



## WAR OF THE WORDS

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It's good to be back this morning to talk some more with you about the book of James. I know that a week at a cabin on a lake in Minnesota sounds like a vacation, but it was more than that: it was really research for this series. Because while we were on our trip, I watched a movie and read the newspaper. It was hard work, but I was happy to do it for your sake.

The movie we rented was *Batman Begins*. Now if you're not a fan of the bat, I can't help you. But I have to say that I think James might have liked this movie. The city of Gotham is in trouble, and to the outside world, Bruce Wayne seems to be ignoring the problems and focused more on living the wild life of a billionaire bachelor. He bumps into his childhood sweetheart Rachel, and he tries to tell her that he's still a good person on the inside, despite appearances, and that she shouldn't pay attention to the way things look. Rachel says to him, "Bruce, it's not who you are on the inside, it's what you do that defines you."

That in a nutshell is the message of James: It's not who you are on the inside, it's what you do that defines you. Stop saying you believe in God and start acting like it. Let your deeds prove your faith. He challenges us over and over again with the idea that followers of Christ need to show it in the way they live.

James gets under our skin in any number of practical ways. He has steered us away from anger. He has shown us the need for compassion. He has pointed out the dangers of playing favorites and shrinking the gospel to the point where it only applies to certain people.

Those concepts hit close to home for most of us. If it seems like James has been talking directly to you, hang on. He's just getting warmed up. Today he's got something more to say to everybody.

### **James 3:1-12**

*Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.*

*When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*

*All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

*With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*

I said earlier that I had read the newspaper on our trip. When I was on the plane, I picked up a USA Today, and the story that jumped out at me was the one about President Bush at the G8 summit. Did you see that in the news? Apparently, the President didn't realize his microphone was on, and over the course of four minutes, he made a number of colorful comments about different world leaders. News analysts discussed how it would probably not cause any ripples here in America, but that the remarks could make some international relationships rather icy because other diplomats could be insulted by what he had to say.

We shake our heads at a story like that, but how many times have you been glad that your words haven't been overheard? James wants us to know that as Christians, the microphone is always on. Our words have repercussions.

I heard once that statistically speaking, 100% of all motorcycles will end up in an accident. There's at least one wreck for every bike that's on the road. That statistic may or may not be accurate for motorcycles, but it is definitely true about talking. 100% of people who can talk will say something they shouldn't. If you talk, there's gonna be a wreck. It's inevitable.

The writer of Proverbs says it well:

**Proverbs 10:19**

*When words are many, sin is not absent.*

It's true. When I look back over my past, I have plenty of things I've done that I regret. But I have a much longer list of things I've SAID that I wish I could take back.

And yet talking isn't normally something we include in our list of the big sins. It's not murder. It's not robbery. How bad can it be, right? For as much damage as we do with our words, we don't take them nearly as seriously as James does. He's all fired up over talking. His letter serves as a wake up call, telling us that what we say is not nearly as harmless as we'd like to think. If that is true, then our mouths are often a tool for evil, and we need to pay attention to what's happening when we speak.

James tells us that this is a universal problem. I don't think any of us would argue with him on that one. Everybody trips over their tongue and makes mistakes in what they say. According to James, if somebody ever figures out how to never say anything wrong, they will have found the key to living the perfect life. I find it very refreshing that he includes himself in with the rest of us when he says "We all stumble in many ways." Everybody has this problem.

Have you ever heard of the term "papal infallibility"? It's a teaching of the Catholic church that says whatever the Pope says about faith and morality cannot possibly be wrong, because God is guiding him. I'm not here this morning to trash talk the Catholic church, but that particular idea seems to go against what James is saying. All people – including the Pope – are sinful, and that applies not only to what we do, but also to what we say.

Now there are all kinds of ways we mess up in our words. Some are honest mistakes. Just ask Pat Heath about some of the science illustrations I've botched in my sermons. I need to not refer to chemical compounds if I don't want to look like an idiot. When we speak from ignorance, we're bound to say something out of line.

But James isn't talking about those kinds of errors. He has something much more sinister in mind. He's concerned about the words that reflect what's going on in our hearts, words with motives behind them. Jesus said,

**Matthew 12:34-35**

*For whatever is in your heart determines what you say.*

This is more than getting our facts wrong in what we say. We're talking about the picture our speech paints about the conditions inside of us. And it's not a pretty picture. We are full of fear and pride and selfish desires and hurts and anger and resentment and misunderstanding, and they all come tumbling out of our mouths in a variety of combinations. So there's often no telling what the real motivation was behind our words. Whether we want to admit it or not, those feelings and attitudes color our speech.

That speech in turn guides our actions. As we formulate our words, they determine what we do. That's why James says the tongue corrupts the whole body. It has so much influence over our choices that we can't really do anything without our words – either words in our minds or words that we've spoken aloud.

James uses three metaphors to talk about the tongue, and if we take the liberty to expand on them a bit, I believe we will start to see the depth of the problem he's talking about. First he mentions

### **The Bit**

*When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.*

I love the illustrations James has chosen, because they still work today. Even in suburban Washington, we understand the concept of a bit in a horse's mouth. It's pretty amazing: this little piece of metal is used to control a 1,000 lb. beast.

That's the key word there: control. James says bits are used to make horses obey. I think the first way we misuse our speech is in an attempt at

### **Gaining Control**

There's nothing we hate worse than feeling out of control – like circumstances, events or people have the upper hand on us. So we use words to try to put ourselves in charge of our own destiny. We feel afraid, so we talk tough. We don't feel good about ourselves, so we brag about our best qualities. Our speech is motivated by inner emotions and attitudes.

When I was in high school, my best friend started hanging out with other people and leaving me out. He would hardly even talk to me. I felt abandoned and insecure, which isn't very fun in high school. This went on for a few weeks, and I was really feeling bad. But rather than talk with him about it directly, I found a card that said, "Thanks for always being there for me when I needed you," and I sent it to him. I wasn't really feeling thankful for him at all – I was hurt and I felt slighted. The card was my manipulative attempt to make him feel guilty about not being my friend any more. It was dishonest, but it worked. He felt bad and stopped ignoring me. That's an example of using words to control a situation.

We can feel equally insecure in our parenting. You tell your kid "no" for something somewhat arbitrary and you dig your heels in, just to stay in charge. You don't really care if they have that drink of juice or play with that toy, but once you said no, you keep saying no so it doesn't look like you're giving in.

Whether it is in friendships or family or work relationships, the reality is the same: we use our words like horse bits to rein in what we fear. That's not necessarily a bad thing at first, until we start to use deception and manipulation to get what we want. When words are motivated by fears and insecurities, we're bound to make desperate choices that aren't healthy or right. Our words become twisted and full of hidden agendas instead of straightforward communication.

James goes on to use a similar "small to big" illustration.

## **The Rudder**

*Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.*

Again, James chooses a word picture that is easily relatable. We understand how a rudder operates. Here, the issue is not so much control as it is direction. Another way we misuse speech is in

## **Steering the conversation**

Our words tend to reveal our self-centeredness. We use words to get what we want from other people.

It starts when you're little and you're at the dinner table. You don't want to eat any more vegetables, so you say, "I'm full." But somehow you still find room for a cookie. Why? Because a cookie tastes better. You used your words to steer things your way.

As adults, we get a little more sophisticated about it, but we are just as good at saying the right things to get what we want.

The Wall Street Journal had a story with the headline "Kissing Up to the Boss can Boost Your Career." The article talked about people who say what their employers want to hear in order to climb the corporate ladder. There was a story about one business executive named Harvey Bass who admitted how in his younger days he would flatter his boss to improve his own standing in the company. The reporter wrote,

*He would finish projects days early and inform his boss that he had worked all weekend. Or he would compliment his boss on his wardrobe and mimic it himself (striped tie, no short sleeves). He says he would bone up on "sports that I could care less about or politics that I could care less about" just so he could hold a career-leaping conversation.*

Like the idea of gaining control, the way we use words to steer the conversation shows a manipulative streak that we all exhibit from time to time. But here, the motivation isn't so much fear and insecurity as it is selfishness and ambition. We have goals we want to achieve. We have things we want to acquire. And we'll say whatever needs to be said to get our way.

The pattern is the same: When we're using speech to steer, words carry hidden meaning. We may tell someone "I like that shirt" when we really mean "I want you to like me." We may say "I don't care. You decide," when we really DO care but want to appear flexible. As we do that, we can no longer be taken at face value, because our words no longer have their original meaning: They are simply tools to take us further in the direction we want to go.

James uses a third analogy to make his point.

### **The Fire**

*Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*

Just a few years back, Canada experienced one of the largest forest fires in the country's history, and it was caused by a single cigarette. Apparently, some things haven't changed much since James wrote. Fire is still as easy to start from a spark, and still as devastating as ever. What we say has the same internal power for

### **Spreading Destruction**

This is the most devastating aspect of our speech, in our own lives and the lives of those around us. We have an uncanny ability to tear people down, to sabotage and undermine and wreak havoc.

Do you remember the name Richard Jewell? This past week marked the 10 year anniversary of the Olympic bombing in Atlanta. Richard Jewell was the security guard who went from being a hero who helped save lives before it went off, to being the prime suspect in the media. It turned out someone else did it, but not before Jewell was vilified in every major newspaper and TV station in the country.

To this day, he is still a wounded man who has never fully recovered from the false accusations. He told a reporter, "You don't get back what you were originally. I don't think I will ever get that back. The first three days, I was supposedly their hero – the person who saves lives. They don't refer to me that way anymore. Now I am the Olympic Park bombing suspect. *That's the guy they thought did it.*"

That's a dramatic example of the destructive power of words. But we do the same thing on a smaller scale every day. We cut somebody down. We talk about a friend behind their back. We make a mean joke. We complain to someone at church about somebody else at church. We criticize our spouse in public. We withhold an affectionate word from our kids.

There's a woman I know who grew up in a home where she constantly heard the line, "What's wrong with you?" She heard it enough times that when she became an adult, she genuinely believed there must be something really wrong with her.

Words are at their worst when they have this effect, and this is what bothers James.

*With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.*

Here is where James touches on the heart of the matter. Through our words, we go in two different directions – worshipping God out of one side and tearing down God’s image on the other. As mangled and scratched up as that image may be in some people, they still bear the likeness of God. They have his fingerprint. That’s what it means to be human – to be the one creature that God chose to fashion after himself.

When we damage people through what we say, we are not only hurting them – we are working against God himself. He created them, he loves them and he wants to see them restored and encouraged, not torn down.

James has taken us down a pretty dismal path. He’s said that the struggle with what we say is universal. He’s shown how we use our words to gain control, to steer things our own selfish way and to spread destruction in the lives of other people. And then he makes what sounds to be a very cynical statement:

*No man can tame the tongue.*

It comes across like he’s given up all hope, as if everything is so bad, there’s no solution. And that’s exactly where we need to be – realizing that this isn’t a problem we can solve on our own. Nobody on earth is good enough to come up with a solution, even if you’re as powerful as the President or as religious as the Pope. It’s going to take God’s intervention to redeem the situation. We’re going to need the power of the Living Word to claim our words and make them into forces of light rather than forces of darkness.

James mentions man being created in the image of God. That takes us back to the creation story itself. And here’s what we see:

#### **Genesis 1:3-4**

*And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good.*

Over and over, the creation story uses that same formula “God said...and there was...and it was good.” God himself is a talker, and that his talk is good and that it’s powerful. He’s our reference point for what talking can and should look like. God’s speech, his words, resulted in creation – the opposite of destruction.

There is hope for our speech, because God is the original source of speech. He not only created, he spoke. And as ugly as our words can be, there is equal opportunity for them to speak good things into being when God is in control of our tongue. God intends for our communication to be a source of empowerment and building up rather than tearing down.

#### **Ephesians 4:29-30**

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

A friend of mine has come up with what he calls his “top of the stairs” philosophy. You know how when you send your kids to bed and you still have company over, sometimes they sneak to the top of the stairs and listen in on the conversation? You pretend you don’t see them, but you know they’re overhearing what you say. He says rather than shoe them off to bed, you take advantage of moments like those to intentionally say positive things about them to the other people in the room. You bring them up in conversation. You indirectly praise them, giving them a huge boost that sometimes means more than being told to their face how great you think they are. He looks for all kinds of settings where his kids might be overhearing him, and he looks for ways to use his words to encourage them indirectly.

That’s a much more productive, practical way to make the most of what we say. There is hope for our words to stop carrying judgment and start carrying grace, to break free of deception and become vehicles for truth.

Even when we might be fully justified in using our words against someone, we can put them to better use. Corrie Ten Boom, who was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, was extremely angry at the man who had turned her family in for hiding Jews. He was a friend who had totally betrayed them. One day Corrie was making a disparaging comment about him to her sister Betsy. Betsy stopped her and said, “No, Corrie. You can’t do that. We need to pray for that man. Think of the guilt he must be carrying around since he did that.”

Words of bitterness and resentment don’t make us feel better. They don’t bring healing. They only bring more bitterness and resentment. How much better to think like Betsy did, to see the other person as bearing God’s image and deserving of our words of prayer instead of our words of judgment.

There’s hope for our speech because God is the source of speech. Secondly, James makes a point that the perfect man is the one who has control over his tongue. There’s only been one perfect man, and that was Jesus himself.

### **1 Peter 2:22-23**

*"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats.*

If anybody had reason to operate out of fear, it would have been Jesus. He knew his death was coming ahead of time, and he knew how excruciating it would be. If anyone had the right to tear down people with his words, it would have been Jesus. He knew people were trumping up charges. He was given multiple opportunities where all he had to do was say the right words, tell a little white lie, operate out of fear, say he was something other than himself and he could have manipulated the situation to his own ends.

But he didn’t. No deceit was found in his mouth. He knew the power of words, and he refused to use them to save himself.

Christ died to save us from our sins – not just from the punishment for our sins, but from sin’s power over us. That includes it’s power over what we say. It is only through him that we will ever find a way to tame our tongues, because he’s the only one who can tame our hearts. We can’t just try to talk nicer to each other – we need him to come in and take over from the ground up.

Finally, James says that the tongue is set on fire with the fires of hell itself. The only way to combat that is to fight fire with fire.

After Jesus had died and rose again and gone back to heaven, his disciples were all waiting for further instructions. This is what happened:

#### **Acts 2:1-4**

*On the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection, the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm in the skies above them, and it filled the house where they were meeting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.*

The fire of heaven takes on the fire of hell. One author I read this week pointed out that when the Holy Spirit came to the church, the very first order of business, his first act of a new creation was to turn speech back to God. The believers started praising God in different languages so that everyone who had come to Jerusalem for the feast that day was able to hear the gospel in words they could understand. It was a powerful day.

That’s what we need – to have the Holy Spirit fight fire with fire. I don’t want to just avoid saying the bad things. I don’t want to just have my tongue tamed. I want it retrained to be something that promotes God. It’s like the words we sang earlier this morning: Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above. That’s my prayer – to join the angels and be a messenger of God’s love and hope instead of scrapping for my own control and agenda.

Let’s be a people who tap into the power of speech for God’s kingdom, who fight fire with fire. There’s no telling what the Holy Spirit can do with a group of people who have given him control over everything they say in addition to everything they do.

What is your war with words? James would want us to make things personal. Bringing it home to your own life, here are some questions to consider.

1. What fears am I trying to gain control over? Maybe it’s with my kids or my spouse or my co-workers. Am I being manipulative with my words?
2. Where am I steering conversations? Are there ambitions and desires driving me to say one thing when I really mean something else?

3. Am I tearing down or building up? If James is right, it's probably a little of both. Ask God to show you where you may be picking someone apart rather than encouraging them.

4. Am I ready to be tamed? Better yet – am I willing to be retrained? Am I ready to let God fight fire with fire in me, to let the fires of heaven take on the fires of hell and fill me with the Holy Spirit?