

Ad Literram

Isaiah 50:4-9a | Psalm 116:1-8 | James 3:1-12 | Mark 8:27-33

JAMES 3:1-12

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴ Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet 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 exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

INTRODUCTION

Good morning. There are any number of difficult topics—contentious topics, solemn topics—that I could, and probably should, address today. But I want to start with a controversial week from mid-August of 2013. It was a vexing week in which nearly every major news publication unexpectedly noticed—in large part, because thousands on the internet were collectively losing their minds—noticed that something in our late modern Western culture, which had been gradually shifting for arguably more than 200 years, had finally reached a tipping point. I am, of course, referring to the week in which numerous dictionaries of the English language changed the meaning of the word *literally*.¹ Merriam-Webster and Cambridge, and even Google, all expanded the definition to include how the word is frequently used—to intensify something not necessarily actually true. In other words, it could now mean *figuratively*. If you are a linguistic purist, it was a depressing week. We no longer have a word in English that means *literally*. If you are a linguistic descriptivist, it was a triumph. The widespread use of the word in this way had effected a change of definition in which a word could now mean its own opposite. It's amazing, isn't it? Literally. And because we are using the post-2013 definition, you don't know if I mean that figuratively or not.

¹ Merriam-Webster later posted an explanatory article. See merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/misuse-of-literally. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, apparently made the shift in definition back in 2011, though it was not widely known at the time. For more information about the shift in other dictionaries in August of 2013, see "Official: 'Literally' no longer means 'literally,'" at *Today Translations* (August 19, 2013). See todaytranslations.com/news/official-literally-no-longer-means-literally/. Interestingly, using *literally* as a figurative intensifier has a long history going back a few hundred years and including obvious examples in well-known literature from Louisa May Alcott, Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Jane Austen. See "Use or Abuse of the Word 'Literally,'" at *NPR* (November 3, 2005). See npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4988053&t=1631395884870.

Words matter. What they mean, matters. Our ability to communicate with one another—verbally or in writing—to understand each other, matters so very much. And it is because words are powerful. The fact is, you do not need me to convince you how powerful the tongue can be. You know this. From clichés like the pen being mightier than the sword—which it is—to the children’s rhyme about how ‘sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me’—which I think we all can verify is simply false—we all know that words are potent. And this is especially true with leaders, teachers, any who are charged with speaking for a living, with exerting influence through their use of words.

Well, this is James’s topic for us this morning, his ancient meditation on the power of words and our moral responsibility in how we deploy them. Indeed, this is his argument: Because words are so powerful, the Christian’s use of words, especially that of a teacher, is to be done with great care. Or to put it more succinctly: *We should take great care in how we use words because words matter.*

EVERYONE’S WORDS

Now, before we dig into this a little more, I want to quickly note that James has framed this discussion in terms of teachers—that those responsible for teaching must be especially careful in their use of words. In fact, the stakes are so high that he recommends that many should not become teachers. There is wisdom in this—in restricting the teaching role to those with spiritual maturity, those who are prepared to bear the greater responsibility. But do not think, not even for a minute, that it frees the rest of us, that it lets us off the hook. James quickly turns to the general use of words, and he undoubtedly remembers the teaching of his half-brother, another preacher known for words, a man by the name of Jesus. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus said:

I tell you, on the day of judgement you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.²

We are all responsible, both immediately and ultimately, for how we use our words. There is no way around it. We should take great care in how we use our words. And James deploys an arsenal of analogies to make this case. But, in particular, he notes three things about our use of words that we should consider here, briefly.

1. POWERFUL WORDS

First, he notes that words are very powerful. In fact, he draws on his first two analogies to demonstrate this.³ Just like a bit, a relatively small mouthpiece, is lodged in the mouth of a large horse, and so allows the rider to steer the movements of the horse, so the tongue has disproportionate effect. And just like a rudder, a relatively small vertical flat piece on the stern (or back) of a boat, allows the captain to steer the large vessel, so the tongue exerts a disproportionate effect. And it’s true. A kind word of praise from a teacher to a student can

² Matt 12:36-37.

³ These analogies are not original to James. See Sophocles, *Antigone*, 477; Aristotle, *Quaest. Mechan.*, 5; Pseudo-Aristotle, *Mund.*, 6; Philo, *On the Migration of Abraham*, 67; Philo, *Stobaeus, Eclogae*, 3.17.17; Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation*, 3.223–224; Plutarch, *How a Young Man Should Study Poetry*, 33F; and Philostratus, *Vit. Ap.*, 2.11.2. See also Douglas J. Moo, *James* (TNTC; Downers Grove: IVP, 2015).

build confidence. A harsh word of critique can deflate or compel improvement. From the particular words of laws to the most intimate communication between lovers, speech, words, expressive and meaningful acts, can immeasurably change lives. ‘You’re fired.’ ‘I do.’ ‘Help me, please.’ ‘I’m sorry.’ And in fact, a single word—and it doesn’t even have to be a real word—can captivate the masses. I only need to utter the word *coofefe* and we will recall when the world ground to a halt for days, trying to unearth the hidden meaning of a typo. Words are powerful.

2. DESTRUCTIVE WORDS

Secondly, words are not only powerful, but they have a disposition. Or to put it differently, words are especially powerful in destructive ways. That’s not to say they can’t be remarkably effective in positive ways—but the tendency goes the other direction. James draws on two more analogies to make this point. Just as a small spark can lead to a forest fire, so a little speech can bring ruin.⁴ “*The tongue is a fire*,” he notes.⁵ It poisons too easily. It connects us too quickly to a world of iniquity. Indeed, this destructive capacity finds its origins in hell. The word here is Gehenna, a reference to the Valley of Hinnom, a topographical feature to the west and southwest of Jerusalem where the kings of Judah sacrificed their children in fire.⁶ And so, James argues, this kind of violent, repulsive act, and the destructive power of the tongue, have a common origin. The depravity of the human heart, the sinful nature, the tendency to rebel against God and all that is good with acts of evil—this finds expression in human speech. Words are not just powerful, but more often than not, they are harmful. Or, as he indicates with his fourth analogy, words are untameable. From beasts to birds, from reptiles to sea creatures, the earth is full of wild animals. They cannot be tamed. And, lest his point be too vague, he notes that untamed animals are dangerous. They are poisonous. And just so, untamed words are restlessly lethal, powerful enough to produce devastation.

3. REVEALING WORDS

And this brings us to his third observation. Our words are not just powerful and destructive, but they are also revealing. Our double-speech reveals our double-minds. We bless God and curse his creation, our fellow human, two incompatible acts of speech, with the same mouth. Our verbal hypocrisy demonstrates a double-mindedness, a divided heart—a subject that James addresses elsewhere in this letter.⁷ It also goes back to the Garden of Eden. We were made in God’s likeness and yet we are subject to the fall, inheritors of both the *imago Dei* and original sin. And so, we are divided in our hearts. Paul picks this up in Romans 7, showing how our sinful fleshly nature is always at war with the Holy Spirit within us. Here, James notes that this double-mindedness ultimately and inevitably reveals itself through our mouths. One can’t but help think he’s likewise referring to the reading we had last week from chapter 2, about the continuity of our words and our actions. Faithful declarations are useless without faithful actions to support them. What use is claiming a Christian faith if you aren’t going to live like a Christian in these sorts of biblical ways? No, our lives and our words should be singular, oriented to praising God and edifying his people. His final two analogies underscore this point. Just as a spring should only give us fresh water, not mixed with bitter water, and just as a fig

⁴ He transitions from the size comparison to the damaging nature of words.

⁵ Jas 3:6.

⁶ See Jeremiah 7:31, 19:2-6. This understanding of Gehenna as primarily referring to the Valley of Hinnom as the site of child sacrifice contrasts with the commonly cited notion of it being the location of burning garbage outside of Jerusalem, which has dubious origin in much later history.

⁷ See Jas 4:8 (cf., 1:8).

tree should give us figs and not olives, just as *literally* should probably mean *literally* and not its opposite as well—or maybe not—so our mouths should reveal faithful, God-honouring, single-minded devotion to our Lord and Saviour Christ Jesus.

OUR WORDS

Where does this leave us? Having heard James's argument that words matter and so we ought to take care in how we use them, what are we to do? Well, a couple quick thoughts before we close. First, let's be careful with our words. Let's recognize how powerful and destructive they can be, and then let's take great care in how we use them. How do you talk to your spouse, to your loved ones? How do you talk to the people you disagree with about COVID polices, race issues, theological differences, or any number of other things that are bound to arise a community as culturally diverse as this one? How do you talk about people? Great care must be taken.

Secondly, our words should reveal rightly oriented hearts. And this requires two things. First, it requires a rightly oriented heart. And this, friends, is where the gospel comes into play. We are not disposed to love one another, to care for one another, to sacrifice ourselves for one another, on our own. And even if we manage to do those things a little, we are imperfect and bound to fail. Selfishness eventually sets in. And our words follow. But, it is in the death and resurrection of Jesus that we have hope of overcoming such sin. It is because he died and rose again on our behalf that we can confidently concern ourselves with more than a statement of our faith, but with words meant to build each other up. But it also, secondly, requires following his example. We heard in the Mark reading—his cross becomes our cross. We must deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow.⁸ Just as Jesus gave up his rights, his divinity, and ultimately his life for the sake of others, we must do so as well. It is a matter of humility. We must humbly ask what we can give up, what sacrifice we can make, in order to bring our lives into conformity with our declarations of faith. We must do more than talk a good game about the environment, we must live sacrificially in a way that makes a difference. We must be more than verbally committed to diversity, we must live sacrificially in a way that explores, understands, and embraces each other's cultures—not merely tolerates. We must do more than profess how we care for one another. We must deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and care for each other, for real.

CONCLUSION

And there is no better place to start than how we talk to one another. We must be proactive in praise and gratitude, slow to critique or admonish harshly. And then, by God's grace, perhaps the kindness of our words will reveal the sweetness of our hearts. Because words matter. They matter a lot. They *literally* matter. And we must take great care in how we use them.

Let me pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you for saving through the death and resurrection of your Son. May our speech be ever oriented to your praise and always reflect your love. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁸ See Mark 8:27-33.