

SERMON TITLE: Warning! Words in Use

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SCRIPTURE: James 3:1-12

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SERIES SUMMARY

Not a day goes by that we aren't shaped by words—words spoken to us, words on the news, words on social media, our own words. We're shaped by words because there is a mysterious and yet certain power in them. The Bible says that there is life and death in the power of the tongue. Words are used to build up and give life. Or, sometimes, they're used to tear down and take life. So, how can we be sure that we are speaking life to others? How can we avoid words that cut and tear down? How can we know we are honoring God with what comes out of our mouths? Answer: God himself is not silent. He is the God who speaks. In Scripture and ultimately in Jesus, we have God's holy communication to us. His word should be the primary thing that shapes our words so that others might find life in him.

Proverbs 18:21 says, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue and those who love it will eat its fruits." All of us have said things that, as soon as the words left our mouth, we thought—"Oh, I wish I hadn't said that," right? Some of your most *embarrassing moments* have been when you said the wrong thing at the wrong time. Some of the most *destructive moments* in your life relationally were when you let something slip that you shouldn't have said and as soon as those words came out of your mouth, you saw the look in the eyes of the person you said them to, and you knew you had hurt them deeply and you wished you could take those words back, you wish you could hit "delete," but you couldn't. And we all know the futility of saying, "I didn't mean it the way it sounded." I mean, we've never said, "I didn't mean it the way it sounded," and then had somebody say, "Oh, okay, that makes me feel a whole lot better." Nope. It doesn't happen, does it? No, you can't take words back once they've been spoken. It's hard to undo the damage of careless words b/c words are powerful—they can be life-giving or life-crushing. Some of our greatest regrets are tied to the hurtful words we've spoken. But also, some of our greatest joys revolve around words as well. Words matter—words can hurt, words can heal, words can make us happy.

Today, we begin a new summer sermon series entitled "The Words We Use." And, we will be looking at the words we use *with God*, the words we use *with each other*, and the words we use *on mission*. The first two weeks will be a general introduction to this subject that's in everyone's mouths by helping us see how God's word must shape our words. If life and death are in the power of the tongue, we need to take what we say and how we say very seriously. I can assure you; God takes our words very seriously. And there's no better place to see how seriously God takes our words than James 3:1-12. ...In this short letter, James, the half-brother of Jesus, and the leader of the early church, has already talked about the importance of the words we use (cf 1:13; 1:19-20; 1:26; 2:12). According to James, our words—what we say and how we say it—are inseparably connected to the integrity of the professions of our faith. He's saying, "Let what you believe about Jesus, shape what you say and how you say it. But in chp3, he underscores just how difficult that is. James says some very shocking things, even discouraging things about our tongues. The question is: What is James doing with what he's saying about the words we use? What is he doing with what he is saying to us about the tongue?"

READ James 3:1-12 — James begins by highlighting how God holds those who teach the Scriptures, to a higher standard of accountability for what and how they teach. But in v2, he broadens his application to every follower of Jesus. He says, "We all stumble in many ways" especially in the words we use. We know that's true, but the problem is, we don't think it's a big deal. "I mean, they're only words, right?" But James says, "No, it is a big deal b/c if you can learn how to tame your tongue, you will become more and more spiritually mature. He illustrates his point by talking about how we can control 1000lb race horses with a small bit in their mouths and how a massive ocean liner is controlled by a small rudder. His point is—(1) Our tongues determine the course of our entire lives. The tongue has the amazing potential to affect the whole direction of our lives. And, Peter adds to that thought by telling us that the words we use can affect the quality of our lives (cf 1Pet3:8-10). But not only does your tongue direct the course of your life, but also, (2) Our words have the potential to direct the course of other people's lives. ...Many of us can still feel the scorch of somebody else's tongue. If we had spiritual eyes, we would see that we are all *burn victims* to some extent. We could look around and see at least 3rd degree burns on just about everyone we know (and a lot of smoke damage as well)—b/c of the dangerous power of an unbridled tongue. That old saying—"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me"—that just is not true, is it? ... We've all been burned and we've all burned others with our words.

James has said in v2—when it comes to the words we use, we all stumble in many ways. And then in v8 he says, “No one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” Wow! ...It almost sounds hopeless, doesn't it? He seems pretty pessimistic. He's saying, “There is no final solution to the problem we have with our tongues.” And, notice, he is talking to Spirit-filled believers (cf “my brothers/sisters in vv 10 and 12). James tells us there is no final solution—there's no A,B,C—1,2,3 application that tames the tongue. He says, “The moment you open your mouth, the potential for sparking a fire is always present.” He's saying, “This side of heaven, we won't perfectly tame the tongue. But, that's not an excuse, it's a warning.

So, what is James doing with what he's saying to us about the words we use? He's posting a huge warning sign—like a big yellow and black “Danger—High Voltage” sign. We think the tongue is no “big deal,” but it is. We think the tongue is not really all that dangerous, but it is. We think praising God and putting people down is normal, but it's not. He's giving us a warning sign. He's saying, “Warning! Unless your faith reaches your mouth and controls your tongue, there is no telling what kind of damage you might do.” James doesn't give us an application, but based on what James has said about the impossibility of completely bringing our tongues under control, here's my application. (1) **A**dmit it when you sin with your words and ask forgiveness. (2) **B**e quick to forgive others when they sin against you with their tongues. (3) **C**ommit Proverbs 18:21 to memory—“Death and life are in the power of the tongue and those who love it will eat its fruits.” ...So, there you go, a 1,2,3—A,B,C application .

It's true—you can't take your words back once they've been spoken, but you can own what you've said by admitting you blew it. You can ask forgiveness. And then do whatever you need to do to make things right. ...*Oh Lord, let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. I ask this in the name of Jesus, the Living Word, amen.*

Discussion Starters —

1. It is shocking to realize that something that seems relatively innocuous like the tongue could actually do so much harm. That thought needs to be stirring in our minds as we read James 3:1-12. READ 3:1-12.
2. James has a lot to tell us here about the “tongue.” When he is speaking about the tongue, what really is the issue? What's he talking about?
3. Why do we tend to think that “the words we use” are no big deal?
4. What kinds of images does he use to talk about the tongue and talking? ...Try and summarize what he is saying through these various metaphors and images?
5. After you hear all that James has to say about the dangers of the “tongue,” how does it leave you feeling? Do you think he's overstating the case? Why or why not?
6. James seems to be long on warning but short on practical advice. ...What do you think you should do in light of his warnings about the dangers that can be found in the “tongue”?
7. What is your biggest “aha” and/or “take-away” from this passage and this message? ...