

Practically Spiritual Words

Please turn in your Bibles to James 3. When I was a kid, I heard that anyone who knows martial arts has to register their hands as lethal weapons. I thought, how cool would that be? As a teenager I dreamed about walking down the school halls with all this power in my hands. Locked and loaded, 24/7. Armed with hands! It would even be cool getting pulled over by the police, just so I could tell the officer that I was licensed to carry my hands.

Turns out, that was just an urban legend. People who know martial arts don't need to register their hands, no matter how dangerous their hands might be. And while most of us may not have deadly weapons at the ends of our arms, the Bible tells us that all of us do carry a deadly weapon with us all the time. It's called the tongue. If you're visiting us, we're in a series called Practically Spiritual and this morning we're going to talk about practically spiritual words. Let's read what God's word has to say about the tongue in **James 3:1-12** and then let's pray.

Background:

The writer of this letter is James the brother of the Lord Jesus. James wasn't one of the twelve apostles and in fact, he didn't believe in Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry but he became a believer after the resurrection and quickly became a leader in the early church. In Acts 15 we see that he presided over the Jerusalem council, so he was a respected leader. His epistle may not have the depth of theology that Paul's letters have, but it is one of the most practical letters in the NT and here in chapter 3 he gets really practical about our tongues.

A caution about the tongue

He begins with this caution: don't be quick to become a teacher of God's word. The reason for this has to do with the importance of our words on judgment day.

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. Vs. 1

We know that we will answer for every word we speak on judgment day because Jesus gives us this warning in Matt. 12, "*I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*" Matt. 12:36-37

Teachers will be judged more strictly for this reason: if you believe a lie, you will be judged for that lie and its influence and effect on your life. If you teach that lie to a hundred people, you will be judged for the influence and effect that lie has had on those hundred people, and then the influence and effect that those hundred people teaching that lie to others and so on. Your judgment will grow exponentially. Conversely, if you teach the truth of God's word to a hundred people, you will be rewarded for the fruit of that truth and its effect on those hundred people and the effect they have on others. So don't be too eager to teach people, because you will answer to God for what you teach them and how it influences their lives.

1. The power of our tongues (vs 2-5)

Then James makes some pretty amazing statements about the power of the tongue. In verse 2 he acknowledges that we all stumble (sin) in many ways. But if anyone could be perfect in what they say,

they could be perfect in every other area of life. If you could control your tongue perfectly, you could be perfect. But no one can do that.

The reason I wanted to include a message on practically spiritual words is because so many of our problems - especially our relational problems - originate from the words we speak. We will never be perfect this side of eternity, but a big part of God's sanctifying work in us is cleaning up our words. Our words have tremendous power in our lives and in our relationships. In verses 3-6 James teaches us that the power of the tongue is both directive and destructive.

a. *The tongue's power is directive (vv. 3-4)*

³ *If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.*

James uses two metaphors to illustrate the directive power of the tongue: first he compares the tongue to the small bit in the horse's mouth. The horse is big, the bit is small, but you can direct this great big horse simply by pulling this little bit one way or the other.

The same is true of the rudder on a boat. The rudder is small in comparison with the boat but the direction of the boat is determined by the direction you point the rudder. In the same way the tongue has directive power in our lives. It has a powerful influence in setting the course of our lives, and most specifically, our relationships, whether for good or for evil.

To get real practical, it's good for us to pause every once and a while and consider where we are. Where our relationships are at. Where our marriage (if we're married) is at, where our relationship with our family is at, where our relationship with our friends, our co-workers, our neighbors, our church family. But we can't stop there - because it's not enough to know where things are at, we need to identify how things got there. There are a lot of people who can eloquently identify everything that is wrong in their relationships, but seem to have no awareness of how they got there. Or they blame everyone else for getting them where they are. There are people who have this long string of broken relationships behind them and they think it's everyone else's fault. And in rare cases, maybe it is, but most of the time, we'd all do well to consider how did my words, my tongue, direct my life and relationships where they are right now? How did they steer things to this place?

- Angry words
- Critical words
- Hurtful words
- Blaming words
- Sarcastic words
- Inappropriate words - words that cross lines into impropriety

Our tongues might be small but they have directive power - like the bit in the mouth of a horse or a rudder on a ship.

ILL: In their book, *We Can Work It Out*, authors Cliff Notarius and Howard Markman studied newlyweds over the first 10 years of marriage to discover what the difference was between marriages that last and marriages that end. What they discovered was that marriages that eventually split up began with the couples putting each other down twice as much as the couples that stayed together. Pattern escalated until after 10 years their insults were five times as frequent as the couples that stayed together. Notarius

"Hostile putdowns act as cancerous cells that, if unchecked, erode the relationship over time. In the end, relentless unremitting negativity takes control and the couple can't get through a week without major blowups."

Somewhere along the line their tongues set a course of tearing one another down and that course only intensified over time and delivered them either to divorce or an unhappy, unloving marriage. We should all look at where our relationships are at, and consider the contribution our words made in getting us there. The tongue has tremendous directive power in our lives.

b. The tongue's power is destructive (vv. 5-6)

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

James goes from the directive power of the tongue to the destructive power of the tongue by comparing the tongue to a raging fire. Fire can be a good thing when properly contained and used, but James' imagery is all negative – a great forest fire is set on fire by a small spark. Again, the tongue is a very small member in our body, but its potential for destruction is vast.

James could have said something like, "see how a great tree is brought down by a small ax" if all he wanted to convey was a small thing bringing down a much larger thing. But a fire is different: what starts as a small spark can grow and grow until it blazes out of control ravaging huge amounts of forest and bringing death and destruction in its path for vast amounts of area.

ILL: a couple weeks ago Northern California was devastated by wildfires that scorched over 220,000 acres of land and claimed at least 42 lives with it. Investigators still haven't determined what started the fires, but believe they might have been started by a spark from a malfunctioning power line or transformer. Just a spark. That's all it takes. Lives and homes and property were destroyed by the out of control blaze started by a spark. That's what James says our tongue can be. A little spark from our tongue can do immense damage.

When I think of words that set things on fire, I think of anger. Anger is like a fire. In fact we say that someone burns with anger. Or when someone gets angry, we say they have a short fuse. Angry words are like fire, that scorch the people they're aimed at. But we can start a small spark and then find that it rages far hotter and far bigger what we intended it to, but now the fire is way beyond our ability to control it. Angry parents often set a spark of anger that then burns in the hearts of their kids. And there comes a point where the parent wants to put the fire out but now it's raging way beyond their ability to douse it. Angry parents often beget angry children.

Or gossip. We can start a rumor about someone that is impossible to recall. People's reputation have been scorched by gossip. Our tongues can start a spark that can lead to a blaze of destruction.

Once again, it is worthwhile for us to prayerfully consider: has my tongue started any fires? Jesus said that one day we will give account to God for every careless word we have spoken. The NIV translates it "empty word". If we will have to give account for the careless, empty words we have spoken, how much more for the deliberate, destructive words we have spoken? When we have torn someone down in anger? When we have hurt someone's reputation by our words? Our tongues have tremendous power to direct and to destroy.

2. The source of our tongue's power (6-8)

James reveals the problem is not our tongue. The problem goes a whole lot deeper than our tongues! Follow the flow of thought in verse 6: *The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire* (there's that directive and destructive nature of the tongue again), *and is itself set on fire by hell.*

The tongue corrupts and sets the course (literally, the wheel) of our lives in a destructive direction, but the source of that fire is hell. What does James mean by that? I submit that James is talking about our hearts. Jesus said this about what comes out of our mouths:

What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. – Matt 15:18-20

The word for hell that James uses, and Jesus used often, is the word "Gehenna" which originated from the valley of henna where in Old Testament days Israelites sacrificed their children to a false god called Molech. Later it would become a garbage dump that would continuously burn outside of Jerusalem.

Our tongues are set on fire by hell – not literally place where the devil and his angels will be tormented, but the garbage heap of our sinful hearts. When we speak lies, slander, gossip, accusations, boastings, we are speaking the devil's language. Our sinful hearts, apart from regenerating and renewing work of Christ, are smoldering garbage dumps. And we spread that garbage and spontaneous combustion wherever we go. That's what James is talking about.

Then, to add another metaphor to the mix, James says our tongues are full of deadly poison (vs. 8). There is a tiny frog found in Central and South America, called the Phyllobates Terribilis, also known as the "poison arrow frog" and its poison is so toxic that one seven hundred millionth of an ounce is enough to kill a person. Some of the natives obtain this poison from the frogs (carefully) and dip their arrows and darts in the poison so that whatever they shoot dies quickly. Our tongues are a deadly poison that can literally speak toxic death over other people.

So what can we do about it? If we look around and we start to see the damage our words have done, start to see the relational fires that we have at least added to, what can we do to change? How do we tame our tongues?

3. The taming of our tongues (9-18)

On a windswept hill in an English country churchyard there is an old gray tombstone with some words etched into the slate that you need to get really close to read. They say:

Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, / lies Arabella Young, / Who on the twenty-fourth of May, / began to hold her tongue.

James clearly tells us in verse 8 that "no human being can tame the tongue." Like Arabella Young, we won't have the ability to hold our tongues - not perfectly, not always. And yet, paradoxically, that's exactly what James says is a vital evidence that our faith is genuine.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. James 1:26

If we claim to be religious, if we claim to follow Christ, but our faith hasn't affected how we talk, James the in-your-face guy writes, "your religion is worthless." If we praise God in church, then tear our spouse or kids or parents down, our faith is worthless. If we talk with great knowledge about biblical truths, and then slander and gossip about people in the church, our faith is worthless. If we bless God and criticize and scorch people with our words, our faith is worthless. When we combine these two passages we see that we can't tame our tongue, but a genuine faith in Christ can't help BUT tame our tongue!!

Getting back to chapter 3 in verse 9 James goes on to say this double speak ought not be so in our lives: ⁹ *With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.* ¹⁰ *From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers,^[a] these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same water both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. Vv.11-12*

The point here really isn't about water or ponds or fig trees. He's talking about the heart. Our words, our tongues, reveal what's in our heart. If we have a tongue problem we really have a heart problem. The garbage dump of our hearts must be cleaned up if the hellfire of our tongues are to be cleaned up. And that is exactly what the gospel promises to do! Jesus not only mercifully forgives and cleanses us from our garbage dump hearts, but He gives us a new heart and a new mind.

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. Ezekiel 36:26 (ESV)

Tongues should reflect that new heart. But how? And why do we still have outbursts of anger, gossip, uncharitable criticisms and so on? The Bible tells us there's a battle being fought between our old nature and our new nature. Dominion of sin has been broken and we have been given a new heart. But the power and presence of sin is still very much present and our old man needs to be put to death every day. Every day we need to die to old man and live to new man. But to do that we need to receive power and a wisdom from above that will permeate how we think and feel and talk.

James 3:13-16

There is a wisdom that leads to heart stuff like jealousy and selfish ambition and bitterness but that wisdom is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. This kind of "wisdom" sounds wise, but it leads to disorder - broken and chaotic relationships - and vile practices. It's a wisdom that comes from hell.

Vv. 17-18

The wisdom from above is more than a mental wisdom - it brings a heart change. It is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. These are heart qualities that will affect our speech. Every day we want to ask the Holy Spirit to shine His light on our hearts and our words and bring conviction and the wisdom that comes from above.

- *First pure* - If our speech is sexually inappropriate, even if it goes no further than crude jokes, it reveals an impure heart. The wisdom that comes from above is pure and will lead to pure speech.
- *Then peaceable* - If we frequently say things that stir up contention (I'm not talking about humble courage to speak truth, but needlessly provocative words) - I've met people who always seem to have relational fires wherever they go - we should ask the Holy Spirit to make us peaceable. Our words help to diffuse, rather than detonate, trouble.
- *Gentle* - Are the words we speak harsh? I've had to have the Spirit do some operating on me over this. I didn't normally go around saying harsh things, but if I got riled up, I could say harsh

things. Especially to those closest to me. Many of the conflicts that Janice and I had were exacerbated by my saying harsh things out of anger. I'm not saying that I've arrived in this area, but over the years the Lord convicted me of this sin and has helped me be more gentle in my approach. The word gentle isn't code for wimpy, it's actually a fruit of the Spirit. Practically spiritual means dealing with people gently - even when we disagree, even when they're doing wrong. If speaking harshly, or tearing people down, or when you get in a conflict exaggerating or putting down with sarcasm is a fair description of your words, ask the Holy Spirit for an increase of the fruit of gentleness in your life.

- *Open to reason* - Are you stubborn? Do you refuse to admit when you're wrong even when the evidence is overwhelming? Do people feel like they're hitting a brick wall when they try to reason with you? These are all heart conditions that come out in our words.
- Do our words express *mercy*? Do our words bear *good fruit*?

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits. Prov. 18:21

This Proverb tells us that whichever side our words land on - whether we speak life or speak death over others - we're gonna eat the fruit of them. Sometimes we need to stop and just consider our diet: what fruit have I been eating lately? Because what we sow with our words we will one day reap - make it a good harvest: ¹⁸ *And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. Vs. 18*

Let me close by emphasizing two things: 1) the importance of our taking this seriously and 2) the hope we have in Christ. If you have a serious tongue problem - maybe you fall into one or many of these categories - and you're hurting people right and left and have a wake of damaged relationships behind you. Let me tell you who should be very, very worried. Cause there are some people - maybe even in this room - who should be very worried. It's the one who takes it lightly. The one who shrugs this message off and these warnings that James gives and it won't make a bit of difference in how you speak. James says if your faith isn't affecting your tongue, not bridling the words you speak, then your faith is worthless. It's like a fake diamond - might look pretty but it is empty of value. That person is dangerously deceived.

But let me emphasize the hope in Christ for the one who hears this message, and inwardly is asking the Lord to forgive you for the ways your tongue has done damage and asking the Spirit to search and change your heart. Oh, there is all the hope in the world for you even if you have a history of great damage because your humble turning to Christ evidences a genuine and valuable faith. Christ and Christ alone can change our hearts but O how he can change us when we come to him in faith. Let's go to God in faith and allow Him to convict us of ways our tongues have done damage, but in faith ask Him to change our hearts and tame our tongues.

Father, we have a tongue problem because we have a heart problem. Our hearts burn with sinful impulses like anger, jealousy, pride, selfishness, contentiousness, lack of compassion, and other garbage heap sins. But Jesus, you gave your life to forgive us of these sins, and you gave us your Holy Spirit to free us from these sins by removing the garbage from our hearts and replacing it with the love of Christ. Right now, in the privacy of our hearts, we want to confess to you the ways that our tongues have done damage.

And we ask you to forgive us. Cleanse us. Change us. Change our words by changing our hearts. Let the power of the Holy Spirit free us from old habits and empower us to live for the glory of God and to speak words that glorify God and produce a harvest of righteousness. We are believing You to do it in us, O Lord. And we will give You all the glory in Jesus' name. Amen.