

## **Introduction**

Words build worlds, and words can burn them down. James is calling us to consistency, wholeness, integrity and cohesion between our faith and our words.

Jesus tells us, “...*For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*” - Matthew 12:34b.

What comes out in your words tells the truth of the condition of heart (see Matthew 12:33-37).

### **I. The Warning About Words**

**James 3:1** - “*Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.*”

James is saying that the speech used by those of influence in a community both creates and shapes the culture they are speaking into. The question is: what *kind* of world are we making?

#### **Words Create Worlds...**

Talk is never ‘just talk.’ What we do with our words is a very powerful act. God ‘speaks’ creation into existence. “*Let there be...and there was.*” - Genesis 1:3

As creatures made in the image of God - made to join God to participate in His creative work in the world - our human ‘words’ are a major part of forming culture or creating a space that leads to flourishing.

#### **And Words Can Burn Them Down**

The first thing Adam does with his words after rebelling against God is to speak a word of blame against his wife (Genesis 3:12). “...*For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of*” (Matthew 12:34b). For the first time, his (Adam’s) heart was full, not of love and goodness, but it was broken by his sin; and that is what came out of his mouth.

#### **‘Judged More Strictly’**

James means more than the human evaluation. Remember, James is riffing on Jesus here; and Jesus, in Matthew 12, says we will all be acquitted or condemned based on our words.

### **II. The Power of Words**

*“When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.” - James 3:3-5*

James wakes us up to see the potency of our words. Especially the harm that can be done when we’re not careful.

How do we move from ‘fractured’ to ‘whole,’ especially in regard to our words?

“What James is after, then, is consistency. He wants people to follow Jesus through and through. To be blessing-only people rather than blessing-and-cursing people. It’s a high standard, but we should expect no less if the gospel is indeed the message of salvation...The spring must be cleansed so that only fresh water comes out. For this we need help. That, fortunately, is what the gospel offers.” - N.T. Wright<sup>1</sup>

James is right – ‘Who can tame the tongue?’ The answer is - God can. Jesus, who was always consistent - His grace forgives us, and heals us, and helps us to learn forward - to be better with our speech.

### **III. The Way Forward**

#### ***1. Acknowledge the Humanity of All People***

*“...with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness.” - James 3:9b*

The logic James uses brings us back to the concept of the *imago Dei* - this Biblical idea that every person is made in the image of God - as we find in the creation narrative of Genesis 1. This means every person is imbued, is stamped with dignity and is worthy of being treated as such.

“And if our faith asks us to find the face of God in everyone we meet, that should include the politicians, media, and strangers on Twitter with whom we most violently disagree.”

- Brené Brown<sup>2</sup> -

To become ‘blessing-only-people’ means recognizing the image of God in all others and letting that reality impact how I use my mouth.

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, N.T. (2012). James: N.T. Wright for Everyone, Part of the Series NT Wright for Everyone Bible Study Guides. IVP Connect. ISBN-13: 9780830821969

<sup>2</sup> Brown, Brené. (17 May 2018). Dehumanizing Always Starts With Language. BreneBrown.com. Adapted from *Braving the Wilderness*: Chapter Four: People are Hard to Hate Close Up. Move In. <https://brenebrown.com/articles/2018/05/17/dehumanizing-always-starts-with-language/>

## **2. Guard Your Speech**

James will go on to address the issue in more clear terms in the next section:

*“Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them, speaks against the law [God’s instructions/God’s ways] and judges it.”*

- James 4:11a -

Slander - that’s using words that injure others. Words that negatively impact their life, relationships, job prospects or promotions, and their mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

*“...Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.”* - James 1:19

*“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”* - Romans 12:14

*“Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or **insult with insult**. On the contrary, repay evil with **blessing**, because to this you were called **so that you may inherit a blessing**.”* - 1 Peter 3:8-9

God dignifies us with the power to make choices. We get to choose a better way forward.

### *A. We Decide to Reflect*

Self-awareness is a Christian virtue.

*“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”* - Psalm 139:23-24.

If, as you reflect, you notice that you struggle with how you use your speech - maybe you’re prone to be explosive with your language, to say things that hurt. Maybe you tend toward gossip or slander - good news - You know it! You’re self-aware! That means you can invite God to help you change it.

If you’ve formed a habit of hurtful speech, it will take time and effort, with God’s help, to form new habits.

- Write out some of the verses we’ve looked at and post them up around your house.
  - “Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another.”
  - “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.”
- When you look back over your day, and you pray with the Psalmist “Search me and know me...” and you go, “How was my speech today?”
  - What’s the temperature of your heart? Is there indication of an area you need to go to God with?

**B. *We Decide to Repent***

To repent is to ‘change directions.’ We can say, ‘God, I was wrong. I was going the wrong way in how I used my words. I want to go a new way - Your way. The way of blessing, not cursing, not slandering, not hurting others. Help me.’

That also means humbling yourself and confessing to those we’ve hurt, ‘I was wrong to speak that way. I’m sorry. I will work on doing better next time.’

**C. *We Decide to Pray***

“God help me! Help me hold my tongue when I need to. To be ‘quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry.’ Help me.”

*“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience [underline that one; then circle it; then get a highlighter and give that sucker some colour; then make a note in the margin], kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control [circle the whole thing, actually].” - Galatians 5:23*

**IV. The One Who Heals Our Fractured-Selves**

The very reason that Jesus, God the Son, comes to us is to reclaim and remake His sin-broken, yet still-loved creation. To rescue us. To make our hearts - well - new. Jesus is reclaiming us to use our words in service to the King and His kingdom. Our words go a long way in our own creative work. We create cultures, create hope, create a sense of peace. Words create worlds; and redeeming us and our words for God’s good purposes, that’s what Jesus does.

The best possible use of our words begins with what Paul tells us in Romans 10:9-10,

*“If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe [**trust**] and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.”*

## **Life Group Discussion and Reflection**

### **Open Up**

The playground rhyme says, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” At some point we all come to realize that’s just not true.

Why do you think words are so powerful?

Why do you think it is so difficult to control our tongues at times?

### **Dig In**

1. **Read James 3:1-12.** What stands out most to you about this text? (Just share a few initial thoughts about it, or questions it raises for you).
2. What do you think about the warning to teachers - about facing a stricter judgment? How is that ‘good news’ for a Christian community? How is it even good news for those in teaching/leadership roles?
3. James reminds us that ‘we all stumble in many ways.’ How is that ‘good news’ to remember while reading this book? What is James *not* saying here?
4. In the message we looked at some ‘ways forward’- that we are to recognize the image of God in others, and that we are to guard our speech, which includes reflection, repenting, and prayer for God’s help. Talk about how you might want to incorporate some of those practices in order to find greater ‘integrity’ in how you speak.

### **Pray**

Take time to thank God for His life-giving word to us. Ask God to help us speak life giving words to others. Share your personal requests and pray for those as well.