

James 3:5-12

June 7, 2020

Today we will start with a riddle—

What are lighter than air but can weigh down even the strongest?

What can be both soon forgotten and always remembered?

What is invisible but can leave an indelible mark on the soul?

What can be free to one and costly to another?

What is fleeting but can follow someone forever?

What can be given away but never go away?

Words.

We all know what it is like have words spoken to us continue to haunt us.

“We know from bitter experience that the childhood taunt, ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,’ reverses the truth of the matter. Far easier to heal are the wounds caused by sticks and stones than the damage caused by words.”

Craig Blomberg

Today, in our ongoing conversation with James we are going to talk about words. Not just words in general but *my* words, *your* words, *our* words.

Part of the goal of this passage today is to convince you that there is nothing more radioactive that you handle on a daily, hourly, and minute by minute basis than your words. How careful we must be with our words. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue,” Proverbs says.

James is going to help us see this morning that it is not enough of just try and reform our words—and to do better—but we need to go deeper. We need to drill down to the place where words are manufactured, shaped, formed, we need to get to the heart.

Without getting to our hearts we will not experience lasting change. All of us need to change our words at one level or another. If I were to summarize our intention this morning it would be—for us to be convinced:

PROP: Your words are too lethal to handle alone.

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

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. [7] For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, [8] but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. [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, these things ought not to be so. [11] Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? [12] Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. James 3:5–12

PRAY

Danger of Words
Deeper than Words

1. Danger of Words

In our passage we heard the word, “tongue” four times. This refers not just to the two ounce organ between our jaw, but primarily to the words we speak.

James presents a doomsday scenario of the destructive power of words. He depicts our words as having a power great than a nuclear detonation. You see, the words we speak can destroy someone else and they can experience fallout for years.

How dangerous are they?

Lit by the fires of hell

[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.

Don’t move too quickly over verse 6. A careless, harsh, or heartless word is like a Molotov cocktail lit by the fires of hell. When you or I say something that does someone else unnecessary harm (gossip, slander, rumormongering, spew vitriol, hostile, talebearing) it is as if we get our words from hell.

When we speak harmful words to others—we are doing the work of Satan for him. None of us would consider:

- Taking up the hobby of voodoo
- Participating in ritual animal sacrifice
- Be mentored in Black magic
- Join a Coven of Witches
- Consult with Demons

But we do worse when we speak harmful words to others. Yes, there are times when we need to say something difficult, but true, and those words we must deliver bathed in love. We aren’t talking about those kind of words.

What is the difference?

Motive. What are you trying to do with your words?

We are talking about words meant to do harm.

None of us would grab a knife and stab it into the chest of anyone, but we think too little of hurling our words at others to inflict pain. Include

- Lying
- Passing on a bad report
- Dividing friends
- Causing someone to think less of another

PROP: Your words are too lethal to handle alone.

But James is not finished. Words are dangerous not only because they glow from the fires of hell, but also they are—

Untamed

[7] For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, [8] but no human being can tame the tongue.

Listen. No human being can tame the tongue. How many of us here can tame the tongue alone? None of us.

It would be easier for you to trek out into the sun-drenched wilds of the Arizona desert to catch a coyote, a javelina, and a bobcat, bring them all home and tame them to be your house pets than tame your tongue.

The tongue is wild like an animal defying all attempts at domestication.

James wants us to understand that the most wild and untamed about us is our speech.

PROP: Your words are too lethal to handle alone.

Our words are:

Lit by the fires of hell
Like a wild animal

And

Poisonous

8b,

It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

When you are hiking, how do you respond to a five foot rattlesnake coiled up, shaking its tail ready to strike?

You go the other way.

What about when you find a scorpion in your kitchen?

You kill it.

What about if you hear the buzzing of a hive of bees?

You call someone.

Why? Because rattlers, scorpions, and bees are poisonous. But more potentially poisonous than any of those are our words used wrongly. You know how poison works. Once delivered—it does not often kill immediately. It travels in the bloodstream radiating pain and misery in every direction.

Words: PROP: Your words are too lethal to handle alone.

*Lit by the fires of hell
Untamed
Poisonous*

Counterfeit

[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, these things ought not to be so.

We sing—

*Who else commands all the hosts of heaven
Who else could make every king bow down
Who else can whisper and darkness trembles
Only a Holy God*

But burst out in anger at someone.

*What other beauty demands such praises
What other splendor outshines the sun
What other majesty rules with justice
Only a Holy God*

Then tear someone down.

A Christian blessed eternally in the heavenly places by God in Christ—raised again to a living hope—indwelt by the Spirit of God: how can we curse others. Cursing is not just calling people names. It is tearing other down, destroying relationships, spreading rumors.

This is NOT how it should be.

[10] From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. [11] Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? [12] Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs?

This is NOT how it should be.

We who are blessed must have words that speak blessing.

How Dangerous are our words?

PROP: Your words are too lethal to handle alone.

Lit by the fires of hell
Untamed
Poisonous
Counterfeit

What can we do?

The situation seems hopeless—remember verse 8?

[8] but no human being can tame the tongue.

Do you see what he is doing here? Our temptation is that we can hear that our words are:

Lit by the fires of hell
Untamed
Poisonous
Counterfeit

And we can think, “I need to do a better job of holding my tongue.”

NOT TRUE.

We need more than advice.

We need more than that. Remember what we have been saying about our words?
PROP: Your words are too lethal to handle alone.

We need help.

We've witnessed the Danger of Words, but the solution goes—

2. *Deeper than Words*

When we read, [8] but no human being can tame the tongue. He means that there is no help within us—our only help comes from without. None of us can change our words by ourselves.

What is the issue?

That words spring forth from the wellspring of our hearts. I'm not talking about that organ that is delivering blood to your body—but in the scriptural sense. Your heart is, “the driving force behind our character, decisions, words and deeds.”

Your heart holds your hopes, your dreams, and your longings.

In other words, your heart is who you really are. Back to words. The trouble with words is that they come from our hearts. If our words are:

Lit by the fires of hell
Untamed
Poisonous
Counterfeit

Guess what? That indicates we need more help than we thought. We need to be changed at a fundamental level. This is both more discouraging AND more hopeful at the same time.

More discouraging the change we need goes deep. More encouraging because we know someone who can change us like that.

PROP: Your words are too lethal to handle alone.

Since no human being can tame the tongue—we need someone who can relate to us but is a human being but MORE. We need someone who has access to a reserve of strength that we cannot tap into alone.

You see, we need someone who will do more than help us say different words, but become better different people. We need Jesus.

No one short of Jesus Christ can help us with our hearts.

Consider his words
Not once were they ever—

Lit by the fires of hell—they carried the glory of heaven.
Untamed—they were gentle.
Poisonous—they were healing.
Counterfeit—they were genuine.

Our words can be that way too—with help from the Lord.

How do we get help from Jesus?

- *Do you want to change?*

Be honest. If you don't, start there. Ask him to change you so that you want to be different from the inside out. Be honest with him. Vent to him.

Pour out your heart to him. You should say things to him that you would never say to someone else. He doesn't need your prim and proper, thee and thou kinds of prayers. He needs you to be honest.

- *Where do you want to change?*

Think of your pattern of speech—where do you need help?

Complaining?
Grumbling?
Belittling?
Bragging?
Manipulating?
Exaggerating?
Lying?
Flattering?
Gossiping?
Rumormongering?

Each one of those patterns indicates something broken on the inside. I'll give you an example in my life. I realized a while back that I can communicate hyperbolically to make a point. To get people's attention. Its exaggeration.

I realized that part of the reason I was doing that is because I wanted people to think better of me than they would otherwise.

What do I need?

I need heart change. I need Jesus to help me from the inside. He knows who I am and he loves me anyway. That helps so much. I can say—Lord my identity is tied to you, I am ‘in Christ’ what matters is what you think of me not others.

Where do you need to change?

- *You cannot attempt this alone.*

We all fail in this area. Jesus stands ready to help.

Jesus has already been castigated for our sins of speech. There is NO wrath left for us. Just an opportunity to receive forgiveness. It takes humility to ask for forgiveness and help.

Jesus will help you.

- *Your words have an outsized potential for good*

While it is true that your words are more potentially deadly than you know—it is also true that your words born along by Christ can be more encouraging than you know.

One of the things that we are here in this world to do is speak life to others. No other creature on earth speaks. That is for mankind, created in God’s image. And part of our job as Christians is to reflect the purpose of God in the world by speaking life to others.

Speaking hope.

Speaking reassurance.

Speaking love.

Speaking consolation.

Speaking reinforcement.

Speaking sympathy.

Speaking compassion.

Speaking understanding.

These words give life.

The people in your life—need words like that.

The people in our community—need words like that.

The people in our city—need words like that.

The people in our country—need words like that.

We, being fixed on Jesus speak words of life.

What are lighter than air but can strengthen even the weakest? Your Words.

What can be both soon forgotten and always encouraging? Your Words.

What is invisible but can leave an indelible mark of grace? Your Words.

What can be free to one but dear to another? Your Words.

What is fleeting but can cheer someone for years? Your Words.
What can you give away and benefit someone in every way? Your Words.

But you don't do this without the help of your Jesus.

PRAY