

## Mere Words: James 3:1-12

I may have got the short straw in handing out the passages for preaching today. I said in my last sermon on chapter 1 that we are to hold up a mirror and take a good hard look at ourselves – and this is particularly clear in this passage today.

But James starts here by putting a spotlight on the preacher or teacher in a congregation. Not only am I taking a good look at myself, but know this he says, God is taking an even harder look at me. Not to mention that you are all sizing me up to see if my actions match my words. Why? Because communication, what we say (and I think we can extend it to what we write) is so important.

It is important because God is a God who communicates. We have a speaking God. And, God has given the gift of language, of speech and communication. So, how we communicate, how we speak to one another, what we say and how we say it, our words are important. We are to be authentic in that our words are true in-and-of-themselves but also true in how they represent us. Are we being true to our words? Are we reflecting how God is and how we should be in all that we say and write?

James, here in Chapter 3, we're looking at verses 1 through 12, says the tongue holds a key place in holy living. If you are in Christ: if you have been given new life in Jesus, made a new creation, become a child of God, you, like me, are called to be holy as our God is holy. Key to your holy living is your tongue – what you say, and how you say it.

James moving focus off the teacher says in verse 2 – read it with me – *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.*

'Perfect' here is the idea James has raised in chapter 1 verse 4 of being complete, being mature. Am I mature in faith? Am I a mature Christian? To answer this, James says, listen to what comes out of your mouth.

We all make mistakes, that is, sin remains our universal experience. And among our sinfulness the sin of speech is prominent.

- a hasty word
- an untruthful statement
- sly suggestion
- harmful gossip
- innuendo
- impurity

Indeed, not to sin in speech would demand perfection. As Peter says of Jesus' example for us to follow in 1 Peter 2:22 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. *"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."*

James' point is clear – the control of the tongue leads to a master-control of ourselves, of our lives. He gives 2 great examples of this. First, the bit in a horse's mouth controlling the whole horse in where it goes. Second, the rudder of a ship directing where it goes. The tongue is a key factor in control.

Do you control your tongue? Do you control what you say? Can you hold your course (to use a boating term), hold the course of holiness? Its important.

James wants us to hear the importance. So, he gives another example of the power of the tongue. This time the power of destruction. You see it there in verses 5 and 6. It's a fire. *How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!* <sup>6</sup>*And the tongue is a fire.*

We are all too aware how a small spark or flame can take hold and flare up into a devastating bush fire. The spark once fanned into flame, and it takes hold, will keep spreading and growing till all around is ablaze and it will just decimate all in its path. So, James says, in his usual style of pulling no punches, the tongue is an actual power for evil.

Listen again to verse 6. *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.* Let's look at a couple of the expressions James uses. 'The world of unrighteousness'. James is saying how what we say is shaped by the world in which we live. It reveals the depth of influence that the world, our culture and community, our world view, the priorities and thinking of the world that does not know Jesus, that is broken and sinful, how much influence that world has on us. He speaks of 'the cycle of nature', referring how we are led deeper and deeper into sinfulness, further and further away from God. How our words effect our whole life and the influence of the tongue is always there. He goes as far as to say that it is set on fire by the fires of hell. It is anti-god. Our fallen nature, our broken humanity and the words we say reflect this. Think of Peter who when he declared that Jesus was the Messiah of God and Jesus then tells them of his mission, Peter says no and rebukes Jesus. Jesus then says to Peter – get behind me Satan. Oh, how he can influence our words!

Well, what of James' statement in verse 8: *but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.* Is it a lost cause? Do we give up? If it is so restless or resistant to being tamed, always wild, what do we do? How often have we said something we wish we could take back? That cutting word? A throw away sly? A disapproving tone? Or a harsh word of anger or hate? Something belittling, judgemental, spiteful or petty? Or our speech peppered with swearing or cursing or blasphemy? A wild beast! But James says, hear what you are saying, listen to yourself, understand what it is saying about you.

How can we one moment be singing praises to God and the next moment, out of the same mouth be cursing someone whom God has made? How can we be all sweet and polite and loving when we meet at church and then be mean and harsh to our partner at home, short with our words to our children, or cutting and foul mouthed at work?

James gives another couple of illustrations. First, you know a tree by its fruit. What type of fruit is coming out of my mouth? What's that fruit saying about what type of tree you really are? Second, a spring does not yield both salt and fresh water. He says check the spring. And the spring is our heart. James is saying check the heart. This is what Jesus said in the reading we had from Matthew 15. *But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.* The taming of the tongue, the controlling of what we say is a spiritual discipline of the heart.

Hold up that mirror with me. Replay the conversations you have had over the last week. Listen to them carefully. Not what the others said, but what you said, how you said things? Look into the mirror of your heart.

What does it say about your Christian maturity? Is there some work you need to do with God? How authentic is your faith? How often in your conversations over the last week have you mentioned Jesus? How often does our faith and love of God feature in our talk? If our words reveal our heart, what do our words say about our heart?

How much is our heart effected and still stained by the world? Have we allowed fear of what others might think to squash our faith into a little private compartment so that is never spoken of? Have we taken the bad behaviour of others to be a licence to swear or gossip or slander or bully in what and how we speak? Have we filled our heart with desires that lead us to bemoan our situation or belittle others to make us feel better and use our words to break down rather than build up? What are the words coming out of your mouth showing you and revealing to others, how your heart is?

James hits a hard punch. He finishes with *Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.*

Here is James wanting to ensure our faith is authentic. He is asking have we been truly transformed by the love of God in Christ Jesus? Are we allowing the Spirit of God to so fill us with his grace and power that indeed our heart is full of the joy and righteousness of the Lord, and that it is overflowing in all that we say and think and do? Let me finish with words from a hymn. You may like to echo these words as a prayer.

Fill my whole life, O Lord my God,  
In every part with praise,  
that my whole being may proclaim  
Your being and your ways.

Fill every part of me with praise  
Let all my being speak  
Of you and of your love, O Lord  
Poor though I be and weak. Amen.