



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Real Faith. Real Life.

Part 8: Words Matter

James 3:1–12 | Steve Lombardo | March 5, 2017

Open please to James chapter three:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³ If we

put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 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.

The average person will spend one-fifth of his life talking, with about 16,000 words per day. If you were to produce books with your words, that would result in 132 books with 200 pages each—every year. We speak a lot—words of truth, words of love, words of anger, words of jealousy.

In the ancient book of wisdom, the book of Proverbs, we read a lot about our speech or our tongues or our words. We read things like this: *“There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing”* (Proverbs 12:18). *“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits”* (Proverbs 18:21). How about this one? You know this one. *“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger”* (Proverbs 15:1).

James has already mentioned the importance of our speech. You may recall James 1:19, *“Let every person be quick to hear [and] slow to speak.”* Now he turns his full attention to addressing the tongue, an organ that is capable of great evil but also of much good. As we live our lives, we have times when we put our foot in our mouth, don't we? Maybe some of us more than others. We get in trouble because of our words.

One of my first memories of this happening was in the second grade. It was Christmastime, a very festive time at school, and I had the nerve to say these words to my classmates: *“There is no such thing as Santa Claus.”*

Are there any kids in here—have they been dismissed for children's church yet? I'm sorry to disappoint some of you here. Obviously you're just learning.

I said to my fellow students, *“There's no such thing as Santa Claus.”* They responded, *“Yes, there is! Where do all the presents under the tree come from?”* I said, *“Well, do this. Test me this way. Go home and this whole Christmastime don't tell your parents what you want for Christmas and see if Santa brings it to you.”* I got in trouble that day at school, and had a note sent home. But that was one of the very few times when my parents sided with me. I was telling the truth that time and that was okay.



The tongue is a powerful thing. Even as a second-grader, I realized that I could make an impact on my classmates by the words I spoke. And I happened to be speaking the truth—maybe in the wrong way, maybe not in love. But just think about using your words to speak untruths and to influence in a way that is evil—that’s what we’re going to consider here.

1. Words are powerful.

You don’t have to look very hard in our day and age to find stories about young people—whether in junior high, high school or early 20s—who have been bullied or belittled, who feel as though they’re at their wit’s end because of degrading words from others, and sometimes end up committing suicide.

Here’s one such story from this past December about Brandy Vela, from Texas. Brandy’s sister Jackie said the teen had always been bullied for her weight. But the cyberbullying ramped up in April. People would make up fake Facebook accounts and message her. She wouldn’t respond, but they would keep coming at her. They would say really, really mean things like, “Why are you still here?” They would call her fat and ugly.

She was beautiful—absolutely beautiful. The only thing that people could find to pick on her for was her weight. Jackie said her sister changed her phone number and reported the bullying to the police, but the police said they couldn’t do anything yet because no physical altercation had taken place.

Jackie knew something was wrong when she got a text from her sister Brandy saying, “I love you so much. Please remember that. And I’m sorry for everything.” Worried, she called her parents and grandparents, and they rushed home. When they got there, they found Brandy in her room holding a gun to her chest. The family pleaded with the teen not to pull the trigger, but Brandy had made up her mind. Tragic.

What do we do? What saying do we teach our kids to help them deal with words? We say things like, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” It’s not true.

The ancient rabbis and teachers of the law called the tongue an arrow. You could kill somebody with a sword in close proximity. An arrow can be used to kill both in close proximity and from a great distance. That is the tongue. So whether you’re facing someone in a personal relationship or spoken from afar, your words can be damaging or even murderous. It might be on social media, or it could be, “She said something to somebody else,” and now it’s getting back to you. But words can pierce.

Why is the tongue so powerful? Referring to the power of the tongue, James begins by saying, *“Not many of you should become teachers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”* Words can influence—that’s why they’re so powerful.

Words can influence the lives of the listeners.

James says, “Be careful pursuing the teaching position,” specifically in the church. Being a teacher in the church can be appealing in some ways. Maybe some of you have a fear of public speaking. But teaching in a classroom or a big gathering like this can be appealing, because people are listening to your words. They’re looking to you for your thoughts and opinions.

I remember visiting with one family who had an elderly relative in the hospital, and although they didn’t know it at the time, he was dying. The doctor came in to talk to his wife and kids about their possible next steps. The doctor made his suggestions. Then the kids weighed in with theirs. “Mom, maybe we should transfer him to another hospital.” As they went over the details, the wife then turned to me and asked, “What do you think, Pastor?” What an honor to have influence in that way, but you need to realize that with that influence comes great responsibility.

Teachers will actually have to answer to God for their words and their influence. It can be a heavy burden. Words are powerful because of the effect they have on the hearts and minds of the listeners.

You can see this to be true in the great movements of history. Just in the last century, during World War II, Adolf Hitler spoke with great rhetoric of restoring the nation of Germany. His deceptive language resulted in the killing of six million Jews. The words were well-designed—designed to desensitize the listener to the violence and vulgarity of the movement.

What about today? Think about how our culture uses words. That baby growing inside the womb is not a baby—it’s an “it.” It’s a mass of cells—a lump of tissue—in the woman’s body. Once you desensitize the meaning, it doesn’t matter that you get rid of that thing. It’s an “it.” Even though the baby has brain waves. Even though the baby’s heart is beating. Even though the baby reacts to pain. Words have influence.

Words can influence positively.

James gives us a couple illustrations of how words are used positively. First, he gives us the image of a horse with a bit in its mouth with which we can control the horse and cause it to obey us. The small bit is used to guide the horse's whole body.

I remember as a young kid going to a farm where there were horses. Horses are big and powerful, and to a little kid they can be kind of scary. I remember that my older sister got on a horse, and the horse bucked her off. It was dangerous. But five minutes later I watched as one of the kids who owned the horses jumped on the horse bareback, grabbing the reins that were attached to the bit and taking off on this powerful being. I watched a 50-pound kid ride that enormous beast all over the field. The same thing can happen with the tongue. If we can control our tongue, we can control our bodies. We can control the direction of our lives.

James also mentions a ship. Whether the ship is small or large, the rudder is much smaller relatively. And by that rudder a ship is steered. So too our lives are steered by our tongues. Verse five, *"So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things."*

Words can influence negatively.

"How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire!" (James 3:8b). Do you remember those forest fire commercials that talked about not throwing cigarettes into the forest? Smokey the Bear would tell us that a little spark could burn down the whole forest. Our tongues are the same way—they are powerful, have influence and can set things on fire. James says the fire of our tongues is lit by hell. Ah, how our words matter.

2. Words reveal the progress of our faith.

James goes on to explain that our words reveal the progress of our faith. Verse nine: *"With [our tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God."* It doesn't make any sense. We bless and praise the Lord, yet we curse and tear down those who are made in His image. Curses should not come from the mouth of a believer.

James uses a couple more illustrations. First, he speaks of a spring. He asks, "Can a spring produce both fresh and salt water?" No. Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. "Can a fig tree produce olives, or a grape vine produce figs?" No. James uses these illustrations of a spring and a tree to say that curses should not come from the mouth of a believer.

Some of you have been there, haven't you? I as a pastor have been there. To my shame, even in my own home I would not bless my family. So let's examine ourselves now.

3. The top five evidences that you are not in control of your tongue.

I ask that the Lord would bring conviction and grant repentance as we consider these five points:

1. You consistently hurt those around you.

Your words are powerful and they can do damage. Recently a young lady came to me at our church to tell me about her father, who does not attend here. She said he degrades and belittles her, even though he claims to be a Christian and to love Jesus. He's even part of the leadership of the church he attends. Yet every moment they're together—at least in her estimation—she is being torn down by his words. She feels worthless and doesn't know what to do.

2. Nothing is ever good enough.

Dads, are you hurting your children with your words? Husbands, are you degrading your wives? Is nothing ever good enough? Remember the Israelites of old who were rescued from slavery in Egypt? At every turn as they journeyed toward the Promised Land, it seemed they were murmuring against God. "How could You bring us out here to die in the desert? We don't have any food to eat. We had food to eat in Egypt, but now we have nothing but this manna. We're sick of it. We've had it every day now for a few weeks. When are You going to give us something different?" (See Exodus 16–17).

They complained that nothing was good enough, forgetting God's provision and blessing. They forgot how God had brought them out of slavery and miraculously brought them through the Red Sea, and was now leading them by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. They continued to complain, so God judged them. In Numbers 21, God sent fiery serpents into the camp. After many of

the people died, Moses interceded for them. God relented, telling Moses to put a brass serpent on a pole. Whoever would look at that snake would be healed.

3. Your words are marked by bitterness.

Third, you are not in control of your tongue if your words are marked by bitterness. Do you know that your tongue never loses its power? Strong men eventually get weak. Beauty fades. But the tongue never goes quiet.

Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, says in Ecclesiastes 12 that the day is coming when your body will fail you, when the desires you had won't even remain. Whether that's sexual desires or the desire to succeed or to master or accomplish something, but as you age, your flesh will fail. But your tongue retains its strength, and it might even grow sharper and stronger, especially if bitterness is locked in your heart. "Nothing is good enough, and I am bitter about it."

Some of you who are older can have such an impact on younger people, but that impact can be robbed through bitterness that comes out through your tongue. On that note, a man came up to me just this morning—I believe it was God-ordained—who last week had been complaining to me about some things. This morning, he asked me for forgiveness. I thought, "There's a man who is seeking to control his tongue, to live for the Lord Jesus Christ."

4. You always turn the conversation away from you and onto others.

When something convicting comes up, you turn the conversation away from yourself. You have done something wrong, but you turn it back to the other person. You never want to talk about something you might have to change or deal with in the future. On the flip side, your conversation may end up always about you and never about others when the subject is something normal.

So when the conversation asks, "How can I change? How can I be better? How can I do things differently?" you direct it elsewhere. It's someone else's problem, someone else's fault—it's never on you. But otherwise in normal conversation, it's all about you and not about them.

5. You have not blessed or encouraged anyone in a long time.

The final evidence that you're not in control of your tongue is when you haven't blessed or encouraged someone in a long time. Why would you? Life is about you. You've forgotten the call of Christ—that your life is not your own. You were bought with a price.

Jesus said, "Just as the serpent was lifted up after the nation of Israel complained, so I must be lifted up" (John 3:14-15). We who are sinners now need to look on the sinless Christ so that we too might be saved, healed and restored, so we can have a right tongue.

4. Words confirm the position of your heart.

These are the words of Jesus in Luke 6:45: *"The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."* The words you speak come from what is inside you.

This is the crux of the issue, beloved. Our tongues will never be tamed by just trying harder. Our words will never be made purer by memorizing a list of rules. No, our mouths will only be made right when our heart is changed. That's the message of the Scriptures. That's what Jesus taught. Until we have new hearts, we can't have new tongues.

Even after we get new hearts, the tongue is still going to be a problem, as we see in James. He's writing to believers, brothers and sisters in Christ, who are still dealing with the tongue. But until we have new hearts, we will not have new tongues. Until we base our identity in Christ, we will never gain control of the words which we speak that matter so much.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul says, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation."* If you are in Christ, be reminded today of your identity. You are a new creation. The sin that would so easily entangle you has no power any longer under the cross of Christ. You've been forgiven, and you've been set free to live according to the law of liberty. Continuing in verses 18-21:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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