

James 3:1-5a

May 17, 2020

A small bit of plutonium can either be used for good or ill. A small amount can be delivered in a nuclear warhead and destroy a city and its inhabitants, or it can provide electricity to that same city. Nuclear power can be used to power Air Conditioners, water softeners, ventilators, refrigerators OR it can be detonated and vaporize countless people.

Today we are going to talk about something similar to nuclear power. Something that can either:

Build up or devastate
Console or destroy
Help or hurt
Serve or obliterate

We are going to talk about our speech today.

Today, we are going to talk about something similar to nuclear detonations that destroy people in an instant—speech. Our speech has a power beyond all reckoning. Your words have the power to vaporize someone and their reputation OR encourage and console that same person.

Your tongue weighs only about 2 oz, yet it has the power to cripple the strongest among us or build up the weakest among us.

I'm not overstating the power of words.

I haven't told you the half of it. Remember where we are, James has just gotten done telling us what Christians look like—now he is going to tell us what Christians are to speak like.

Your words have greater potential than nuclear power.

We've been in James and way back in chapter 1, he gave us a sneak peek at the topics that he was going to cover in the book.

- Speech
- Service
- Worldliness

Remember? 1:26,

“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is 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.
James 1:26–27

Remember what he said?

Authentic Christians—people with a living faith will not just talk about what they believe, they will do good works for Jesus. A Christian will be obedient. Now, James moves

from what our lives should look like to what our speech should be like.

PROP: Speak like a Christian.

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look 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. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.” James 3:1-5a

1. The Danger of Many Words

Watch out if words are your profession!

Why?

Because teachers make a living by their words. Their words can either build up or tear down. Their words can either encourage people or lead them astray. Their words can lead people to Jesus OR push them away from Jesus.

James 3:1 is the most sobering verse in the bible for me. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

I have been preaching consistently for nearly 18 years now. I did the math and that means that I have spoken nearly 4 million words during that span. That is frightening. I’ve got to be honest, I don’t remember most of them.

This is important for us to realize. It is not as if I as a preacher have some kind of special dispensation from the Lord making it harder for me to sin with my words. Not true. Where there are many words, there is the potential for much sin no matter who you are.

Preaching and teaching is a responsibility before it is a privilege. Let me tell you, do not try and be a teacher in the church for the status alone. Not only is that a bad motive and incredibly foolish it ignores the fact that teachers are going to be held accountable at a greater level.

You might think—judged? Will Christians be judged?

The answer is no and yes. No, we cannot be condemned to eternal torment for our many sins. Those have been fully and finally placed on Jesus. Jesus was judged and found guilty in our place. But, yes the Lord will judge us based on the lives we live. It is like this—the Lord has saved you and ransomed you—how did you live in light of that great gift?

That is the judgment that James is talking about here.

I will be evaluated by the Lord most high based on the words I have preached to you. Questions like—

- Did I preach only what people want to hear?
- Did I shrink back from preaching the truth?
- Was I overly harsh in my teaching?
- Was I overly soft in my teaching?
- Were sinners pointed to Jesus or pushed from him?
- Was I too concerned with what people thought?
- Were my words unnecessarily offensive?
- Did my words offend when the scripture was offensive?
- Did my words comfort when the scripture is comforting?
- Did I tell the truth?
- Was I more concerned with the name of the Lord or myself?

All these kinds of questions are the ones that will be put to teachers. If you want to teach be sobered—you will receive a stricter judgment. More is expected of you.

Not only teachers and preacher face the trouble of words.

Everyone does. You may not ever teach in this or any other church, but you still speak. You have a tongue that is able to do untold good or harm.

2. The Danger of Words

Vs. 2,

² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

You see what he is saying? Our tongue, what we say, is a daily reminder of what is going on in our hearts. James doesn't use the word heart here, but the concept is all over this section. By heart we don't mean muscle that delivers blood to every nook and cranny of your body, but your inner self.

In other words, your speech shows who you really are. No one is able to do this perfectly—if we could as James says—we would be the perfect man or woman. It is not possible. James then uses two analogies to show us the power of the tongue.

Vs. 3,

³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

A bit in the horse's mouth gives the rider power over that horse. A subtle tug of the reins this way or that way and the whole horse completely changes direction. The bit is a tiny thing when compared to the horse, but if you have mastery over that bit you master the horse.

The same is true for ships at sea,

Vs. 4,

⁴ Look 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.

Giant ships are manipulated by a relatively small rudder. They traverse the world's oceans and waterways completely manipulated by a small rudder.

Vs. 5,

⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.”

Do you see?

A rider uses a bit to direct his mount.
A captain uses a rudder to direct his ship.
Our speech guides our action.

The heart moves the tongue.

So before we make resolutions to control our speech, we must recognize that our speech reveals who we really are.

What are we to do?

Try harder?
Stop speaking?

Look at what he says in verse 8,

[8] but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (ESV)

This is a riddle.

James seems to be saying—control your tongue but you can't really.

How are we to think about this?

Notice James willingness to us feel this tension. We should not move on too quickly. We must recognize the difficulty, the impossibility of truly controlling our speech.

Do you feel the tension? I do.

What is the answer?

We don't just need to change our pattern of speech by simple dint of our will—but rather we need to change our hearts. Can we do that? No.

What is the answer?

Need a heart change.

You have be convinced of the need for help. Help comes to the humble. We need the gift of conviction. That gift comes from the Holy Spirit.

Remember we have said that this pandemic is an opportunity. To evaluate and consider. Your two ounce tongue can be used for good or ill.

Consider your words.

Do your words—

Deliver hope?

Deliver explosions?

Not just what we speak. Emails. Texts. Facebook. IG.

None of us are going to be perfect, but we are looking at general patterns.

Are they helpful?

Do they build up?

Do they tear down?

Are they MOSTLY corrective?

Are they MOSTLY combative?

Constantly throwing out opinions?

Hard to disagree with?

Talk about people?

What is the pattern?

Complaining?
Ranting?
Angry?
Yelling?
Exaggerating?
Embellishing?

What we need to do is humble ourselves and ask the Lord for help.

You can't change your heart—only the Lord can. That is good news. One of the prayers the Lord will always answer is: Help me, I can't do this alone. I need help.

But be ready. He will answer that prayer.

He is the **ONLY** one with power to help me and to help you with our words. You are not up to the job.