

Our Words Matter

James 3:3-8

According to the Global Language Monitor, which tracks language usage trends, the English language currently tops one million distinct words including tons of scientific words that many of us don't know but, of course, still qualify as words.

But words can be more than just the construct and arrangement of letters forming any number of terms that we use throughout the day. Gestures and sign language form another part of our vocabulary that have just as much meaning and impact as any word.

Think for a moment about the many different conversations you have had over the past couple of days. How about the words you used on the way to church with your spouse, a child, someone you talked with prior to the service. Every conversation is an engagement that entails the use of words. Isn't there a statement that says "anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law?"

I mentioned several weeks ago when we began our discussion on **James 3** about the tongue that scientists believe sound waves from the spoken word continue to reverberate endlessly and if they could design a machine they could capture every word that has ever been spoken.

Words offer hope but they also hurt.

Words build up or tear down.

Words encourage or exasperate.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me is as much a falsehood as unicorns or leprechauns.

History has shown the destructive nature of words. Listen to what John Phillips writes as he illustrates the inflammatory nature of words.

"The tongue! What an incendiary it is, what an arsonist! Take, for instance, the history of the Second World War. The Third Reich lasted twelve years and four months, but it caused a holocaust of destruction on this planet more violent and earthshaking than anything that the world had ever

experienced. At one point, the Germans reigned supreme from the Atlantic to the Volga, from Norway to the Mediterranean. But then the tide turned, and the German people were thrust down to the uttermost depths of destruction, desolation, and despair. During the days of their power, the Germans instituted a far-flung reign of terror that outdid in savagery all of the oppressions of the past.

By the end of September 1944, the Germans had seven and one-half million slaves to do their will. Most of those people had been dragged from their homes and transported to Germany in boxcars from all over occupied Europe. They were beaten, starved, and deprived of proper clothes and shelter. Families were savagely broken up as a matter of course. Children were beaten, brutalized, put to work, or killed. Jews and Slavs were looked upon as subhumans who were unfit to live and exterminated by the millions. Prisoners of war, especially Russians, died in captivity in vast numbers. The Germans retaliated for acts of sabotage by freedom fighters. The formula was one hundred to one – one hundred hostages rounded up at random and shot for every German life lost. The fate of Jews was death in the extermination camps. At Auschwitz alone, at the peak of operations, six thousand Jews were gassed every day. The joke among the German exterminators was that Jews came in by way of the gate and left by way of the chimney. Atrocious medical experiments, barbarously conducted with great cruelty, were routine. And millions of people died on the battlefields as a matter of course. The whole world became engulfed in the carnage.

The human cost of Hitler's attempt to seize world power staggers the imagination. Thirty-five million lives were lost. On the battlefields, one out of every twenty-two Russians was killed, one out of every twenty-five Germans, and one out of every 150 Britons. The toll on the Jews was even higher – two out of every three European Jews perished in Hitler's attempt to rid Europe of all of its Jews.

The vast conflagration was kindled by one man's tongue. Adolph Hitler was an orator, a master at whipping his audience into a frenzy. He could

mobilize men by the millions at a word. His rages cowed visiting statesmen, and his tirades paralyzed his top generals. And his countrymen, urged on by the lash of his tongue and mesmerized by the power of his words, fought on and on, long after the war was lost, until all of Germany was reduced to rubble.”

Someone calculated that for every word written in Hitler’s book *Mein Kampf*, 125 people died.

In our passage today, James wants us to understand the destructive nature of the tongue by illustrating that though it is very small it can set the course that alters a life. I mentioned in our message on **verses 1-2** that we are master of the unspoken word, but the spoken word is master of us. How important it is to learn the need to control the tongue.

Turn in your Bibles to **James 3:1-8**.

I’m not a medical expert by any stretch of the imagination, but I understand, and correct me if I’m wrong, but the doctor can determine certain things about your health by looking at your tongue. In the same way, the tongue can reveal the spiritual health or sickness of the heart.

James first discusses the power of the tongue in **verses 3-5**.

I. THE POWER OF THE TONGUE – vs. 3-5a

He begins by giving us a comparison or analogy that illustrates the tongue. An analogy offers some explanation or clarification about the topic at hand.

A. The Analogy About the Tongue – vs. 3-4

In the first analogy, James gives us an illustration from the natural world.

1. An illustration from the natural world – v. 3

Jesus often used comparisons from nature to illustrate a particular point.

In **Matthew 13:31** He said that the kingdom of heaven was like a mustard seed.

In **Matthew 17:20** he likened faith to a grain of mustard seed.

Or consider that from the Sermon on the Mount how He compared God’s care for daily needs to that of His care for the birds of the air or the beauty with which He clothes the flowers of the field.

James take a page out of the storybook of Jesus to illustrate for us from nature about the tongue likening it to a horse and rider. When it comes to controlling a horse, man has devised an implement that can affect the horse’s obedience. A piece of leather strap or metal placed over the tongue of the horse keeps the animal in check causing it to obey the rider. Without it, the horse has a mind of its own. With it, the rider is in control.

When my Dad was a teenager, he worked at a stable and learned to break horses. Back in the days of Radio drama and the Lone Ranger he took care of that horse. In breaking a horse, he learned the value of the bit. It’s amazing to think that a small piece of metal or a leather strap across the tongue can control such a large and powerful animal. James adds that the reason for the bit is so the horse will obey. With it, James also says that the rider can turn the animal wherever he wants.

The natural world gives us a great analogy. But James continues with a second illustration to compare the force of the tongue. Where the first illustration comes from the natural world, the second comes from the nautical world.

2. An illustration from the nautical world – v. 4

The force of great storms out at sea have the ability to blow a ship around by the sheer magnitude of its strength. Try as I may, I cannot move a mighty oak tree by pushing it, yet take a strong wind and the trunk can snap like a twig. Without a rudder, strong winds can easily manipulate the direction of a vessel, yet James says that even though the storms rage and the ship is large, employing a very small rudder can keep the boat headed in the right direction. While the KJV uses the term helm and NIV says rudder, the idea is the same. The helm used to steer the ship is connected to the rudder which the helmsman uses to turn the boat whichever way he determines. The point being that once again,

something very small can alter the course of something very large.

The analogy is clear: just as small things can move big things, the tongue is a small part of the body but makes great boasts. James then draws the analogy to a conclusion in **verse 5** by giving us the application to the tongue.

B. The Application To the Tongue – v. 5a

Likewise, or in the same way, James says, just as a bit is small but controls the direction of the horse or just as a rudder is small in comparison to the ship it controls, the tongue is small but makes great boasts.

To boast is to make self-exaggerated and excessive claims out of pride about one's own achievements or accomplishments. The word literally means to lift up the neck. We call it being stuck up or snooty. Related words include pretentious, pompous, arrogant, egotistical, vainglorious, or full of hot air.

Muhammed Ali boasted that he was the greatest.

In Genesis, Lamech boasted about killing a man for wounding him.

Haman boasted about being invited as a dinner guest of Queen Esther.

Though small, when the tongue is let loose it makes great boasts about itself. **Someone has rightly said that "what is in the well of the heart will come out through the bucket of the mouth."**

Just as the bit and rudder must overcome contrary forces, so the tongue must overcome the contrary force of the old nature if it is to have victory over what it speaks because we all know too well that words have consequences.

An unknown author penned this poem:

**A careless word may kindle strife;
A cruel word may wreck a life;
A bitter word may hate instill;
A brutal word may smite and kill.**

When comparing the size of the tongue to that of the rest of the body, how small it is, yet how

impactful it can be.

A friend of mine who was an assistant HR director in the company where he worked told me about some issues he had to deal with because words that had been spoken. Animosity between individuals caused problems. My friend was a Christian and took some biblical principles and prepared a presentation he called "Intent vs. Impact." He laid out how words can be mistaken and misconstrued resulting in problems. He talked about how important it is to consider the intent of your words and their impact on the person hearing them. He then told me about an incident between two men who were at greatest odds with each other. One day after a break they were walking back to their work area. One was following the other close enough to hear the first guy say something he thought was intentionally and derogatorily directed at him. From what he thought he heard, he was about to punch the other guy in the back of the head and lay him out, but he stopped and asked the guy what he said. When it was repeated, he realized it wasn't about him at all and the whole matter was settled.

Though small, the tongue can have a tremendous impact on others. How careful we need to be with our words. The tongue has ruined the reputation of individuals, families, business, churches, communities and even countries.

James points out the power of the tongue and then speaks about the perversity of the tongue.

II. THE PERVERSITY OF THE TONGUE – vs. 5b-8

James says that the tongue corrupts the person.

A. The Tongue Corrupts the Person – vs. 5b-6

We are given a third analogy about the tongue to demonstrate its destructive nature or force. He likens it to a fire. Take a small match for example in comparison to a large forest fire. A match or even a small spark is small compared to the devastation it can cause when it catches hold of a forest.

In my freshman year of college two fires started

outside camp in the national forest. In the second fire, strong winds snapped a tree branch that hit a powerline causing a spark that ignited a fire that destroyed thousands of acres.

The tongue is just like that spark. Once the spoken or written word is out, you can't take it back no matter how much back pedaling you attempt in an effort to quell the damage.

Fire has so many benefits. It cooks our food, warms our home, dries our clothes, produces energy through combustion. But fire is also destructive. It destroys all consumable material in its path.

Many believe that in 1871 it was Mrs. O'Leary's cow that kicked over a lantern starting the great fire of Chicago leaving 300 dead, 100,000 homeless, 17,500 buildings destroyed, amassing \$400 million in damages.

While the tongue can be used to bless, it can also be used to destroy that far surpasses the effects of a physical fire. The tongue's damage never goes out. **Proverbs 12:18 "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."**

Proverbs 16:27-28 "A scoundrel plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends."

Proverbs 26:18-26

The tongue though small, corrupts the whole body. It permeates our whole being. It affects everything about us. To corrupt means to change our morals, attitudes, actions from good to bad. It's a word that means to stain or become polluted.

Take a glass of water and plop in a couple of Alka seltzer tablets and it automatically permeates the whole glass of water. The tongue has the same impact on the whole body corrupting it.

When James talks about the whole course of his life being set on fire literally refers to a wheel. You have seen those wheels at festivals where the hub is

set on fire and as the wheel spins, the fire burns outward lighting the other firecrackers. As it spins sparks fly outward. That's the idea James is conveying that as the tongue which is at the center or hub of one's life is set on fire and spins it enflames the rest of the rest of the person. This course James speaks about is the whole course or activity of the person, that's the effect of the tongue.

John Phillips writes that "The tongue is capable of disrupting everything. The tongue can ignite all of our worst passions of lust, envy, hatred, malice and murder and give reign to all kinds of resulting evils."

In their commentary, Walvoord and Zuck state "It is as though the tongue is at the center or hub of the wheel of nature and like a fireworks display, the wheel is set on fire at the center. The more it burns, the faster it revolves until the whole wheel spins in a blaze, spitting fire in all directions. But the tongue is only the fuse; the source of the deadly fire is hell itself (Gehenna) – the place in the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem where human sacrifice was offered (Jeremiah 7:31). It's continuous burning of trash made it an apt illustration for the Lake of Fire in Revelation."

James likens the tongue to the continuous fire of hell itself, a fire that is never quenched, it never goes out. It continues on its destructive burn with significant fallout.

We understand the term fallout. It's the spread of destruction beyond the epicenter. Fallout can be applied to the tongue as well. During the Persian Gulf War it's estimated that anywhere from 1-6 million barrels of oil were dumped into the Gulf. A barrel equals 45 gallons. The Iraqis deliberately released oil from tankers that affected 300 miles of shoreline being contaminated and wildlife killed. They also set fire to more than 600 Kuwait oil wells, sending plums of black smoke, soot, carbon dioxide and toxic gases into the air for some 500 miles. It was estimated that 500,000 tons of carbon and 50,000 tons of sulfur dioxide were released into the air every day by this wanton vandalism. One

result was acid rain. Another result was black rain that released tremendous amounts of soot in the air.

That is the type of impact the tongue can have as it spreads its toxic fumes. It's no wonder Paul describes the unrighteous in terms of having throats that are an open grave, tongues that practice deceit, the poison of serpents on their lips with mouths full of cursing and bitterness (**Romans 3:13-14**).

Pastor Chuck Swindoll writes that the "full range of iniquity finds an outlet through the tongue. It is virtually impossible to seethe with anger without expressing our rage in words. Bitterness sours our speech. Pride prattles on and on. Hate explodes from the lips. The tongue can suddenly turn an otherwise gentle person into a monster."

How important it is for us to heed the advice of David as he wrote "I said, 'I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence.'" (**Psalm 39:1**)

Let's remember that Jesus said that "out the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks" (**Matthew 12:34**).

Well, not only do we see the perversity of the tongue in that it corrupts the person, James also notes that the perversity of the tongue is catastrophic to the person.

B. The Tongue Is Catastrophic To the Person – vs. 7-8

We love going to the circus and watching all the animals perform from elephants to bears to lions. It's amazing to watch what a trainer can do with them. It shows exactly what James says here that we can tame all kinds of animals.

We teach parrots to talk.

We teach lions to jump through fiery hoops, horses to canter, elephants to stand on their hind legs, seals to balance balls and dolphins to do amazing watery acrobatics. We can train all kinds of animals and birds and sea creatures to do phenomenal stunts yet with all our ability to train them, James says no one can tame the tongue. It's an impossibility. It is not

in our nature to train the tongue. He says it is a restless evil full of deadly poison. Like the poison of a serpent, the tongue is also full of poison.

Some people are quite proud of their poison pens. They relish in the idea of using words to spread rumors to decimate someone's reputation. I read some interesting stories of poison pen letters that resulted in lengthy trials and ruined reputations. In one story I read one of the victims was so overcome by the inflammatory nature of the letter even though it was all false that the person took his own life.

How careful we must be and to remember that we will one day stand before the Lord and give account for every word spoken. The tongue is catastrophic. **Proverbs 18:21** says that the power of life and death are in the tongue.

Psalm 141:3-4 "Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips. Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil, to take part in wicked deeds with men who are evildoers; let me not eat of their delicacies."

James seems to leave us hanging. It doesn't appear from what he says that there's much hope for any ability to control the tongue and keep it under wraps. **What help is there for us?** Let me conclude with a few ABC's regarding the path for the tongue.

III. THE PATH FOR THE TONGUE

A. Speak Words of Affirmation

Affirmation is the state of asserting something to be positive or true. I like to think of it as being encouraging, offering words that are supportive, that speak truth and love to the heart of the person about their worth or their character. Paul tells us that as believers one of the things that we are to do for one another is to encourage each other in the body of Christ (**I Thessalonians 5:11**). Affirmation can come in the form of expressing appreciation for the role a person has in the body of Christ, expressing gratitude for something that person did, saying something positive that encourages the person. Our words need to be affirming.

B. Speak Words of Blessing

Paul exhorts the Christian in **Romans 12:14** “**Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.**”

Jesus lived out this principle by blessing even those who persecuted Him. As Stephen was being stoned, he blessed his persecutors. **When it comes to the incendiary words cast at us by others, can we in turn express a blessing on them and mean it? Can we invoke a divine blessing over them even though what they say to us is hurtful?**

C. Speak Words of Compassion and Comfort II Corinthians 1:3-4

People are hurting from any number of issues. Paul says that God has allowed us to go through trials in our own life so that we can comfort others with the same comfort with which God has comforted us. **Rather than throwing a “woe is me pity party for one,” can I look for others who are encountering similar trials and hardships with whom I can extend comfort through my words?** The God of all comfort has brought us through them to be of comfort to others. There is no end of people who need it.

I received a prayer request from Elaine this past week about praying for an old army buddy who has COVID and is in ICU. She’s alone, afraid, and not saved. What an opportunity to extend words of comfort and compassion through faith in Christ.

D. Speak Words of Depth

Proverbs 27:17 “**As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.**”

We are encouraged to help each other grow in our walk of faith as we challenge one another to mature in Christ so that we won’t be tossed around by every wind of doctrine that blows around us.

E. Speak Words of Edification

Similar to the words of depth, we are to edify or build up one another. Paul adds that exhortation to **I Thessalonians 5:11**. It’s so easy to tear someone down, but building up others is an investment that

ensures stability and endurance as we instruct one another to stand strong in our faith. The dictionary defines edification as the instruction or improvement of a person morally or intellectually. From a biblical perspective, we are concerned about the moral aspect of a person’s life in relationship to their becoming more Christ-like in character.

F. Speak Words That Are Fitting Proverbs 25:11 “**A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.**”

The right words spoken at the right time are of beauty and value to the hearer. Let your words be aptly spoken that they might benefit the hearer.

G. Speak Words of Grace - Colossians 4:4-6

Let your words be seasoned, gracious, flavorful, loving, peaceful, kind.

H. Speak Words of Humility – Proverbs 15:1

Pastor Jim spoke last week about the importance of a gentle spirit. That is the essence of humility, the need to be gentle even in your words.

Galatians 6:1 tells us that when someone is overtaken in a sin we should restore that person gently. It’s not only in our manners as we help them back into a right relationship with God, but also in the words we choose to guide them in that process of repentance and reconciliation with the Lord.

A careless word may kindle strife;
A cruel word may wreck a life;
A bitter word may hate instill;
A brutal word may smite and kill.

A gracious word may smooth the way,
A joyous word may light the day.
A timely word may lessen stress;
A loving word may heal and bless.

Our words really do matter. **What path will you take this week with your tongue as you engage with others? Will they build up or tear down?**