

WATCH YOUR MOUTH**JAMES 1:26; 3:1-12; 4:11-17; 5:12**

Our words can get us into trouble really fast. Did you hear about the young, just hired grocery clerk? It was his first day on the job as a new clerk in the produce department. A lady came up to him wanting to buy half of a head of lettuce. He tried to talk her out of her odd request, but she persisted. Finally he said, "I'll have to go back and talk to the manager." He went to the rear of the store to talk to the manager, not noticing that the woman was walking right behind him. When he got into the back of the store, he said to the manager, "There's some stupid old bag out there who wants to buy half a head of lettuce. What should I tell her?" Seeing the horrified look on the face of the manager, he turned around and, seeing the woman, added, "And this nice lady right here wants to buy the other half of the head of lettuce. Will it be all right?" Considerably relieved, the manager said, "That would be fine." Later in the day, he congratulated the young man on his quick thinking. He then asked, "Where are you from, son?" The boy said, "I'm from Toronto, Canada, the home of beautiful hockey players and ugly women." The manager looked at him and said, "My wife is from Toronto." The young man said, "Oh, what team did she play for?" Oh, that all of us could be that quick in our thinking! It might save us some of the trouble our words cause us.

We're working through the New Testament book of James together. James was a blunt, brusque, "in your face" communicator. He was very clear about what it meant to follow Jesus and he had no problem whatsoever in saying it in a black and white way. He did not make suggestions or offer opinions. He was all about telling it like it is and letting the chips fall where they may. James was concerned what was coming out of the mouths of his fellow Christians. He had very important, Holy Spirit-inspired stuff to say about the power of our words, but it's not all in one neat, concise section of his letter. It's spread around in different places. So, this morning I want us to consider several different passages in James. What ties them all together is how we use our mouths and the power of our words. If James had one overarching theme, he might have put it this way: Watch your mouth, Christian! His first point is obvious, but we easily forget or minimize it.

MY TONGUE CAN BE USED FOR GREAT GOOD OR GREAT EVIL.

The most well-known Bible passage on the power of our words is probably James 3:1-12. Let's read it just now. We can safely assume the misuse of our mouths must have been a big problem either in the church James pastored – the church in Jerusalem – or among other congregations who read or heard his letter. You just don't raise issues like ungodly speech patterns without a compelling reason to do so. Yes, God did amazing things in and through those very first followers of Jesus, but – just like us – they were far from perfect. Apparently one obvious problem area was a sinful, ungodly, and destructive use of words toward one another and others.

James used analogy upon analogy to describe the power of the human tongue and, frankly, nothing he said about it was good or positive. He compared the tongue to a bit in a horse's mouth and a rudder for a large ship. All three are literally small. Just like a tiny bit can control a large, powerful horse and a relatively small piece of wood can guide a huge ship even through winds and weather, the little human tongue can have an enormous influence on our lives and the lives of others. Then, he compared the tongue to a small flame or spark that evolves into a towering inferno. All those monumental, incredibly destructive fires we saw on TV in California and elsewhere a few months ago started with a single, small flame or spark. In the same way, the human tongue can be enormously destructive. Like a fire, our words get quickly beyond our control. Once we say something, we can never get it back. Even after it's been put out, a fire can easily defile and ruin an entire home by leaving ash and smoke damage everywhere. Like a fire, your tongue can defile or ruin your life and other people's lives.

James' analogies continued. The tongue is like a restless, untamable wild animal. The Columbus Zoo is but one example of how successfully we humans have been in taming or controlling just about any critter on the face of the earth. But James said you can't tame or control the tongue. The tongue is also like a poisonous snake – dangerous, unpredictable, and destructive. We wouldn't think of letting hungry lions or poisonous snakes loose in our home or in our church, but ungodly mouths can also accomplish destructive results. The tongue is often hypocritical. Can you imagine a spring putting out both fresh and salty water, or a fig tree producing olives, or a grapevine producing figs? Of course not! But your mouth and mine is fully capable of belting out hymns and praise songs to God this morning with great gusto, but then telling someone to go to hell this afternoon with equal gusto. We can offer up an eloquent prayer to God one day, and then gossip about a neighbor the next.

I have a feeling James was well acquainted with the Old Testament book of Proverbs. It's there we find great teaching on the great evil the tongue can cause, but also the great good it can do. "Some people make cutting remarks, but the words of the wise bring healing.... A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare.... The tongue can bring death or life." (Prov. 12:18, 15:1, 18:21 NLT) Why was James so negative about your mouth and mine? Because he wanted to drive home that only Jesus – through the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence in our lives – can bring a human tongue under control. Human will power isn't enough. But when we surrender our mouths to Jesus, gentleness and gracefulness can replace abusive verbal attacks, gossip, lies, cursing, and ugly words of condemnation. We should pray often the prayer David prayed, "Take control of what I say, O LORD, and guard my lips." (Ps. 141:3 NLT) Then my mouth can become a mighty tool to praise God, to encourage people powerfully in the midst of all kinds of discouragement, and to help lost people find Jesus as their Savior. I think of how Jesus' words revolutionized the life of the lonely, immoral woman He met at the well in Samaria. I think of how Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost was God's instrument to open the door of salvation for 3,000 people on just

one day alone. Your tongue and mine can be used for great good or great evil, so watch your mouth. James told us another foundational truth about our mouths.

MY TONGUE REVEALS THE REALITY OF MY FAITH.

In another place in his letter, James said, “If you claim to be religious but don’t control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.” (Jam. 1:26 NLT) What’s your “religion”? James said your “religion” is just all those normal, everyday ways you demonstrate your faith in Jesus and indicate to others that you’re His follower. You know, going to church, praying, reading the Bible, singing praise songs, tithing, showing love to others, helping out someone in need, etc. But notice how he made a direct connection between your mouth and the reality of your relationship with God. James had no problem equating mouth control with being truly born again. The ability to control your tongue in godly ways when you’re provoked, when you’re mistreated, when you’re angry, when you’re tempted to lie or gossip or use foul language is ample evidence you know Jesus personally and the Holy Spirit lives in you.

By the same token, the inability to control your mouth is strong evidence that you’re not really a genuine follower of Jesus. If you think you have faith, but you can’t control your mouth, your “faith” is useless, worthless, and powerless. Remember James was all about living out your faith in practical ways and not just having the right beliefs and doctrines. Just do it. Walk the talk. So any claim to love Jesus deeply followed by the demonstration of an ungodly mouth was rank hypocrisy for James. It should be for you and me today. A demonstration of hypocrisy to be avoided, rejected, and renounced.

Jesus also made a direct connection between your mouth and the reality of your relationship with God, but He used different terminology. He said, “What you say flows from what is in your heart.” (Lk. 6:45 NLT) What did Jesus mean there by your heart? Obviously, it’s not that organ in your chest pumping blood to every part of your body. No, your heart is the unseen, but very real part of you and me that relates directly to God. You could think of it as your mind, your spirit, or your soul. If my heart is right, my words will be right. If my words are ungodly, it reveals a heart that’s wrong with God. Both James and Jesus taught that your mouth reveals the reality of your relationship with God or lack of it. So watch your mouth. James was all about spiritual maturity. That’s the overarching theme of his entire letter. Grow up and become the man of God and the woman of God you’re called to be. We shouldn’t be surprised, then, to see James underline yet another truth about the mouth.

MY TONGUE REVEALS MY SPIRITUAL MATURITY.

James made a bold statement, “Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way.” (Jam. 3:2 NLT) That word “perfect” means “mature, complete.” James wasn’t saying it’s better to be silent than to speak. He wasn’t asking us to take some vow of silence! Instead, he wanted us to apply wisdom and self-control to our mouths. If I can

control my mouth, I can control my entire life. So, the ability to control my tongue, specifically, is evidence I can control every other part of my life. An overstatement? An exaggeration? Not for James! Mouth control equals spiritual maturity because there's no sin easier to commit – and James admitted that right here - or potentially more dangerous than tongue or mouth sins. We see evidence of that every day, don't we?

Teenage gossip has always been hurtful, but once it was limited to note passing, phone calls, and scrawls on bathroom walls. But now it's more pervasive and vicious than ever, thanks to the Internet. A Highland Park, Illinois girl, now a senior in high school, said that as an eighth grader she was the subject of an online rumor that she had slept with every boy on the football team. "I think it was started by the ex-girlfriend of a boy on the team, but it didn't matter where it came from," she said. "People just want to believe it and there was no way to refute it. I wanted to kill myself." Bullying words can lead to suicide. One word out of place can ruin a career or bring down a government. One unwise remark – reported and circulated on the Internet – can cause riots on the other side of the world. Get your mouth right – what you say and how you say it – and it's evidence of complete self-control. Spiritual maturity.

James provided several specific examples of ungodly speech patterns which ought to prompt some questions we can ask ourselves today. Here's one. Does my mouth speak truth or lies? I see James providing two different, but related aspects of that question. Do I speak the truth about other people? Turn with me to another passage: James 4:11-12. If we can read between the lines, there were people who claimed to follow Jesus in James' church who apparently had no problem with slander. Telling evil lies about fellow Christians! Slander is deliberately lying about someone else usually behind his or her back. It could be a bold-faced lie, it could be malicious gossip, or it could simply be the act of passing on damaging information but you haven't checked on its truthfulness yourself. This just drove James nuts because it was just so obviously wrong on so many levels.

Verbal abuse often involves sitting in judgment upon someone. Now, Jesus said discernment was OK, but not judgment. We never have any justification to write someone off as unworthy of God's love and grace, or as a lost cause, or as undeserving of respect or value. Furthermore, Jesus said we're supposed to treat others like we want to be treated. We're supposed to love other people like we love ourselves. Who wants to be lied about? Who wants to have their character attacked or their reputation ruined? Who wants to be the object of gossip? If for some reason, knowing what God's Word says about verbal abuse, we ignore it or we don't think that standard applies to us for some reason, then we're sitting in judgment upon God's standards. We're putting ourselves above God. This was serious stuff for James! Watch your mouth!

Here's a second aspect of whether my mouth speak truth or lies. Do I speak the truth all the time? Is it automatic? James just touched on that in another verse. "But most of all, my brothers and sisters, never take an oath, by heaven or earth or anything else. Just say a simple yes or no, so that you will not sin and be condemned." (Jam. 5:12

NLT) Back in James' day, Jews – and all of the first believers in Jesus were Jewish – were big oath takers. They used oaths to back up their statements as being truthful. They wouldn't make an oath in God's name because that was considered blasphemous, so they might make any oath by Heaven, or by Earth, or by Jerusalem. It was just a culturally acceptable way back then to buttress or beef up your claim to be telling the truth about something. James point was that it was excessive and unnecessary. I think that's the nugget we can apply to our lives today. Whatever you say should be truthful and reliable without having to get all wordy about it or embellish it. If I have to use a lot of words to convince someone I'm telling the truth, something is wrong with my character. A simple yes or no is always enough to establish the truthfulness of a person who is doing his or her best to follow Jesus. Watch your mouth!

Here's another example of specific, ungodly speech patterns. Does my mouth encourage or abuse others? This is different than slander which is telling malicious lies about other people. This is using words deliberately to hurt, wound, or inflict pain on people. It's targeting another human being with insulting, degrading words. It's "weaponizing" words. We live now in a very "abuse aware" culture. Well and good. Physical abuse and sexual abuse shouldn't ever be tolerated or have to be endured by anyone for any reason. Please add to that list any kind of verbal abuse. Ironically, with all the new communication options at our disposal, there's never been more verbal abuse. I hope there isn't a husband in the room today who thinks God will overlook verbal abuse aimed at your wife. Or vice-versa. I hope there isn't a parent today who thinks God will overlook verbal abuse aimed at your child. Or of an adult child toward an elderly parent. I hope there isn't anyone here today who think God will overlook you using words as a weapon in any relationship. God holds us accountable for our words and abusive speech is not something He just overlooks. Watch your mouth!

James said, "Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God." (Jam. 3:9 NLT) Because every human being is made in God's image; therefore, every person deserves to be treated with the utmost respect verbally! When it comes to other people, James called you and me to be a blessing-only people rather than a blessing-and-cursing people. Elsewhere the Bible makes being a verbal encourager of great value and importance. It says, "Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone." (Col. 4:6 NLT) Another translation of that same verse puts it this way, "Be gracious in your speech. The goal is to bring out the best in others in a conversation, not put them down, not cut them out." (Col. 4:6 MSG) Scripture also says, "Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them." (Eph. 4:29 NLT)

There is a little-known congressional program that awards internships to young people who have aged out of the foster care system. These are kids who were never adopted, and are no longer eligible for state support. A senator employed one such young man as an intern. One morning the senator came in early for a meeting and discovered that his intern was already in the office, reorganizing the entire mailroom. The senator said

to the intern, "This is amazing—the mailroom has never looked so clean. You did a great job." A few minutes later the senator saw that the intern had tears streaming down his face. He said, "Son, are you okay?" "Yes," the intern answered quietly. "Did I say something to offend you?" "No, sir." "Well, what's wrong?" The young man said, "That's the first time in my life anyone's told me that I did something good." A little bit of attention and a kind word—that's how little it takes to affect someone's life for the better. I doubt anyone here today is going to disagree with what I've been saying. The danger is in minimizing its value. God was saying through His servant, James, that your mouth and mine reveals our spiritual maturity and it even reveals if we are truly born again. Watch your mouth – it's very important.

James offered a final example of an ungodly use of the tongue we need to avoid. Does my mouth acknowledge or ignore God's will? Let's look at one more passage in James (4:13-17). James referred to some businessmen who made some ambitious business plans. They were probably fellow Christians, but something about their words bothered James. Their words revealed an attitude. Or as Jesus might have put it, their words revealed their heart. What's the big deal? Was James saying it's wrong to set goals and make plans? Was he against business deals and making a profit? Definitely not. He did attack, however, an outlook, a mindset, a perspective that assumes we human beings can control our own lives and shape our future effectively with little or no input from God. Essentially, these men had put God on the "back-burner" of their lives. They were presuming when they should have been praying. They didn't allow God to guide their daily decisions. When we make plans and only then ask for God's blessing, we make the same mistake. When we assume God's input is an option rather than a necessity, we ignore God's will. I was interested to learn that in many periods of history, followers of Jesus would end their letters to one another with the Latin phrase "Deo volente" which means "if God wills." They understood – and constantly reminded each other – that their plans for tomorrow were contingent on God's will for their lives. They were good at watching their mouths.

James told us why we should always acknowledge God's will with our mouths. Life is uncertain. He said, "How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow?" (Jam. 4:14 NLT). Life is never uncertain for God, but it sure is for you and me. Life is short. "Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone." (Jam. 4:14 NLT) The Since life is so brief, how important it is then to find out what God wants you to be and to do, and then go out and do it! We are also limited. We control very little about our lives. Our understanding of anything and everything is partial at best. We have neither the ability to see the future nor to control it. James said, "What you ought to say is, 'If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.' Otherwise you are boasting about your own pretentious plans, and all such boasting is evil." (Jam. 4:15-16 NLT) Watch your mouth, because it reveals your heart. Yes, set your goals. Sure, make your plans. But hold them lightly realizing God has the right to change them at any time. Godly confidence about tomorrow should be based on wanting God's will above my own will,

desiring to walk in His will at all times, and then asking God to reveal His will to me as He wishes. "Deo volente. If God wills."

We all need to be reminded – regularly and often – to watch our mouths and pursue the godly use of our tongues. Even we pastor types. About forty pastors and denominational leaders squeezed into a relatively small conference room to discuss urgent and somewhat controversial matters. It didn't take long for the discussion to escalate. Volumes increased. Tones started to get edges. Observations teetered dangerously close to accusations. Fittingly, lightning flashed through the windows, followed seconds later by thunder. A storm was coming in more ways than one. Then, a distinguished African American pastor stood up slowly—intentionally so. As he rose, the noise shrank. Everyone knew him as "Brother Rochelle." His bearing and demeanor commanded respect.

Brother Rochelle scanned the room for a good five seconds and then, with a voice trembling with compassion, he spoke, slowly and carefully: "Oh ... my dear ... children." He stopped—as did the thunder. It was as if Brother Rochelle had paused to wait for the Spirit of God to prepare the ears and the hearts of every single individual in the room. When he spoke again, it wasn't a lengthy speech. He quoted a single Bible verse many of those pastors had memorized as children in Sunday school: "Be ye kind, one to another." "Tenderhearted," he continued, looking around the room as if to convey just how much he loved every single one of his colleagues. "Forgiving one another." When he sat down, they all sat in the silence brought about by the power of an aptly spoken and encouraging word. The storm passed. Attitudes shifted. Peace reigned. The meeting continued and concluded in a spirit of brotherly love.

Christian, watch your mouth. But, better yet, use it. Use it to praise and glorify God. Use it to build up and encourage other people. Use it to breathe life into those who so desperately need it.