

1 Last week I introduced you to one artist's attempt to take the words and ideas of the Biblical book of James and to summarize them in a picture, what I'm choosing to call, "Living the Word." Our faith, rooted in the Word of God, is a trail head that leads us into the communities where we live and work and go to school, and the wider world around us. It's the point of origin for the greatest adventure of our lifetimes, the one we call discipleship, or more simply, following Jesus.

Last week we studied James 2:26, "Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works."¹ A faith without the fruit of good works is like a car in a parking spot that never moves. The car might just as well have a dead battery and flat tires. We're helping you put your faith into gear today by encouraging you to pick up one of these blessing bags out in the lobby. Carry it with you in your car and share it as a blessing to the next homeless person you meet at a freeway intersection.

2 As I said last week, James is a tough read- not because it's difficult to understand, but because it's difficult to live into. Today we tackle that perennial favorite, taming the tongue. There are few topics in the Bible that get as much press as the use and misuse of our gift of speech. The proverbs especially weigh in on this topic: Proverbs 18:2, "Fools have no interest in understanding; they only want to air their own opinions"; Proverbs 18:6, "Fools' words get them into constant quarrels"; Proverbs 18:8, "Rumors are dainty morsels that sink deep into one's heart"; Proverbs 18: 21, "The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences." Proverbs 12:18, "Some people make cutting remarks, but the words of the wise bring healing." And one of my all-time favorites, Proverbs 10:19, "Too much talk leads to sin. Be sensible and keep your mouth shut."² I wish I could tattoo that one on my eyeballs!

Both Old and New Testaments give copious and clear warnings that there are both helpful and harmful ways that we can use our words. Yet despite reading and hearing these admonitions again and again, we still struggle to do the right thing. Of all our body parts, the tongue truly is the most difficult to master.

¹ New Living Translation (2nd Ed.)

² Ibid

3 Here is just a sampling of the various ways that we manage to ensnare ourselves and hurt others when we open our mouths. Which of these are you most prone to be trapped by? Lying, cursing, boasting, crudeness, slander, deceit, gossip, foolish talk, obscene talk, harsh criticism, false teaching, crooked speech, speaking evil, and careless speech. This isn't an exhaustive list, but it's a good starting place. It would make a great sermon series outline, but I don't suppose any one of us, including myself, could handle that much attention to our words. We're going to move quickly beyond this list of sins and on to focus on more Godly ways to speak, but it would be wrong to do so without first pausing to consider why the Bible considers these ways of speaking sinful.

James gives us three clues about that in the first twelve verses of chapter 3. In verse 5, James warns that "a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire." Today we might say, "a single tweet can start a flame war." Do those words ring true for you? Have you ever sent a text or an email that you desperately wished you could take back? Our words can start fires, and fires destroy and leave scars, on forests as well as people. Sometimes it's not even the words we use, but a subtle shift in the tone of our voice that gets us into trouble by suggesting that we're not in sincere agreement with the words we just uttered. An insincere apology comes to mind as a common example. And depending on how fragile the relationship is, a single spark is all that's needed to start a fire. How many of you know how much harder it is to put out that kind of fire than to have carefully avoided it in the first place?

The second reason James gives us is in verse 9: "Sometimes [our tongue] praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God." In other words, when our words visit violence upon other people, they reveal that the praises we offer God in worship are hollow, because we heap insult and injury on those who God has called "very good" and called his own. Think about that the next time you open your mouth to speak to another person: every person bears within their lives the image of their creator. Just as faith without works is dead, praise of God without reverence for God's creation, and especially God's children, is dead.

Finally, James notes in verse 10 that "blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth." When we say that God is holy, we mean that God is set apart from the

profane, which is just another word for everything that's not of God. God commands us to "be holy because I am Holy."³ That doesn't mean that we're all supposed to dress in white robes and pretend to be better than we really are. What it does mean is that the attitudes of our hearts and our words and actions should identify with the heart, Word, and will of God, rather than being derivative of the corrupted cultures around us. Curses called down on others reveal the corruption of our hearts and despoil the would-be blessings we have to offer others.

4 Just like the failure of faith to bear fruit is really a heart issue, so too the ways we use and misuse our words are a reflection of our underlying heart condition. As we read in Luke 6:45, "The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks."⁴

Once again, we're left asking the question, what does it take to have a good heart? How can we fill our hearts with goodness rather than evil, so that the abundance of our hearts spills out in holy, helpful, healthy ways? Ultimately that requires the work of God's Holy Spirit, without which we can't even choose to turn to God. So a holy heart begins with surrendering ourselves to God, every day, and asking that God's Holy Spirit do an extreme makeover on our hearts and in our lives.

5 There are, however, some obvious ways we can begin to cooperate with God's Spirit. I believe that although our mouths speak out of the abundance of our hearts, we can also shape our hearts by training our mouths. As we read in the Proverbs, "Kind words are like honey—sweet to the soul and healthy for the body."⁵ If we take that earlier list of sinful ways of speech, we can easily imagine a list of opposite speech that honors God and builds up others: Instead of lying, telling the truth; instead of cursing, blessing, instead of boasting, humility; instead of crudeness, wholesomeness; instead of slander, praise; instead of deceit, honesty; instead of gossip, kindness; instead of foolish talk, wise talk; instead of obscene talk, God-honoring talk, instead of harsh criticism, gentle criticism; instead of false teaching,

³ Leviticus 11:45. New Living Translation (2nd Ed.)

⁴ New International Version (2011)

⁵ New Living Translation (2nd Ed.)

truthful teaching; instead of crooked speech, straight speech; instead of speaking evil, speaking good; and instead of careless speech, careful speech.

5 In Hebrews 13:15, Paul exhorts us to “offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to his name.”⁶ When we talk about sacrificial giving today, we often assume we’re only talking about our financial gifts to the church. But really, our whole lives are intended to be patterned after the sacrificial giving of Jesus, who gave his very life up for our sakes. When we confess our faith by speaking a liturgy, or pray, or sing words of praise to God, we are bringing a sacrifice of praise, using our tongues for one of the main things they were made for. In a very significant way, when we worship together we’re training our tongues and our hearts for the kind of living that pleases God and brings blessing to us as well as God’s world.

6 We’re going to try that right now with this simple responsive hymn that we’ll sing twice through. As we sing, let your praise be directed to God, and your heart be open to the powerful work of God’s Holy Spirit.

{Sing UMC # 177, He Is Lord, two times}



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⁶ Ibid