

## Wisdom for Wholeness: Words Matter

James 3:1-12

Some of you are familiar with the Supreme Court decision given a few weeks ago known as the Bostock decision. The basic gist of the case was to determine whether or not the word “sex” in the 1964 Civil Rights Act includes a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity. Now, I’m not going to get into the specifics of the case this morning, but I just want to point out that you basically have the top legal minds in the world wrestling with the definition of a single word. The definition of that word matters because the way you define the word “sex” in that law will shape how people act today. Here’s the point. Words matter in ways we often take for granted.

Words matter because words are the fundamental way that God acts. Think about the opening chapters of Genesis. God creates, not by rolling up his sleeves, but by speaking. God’s speech and actions are often one and the same thing. God speaks and creates reality. His words are active, and He presents Himself to us through his living words. Throughout the OT God acts by speaking. He makes covenants, He judges, He saves, all by His words.

At least part of being made in the image of God is the glorious gift of speech given to human beings. We so often take this for granted but think about the way our words are acting on those around us. We encourage, we build up, we affirm, we promise, we teach. On the other hand, we slander, we tear down, we belittle, we mock, we gossip, we lie. This is why Proverbs describes the active power of our words this way in Proverbs 18:21. *“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.”*

The average person speaks 7,000 words a day. You and I are opening our mouths and acting on those around us. You are shaping people toward life or death by what you say and what you write nearly every moment of every day. Words are not just sounds we make with our mouths or combinations of letters we write with our pens. Your words are mimicking God’s words by creating a new reality and relationship with those who hear you speak. Opening your mouth is like squeezing the toothpaste out of the tube. Good luck trying to put it back.

God has given us this glorious and deadly gift and this is why James addresses it over and over again. Glance quickly at James 1:26 where James is describing the complete or whole Christian. You can think you are quite spiritual, but if you cannot control this massively important gift God has given you, you are completely self-deceived. Turn to our passage for today in James 3 and notice in the first couple of verses how James sets the stage to talk about our words. Look at verse 1.

James uses the illustration of a teacher to launch into his discussion of words because it's a very clear example of how mighty words can be. It's easy to want to be a teacher, to want to stand up and instruct people. During James's day there was a certain amount of prestige in teaching and many were wanting to do it. But James warns that teachers, because they use their words so much, will be held to a stricter judgment. Why? Because of verse 2. Think of verse 2 as the summary of this whole passage. Look there.

We all sin in a variety of ways. This statement takes us back to 2:10. If you stumble in any one way you have become guilty of the whole law, but if you are able to bridle or control your tongue, you are a perfect or complete man. Of course, James is not saying that the one who can control his or her tongue is free from sin. He uses this word perfect to describe the complete or mature believer. We've called our study in the book of James Wisdom for Wholeness because the instruction James gives is aimed at creating complete or spiritually whole Christians. He doesn't want us to be lacking in any way. And James makes it clear that if you can control your tongue, there's no doubt you can control everything else. It's like saying that if you can run a marathon then of course you can run a 5k.

But let's be honest with ourselves this morning. Most of us don't think of our words this way. We don't think of controlling our words as the most difficult and important aspect of our pursuit of spiritual wholeness and Christlikeness. In fact, I would venture to guess that most of us aren't really that concerned with what we say because we think, "Well, those were just words." "It was just a Facebook post I wrote." It's like having a nuclear reactor in your back yard and acting like it's a 2 stroke weed eater engine. We have seriously miscalculated.

And James is here to help us correct that miscalculation in verses 3-12. So, based on his summary in verse 2 we are going to see **3 Reasons that Spiritual Wholeness Requires Control of Your Words.**

### **1. Words are Dominant (vv. 3-5a)**

Now, as we get into these three reasons I want to make it clear that there is a progression here. The goal of controlling your tongue is spiritual wholeness and completeness, but James is going to build the case through these three reasons that misuse of your tongue will ultimately divide you as a person and fragment your spiritual life. In other words, misuse of your tongue will show that you are a “double-minded man” as we saw in 1:8 and will see again in 4:8.

James begins to make his case by simply pointing out that even though the tongue is small, it is massively dominant and influential in your life. He’s already introduced us to the idea of a bridle controlling a horse in 1:26 and 3:2 and now he makes that illustration even clearer. Look at verse 3.

If you have ever ridden a horse before you know it’s a powerful animal. To watch a horse in full gallop is amazing and I would imagine that being on one in a full gallop would be exhilarating and slightly terrifying. Yet, if you put a bit in the horse’s mouth and a bridle in the hand of a skilled equestrian the rider can direct the entire body of the horse and the speed of it with a simple flick of his or her wrist.

It’s the same with a ship. Look at verse 4. Our family visited Traverse City a couple of weeks ago and as we stood at the shore and looked out over the bay there was a ship with three huge masts with multiple sails cutting its way through the water as it crossed the bay. The pilot of the boat obviously cannot determine which direction the wind blows, but by simply controlling the very small rudder on the back of the ship he can direct the entire ship.

Now notice that neither the horse or the ship is a negative illustration. James is simply showing that despite the tiny size of the tongue it is dominant over the direction of our spiritual lives. He makes that clear in the first part of verse 5.

Having made the point that our words are influential and set the direction for our whole bodies and lives, he now advances his argument by pointing out how

massively destructive our words can be. This is our second reason spiritual wholeness requires controlling our words.

## **2. Words are Destructive (vv. 5b-8)**

You can see in the second half of verse 5 that James brings together the ideas of influence and destructiveness by using a third illustration, a fire. Look at the rest of verse 5 with me. The tongue has power that is disproportionate to its size and often, that power is exercised in a way that brings disaster.

We are pretty unfamiliar with forest fires here in Michigan. Our family lived in Southern California for 4 ½ years and became quite familiar with fire season out there. It's true, they definitely have a legitimate fire season out west in many states. It's so dry throughout the summer and there's so much open land that fires happen quite often. In 2018 California had over 7,500 wildfires and they burned a combined 1.6 million acres of land.

Think about how a fire starts though. It's normally a smoldering camp fire left by a group camping. Someone may toss a cigarette out or not quite extinguish some hot coals they used for grilling. The point is that every wildfire starts with a single spark and yet proves massively destructive. Some wildfires can move in high winds at over 20mph. You can't outrun them on foot and they don't bypass homes and businesses. Once they get going the devastation is nearly impossible to control.

What a sobering picture of the unintended destruction our words can cause. Look at verse 6. There's a lot here but let me try to summarize what James is saying. Our words can express the entire ungodly world of unrighteousness. Think about how many different ways you can sin with your words. You can lie, slander, gossip, curse, arrogantly boast, belittle, incite to violence, express perversity, mindlessly chatter foolishness, provoke mischief and the list goes on.

The tongue stains our whole body, despite its relatively small size. This is the point Jesus is making in Matthew 15:18. The tongue wreaks havoc throughout your entire life. It's disruption and damage have no limits. And the destructive power of the tongue is emboldened and empowered by the very fire of hell. It makes perfect sense that we have this glorious gift of speech, given by God, and Satan would seek to pervert it to his own ends.

It's amazing that we can't seem to get control over this tiny little aspect of our lives. Look at verse 7. James alludes to Genesis 1 with this language and his point is that mankind was given the task of dominion over creation and we demonstrate an amazing ability to tame and rule over the created world. We put any animal we want in a zoo and we can tame the vast majority of them. We know how to handle poisonous snakes without getting bitten. We can even use their poison to create anti-venom. But not with the tongue. Look at verse 8. It's destructive power overwhelms us.

So, I hope you can see the steps in James' argument. The tongue is dominant and because it's so dominant it is destructive beyond what we often understand or think. And now he's going to move to the culmination of his argument. Because of the tongue's influential and destructive nature it divides us and fragments our spiritual lives.

### **3. Words are Divisive (vv. 9-12)**

Let me explain here that I don't mean words divide one person from another, although they certainly do that. James is making the point here that misuse of our words creates double-mindedness in us, which is the exact opposite of his goal for us in this letter. He longs for us to be complete and whole, spiritual mature. Our tongues often wreck our spiritual integrity. Look at verse 9.

The highest and most noble use of human speech is our ability to praise and worship our Creator. What a privilege to ascribe worth to God, to say right and true things about God as our hearts rejoice in His love, justice, grace, and holiness. And we've been given the honor of expressing back our delight to God in words. And so, we come to church on Sunday and sing songs of praise to God and listen to His word and speak of His truth to one another, and then we go home and gossip about someone we saw at church today. We call another human being, a person created in the image and likeness of God an idiot. We post lies online and trash other people.

James brings out the theological principle here that every human being is made in the image of God and worthy of dignity, respect, and honor. Notice here that James doesn't give an exception for people who disagree with or those who think differently than we do. So many of us are fragmenting our souls by the way we praise God on Sunday mornings and bash his image bearers throughout the rest

of the week. James makes his point in verse 10. This is not ok, it's not acceptable. And he illustrates the unacceptability of this with 3 pictures in verses 11-12.

These are easy enough to understand. In Israel fresh water springs were vital to life. In fact, towns were normally built near or around springs because of the necessity of drinking water. But there's no such thing as a spring that puts out salt water on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and Fresh water on Tuesday and Thursday. In the same way, fig trees don't produce olives and grape vines don't produce figs. It's not in their nature to do that. Neither do salt water ponds, like the dead sea, provide potable, usable water.

Now, obviously human beings aren't trees or springs and so one misuse of the tongue does not mean you are a bad tree or a salt water spring. Humans are a bit more complicated than trees. But the point James is making is that if we have a truly renewed heart and mind we will consistently be producing bad fruit with our tongues. In fact, we will use the amazing power of our speech to produce good fruit. We will edify, encourage, build up, teach, bless God and others, and speak the truth. Our spiritual wholeness and integrity depends on it.