place a feather in each yard around town and then go back and gather up all the feathers. Of course, they had blown away. There was no getting them back.

James says that the tongue is a world of evil. That is, the tongue represents the evil world among the parts of the body. Because speech is hard to control, it's in speech that we first observe "the world" in our hearts.

Not only does corrupt speech display a corruption within, it spreads corruption all over a person. The tongue's fire sets ablaze the course of a person's whole life. And the tongue itself is set on fire by hell. This doesn't mean the tongue as the God-given source of language, but as something corrupted by the fall. The Evil One is the source of the corruption, bitterness, envy and such that spew out in the rush of impure speech and that spread all over our lives and relationships.

James isn't through demonstrating the tongue's power and evil. His next example refers to all the animals that humans are able to tame. The irony is that though we can tame all these animals, we're unable to tame our own tongues. The tongue is a restless evil that we can't control and it's full of deadly poison. Impure speech, full of burning anger, is restless rather than peaceful and it's death-dealing instead of life-giving.

This leads right into James' real-life example in 3:9-10. The instability of the double-minded (1:6-8) is reflected in the restlessness of the "double-tongued." If you play a brass instrument in band, it's a good thing to be able to double-tongue—you can play more notes faster. But in life, to be double-tongued is a bad thing. Maybe this is where the phrase "speaking with a forked tongue" comes from.

James points out how, with the same tongue, we praise God, our Lord and Father, and we curse people who are made in God's image. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. We praise God in church but then we speak evil of other people who represent God.

In James' day the king or emperor would set up his statue in the cities of his realm. If anyone insulted or cursed the statue, they were treated as if they had cursed the emperor to his face, because the statue was the image of the emperor. So cursing, speaking evil of, or insulting a person is like insulting God. How can we praise and insult God at the same time?

Imagine you finish singing a hymn of praise in church and then as you pull out of the parking lot someone cuts in front of you, or the restaurant messes up your order, or somebody else does something irritating. What do you say about those people? Do we know the right words to say about God but can't say anything good about other people?

James says, "My brothers and sisters, this should not be!" Fresh water and salt water can't come from the same spring. Olives don't grow on fig trees and figs don't grow on grapevines. That kind of thing is bizarre in nature. It should be just as strange in Christian speech and behavior. If our hearts were really whole in devotion to God, we wouldn't have this problem of being double-tongued. But the doubleness in speech and action reveals double-mindedness, mixed loyalties, and confused commitments.

The antidote to impure speech is the heavenly wisdom that comes down from God. Wisdom in James is very similar to the Holy Spirit in the rest of the New Testament. The characteristics of wisdom in 3:13-18 are similar to the fruit of the Spirit that Paul mentions in Galatians 5:22-23. We need God's Spirit to work in us, we need God's powerful word to be implanted in us to make us whole so we'll have integrity, so our actions and words and inner life are consistent.

Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? (4:11-12)

Here James concludes the main section of the letter with another call to let God be God. The person who is purified by God's wisdom won't condemn others. To slander someone else is to set ourselves up as that person's judge. But in trying to judge or condemn our brothers and sisters, we actually set ourselves up as judges of God's law. If we're doing that, we're not keeping the Law but breaking the very Law we claim to uphold. In trying to be a judge we set ourselves in God's place. James says, "Who do we think we are?"

James gets in one more word about words toward the end of the letter. "Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not 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" (5:12). Typical Greek letters at that time included an oath certifying that what was said in the letter was true. James replaces that oath with a quotation from Jesus (Matthew 5:33-37). He says that Christians shouldn't take oaths. He's not talking about official oaths, such as in court. James is addressing the use of oaths to prove integrity in everyday conversation. Such oaths divide speech into two levels. Some statements are sworn to and so they must be true. Other statements are just normal speech and may or may not be true. Jesus said we'd be accountable for every word (Mt 12:36). All our words are to be true. Everything is to be open and honest. God hears everything we say, so we need to speak as though speaking before God—with integrity and honesty.

It's tempting to want to withhold some truth or exaggerate the truth to make ourselves look better or to protect ourselves. But that just doesn't work. I think of a scene in a movie where a student is called in front of the school to give evidence against some classmates who vandalized school property. He doesn't want to get in trouble but he doesn't want to rat on

his friends either. So he tries to tell the truth, without actually telling the truth. He squirms and evades and says, "I couldn't see clearly," and so on (*The Scent of a Woman*).

James, following Jesus, says, "Just say 'Yes' or 'No.' Let your life and your words be so consistent that people can trust what you say." Let's humble ourselves and receive God's word, take in God's wisdom, accept God's grace that will purify our hearts and make us able to speak and live as followers of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.