

Work of Peace and the Power of Speech

James 3:1-5

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Good morning to you all. My name is PD Mayfield, and I serve as one of the pastors here at Columbia Presbyterian Church. It is always good to open God's word. And so if you have your Bibles or if you have an app, turn with me or tap with me in the book of James. We're going to look at James 3:1-5 this morning as we continue our series in the book of James called Wisdom, Faith in Practice.

Now, a couple weeks ago before the Easter holiday, we concluded the section right at the end of chapter 2 where James was discussing the relationship between faith and works. Whereas Paul in his letters emphasizes the point that good works don't merit salvation. But here in the book of James, James is emphasizing the point that good works are demonstrated out of those who have saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It raises the question what are good works? Christianity does not give this master list that we follow, but Christians do discern what good works must be done from the wisdom of God. And that wisdom of God that's in His word and by His spirit, it shapes our dispositions toward others out of love and service. Our hearts are transformed by His grace, and our actions are motivated by the love of God.

So turn with me to James 3:1-5 as I read.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 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. 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! [ESV]

Let us pray.

Father in heaven, we ask that you would meet us in this time in the reading of your word as we ponder what it looks like for us to put faith in practice with our speech. Lord, likewise, I ask of you to help the teacher. I stumble in many ways. And may we look to you. May you increase so that I may decrease so we may see more and more of your beauty. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.

We know the power of words, don't we? From the inspiring speech that moves a nation to foolish gossip that rips a friendship apart. We have significant memories in our lives, whether we were seven years old or whether it happened this week, these memories of people speaking into our lives. Perhaps it was a coach or a teacher that said, great job. Keep going. Keep doing what you're doing. But it also could be someone that said, you can't do that. You're worthless.

The Bible has much to say about our speech. For example, from the wisdom literature in Job 27:4, it says, "My lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit." Proverbs 10:20-21, "The tongue of the righteous is choice silver. The heart of the wicked is of little worth. The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense."

James likewise offers much wisdom about our speech. These verses really fit into a larger section that goes all the way to James 4:12, and today's main point comes from verse 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!"

With our speech, we build up. With our speech, we tear down. We give thanks, and we criticize. And we read the wisdom of the Bible and have the experience of our lives that words have the power to

wound us, and they have the power to heal us. And the power of our speech as we see in these verses has the potential for very big consequences.

But the good news that we have from this passage as well is that our faith in Christ Jesus will be the very bed rock and the motivation that we have that demonstrates our good works. And because of that, our speech really becomes a place where Christians can engage in a work of peace. Now, this is something we're going to be talking about for the next several weeks as we unpack this larger section of the work of peace. And today and next week we'll be looking at the power of our speech.

So how do we do that? Today in James in these verses specifically, we're looking at the potential power of our speech. We'll be discussing briefly that the potential power of speech requires a greater responsibility on teachers, it reveals an important association between our words and our bodies, and it displays our hearts' direction.

Let's look first in verse 1 as we look at the potential power of our speech which requires a greater responsibility for teachers. James begins in verse 1 with a caution, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." Why does James give this caution here? He's making a connection between the previous passage in chapter 2 of how faith and works relate. But now, he's moving into the relationship with our words. And if you remember, James even briefly touched on this in chapter 1:19-20 where he says, "Know this, my beloved brothers. Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." And then again in verse 26 after that, he says, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." Our faith and our works very much collide with the very actions of our words, the words we say and the words we speak, certainly. But they reflect something about our hearts.

And James gives this caution because he himself is keenly aware of the particular power that comes from the words of a teacher, this power that people who are teachers in our lives have, or pastors, teachers in schools, some sort of coaching and mentoring relationships. The power of words in our lives, we know the difference between the humility versus arrogance. We know the difference between truth and falsehood. And we experience the impact of understanding versus confusion or that of being empowered or being manipulated.

James considers himself a teacher. And he humbly includes himself in this warning just as I must do as well. He acknowledges that greater scrutiny is upon a teacher's words. We see this from Jesus in His own teaching from Matthew 12:36. Jesus says, "I tell you on the day of judgment, people will give account for every careless word they speak." If that is true of you and me just as people, how much more true will it be on those who presume to be teachers, presume to be proclaiming what the Bibles says of what is true about God, His character, what we must believe to experience His eternal salvation, to experience the hope that we have in our relationship with Jesus Christ?

So briefly, here are some points of application for people like me, people who aspire or seek to become teachers of God's words. Here are just a couple things as we are watchful of our speech and its power. May teachers of God's word have their character formed before their skills are perfected. May teachers of God's word exercise humility and love that imitates Jesus the master teacher.

Now, what if you aren't a teacher or what if you don't aspire to be one? There are things to glean from this passage as well. May you as students have your ears tuned to the truth of God's word more than the flourishes of a teacher's mouth. May you as students prefer what is good for your souls instead of what sounds good to your ears. And may you as students listen closely to those teachers who are pointing you to Jesus Christ instead of highlighting themselves. This work of peace and the power of speech is important for all Christians, but a greater responsibility falls on those who are teachers.

Next, James moves into the potential power of speech as it reveals this important association with our words and our bodies. Verse 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." Now, here there are some interpretive decisions to make. Some people think that James is continuing to talk about leaders through this passage. Other people think that he is simply making a transitional jumping off point and moving into the power of speech and the body, the community of faith. Now, whichever direction you take, the point is still valid that James is communicating.

To be quite honest, I go back and forth between what the context is alluding to. But I know with certainty that James is dealing with something that is true for whether you're a leader or not. This is true of everybody.

The word "stumble" here in verse 2 simply means to lose one's footing. But it often carries moral implications in scripture of someone walking along a path and falling, and that has the metaphor of falling into sin, getting off track, being sidetracked and distracted away from the way you are to be living your life. James recognizes a truth that the Bible presents very well, that the human heart is complex, and that no one is without sin.

Proverbs 20:9, "Who can say, 'I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin?'" Ecclesiastes 7:20 says, "Surely, there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins." And John the apostle writes in his letter, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

So here is this reality that we are not perfect, and even leaders are not perfect. And we may stumble along the way. But James moves into various illustrations that he uses. He uses a bridle, he uses a ship's rudder, and he starts to talk about a fire all to explain the tongue and illustrate what he is saying.

Here, we'll begin with the first image of the bridle in verse 3. "If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well." Although no one is without sin, James is certainly recognizing our weaknesses and our frailty. But nevertheless, the body of Christ, Christ's church, is intended to grow in maturity of faith and grow in holiness in our sanctification which is merely the process of becoming fully who we are in Christ. In this way, the bridle gives us an illustration of growing in self control which guides us in that work of peace that we are intended to do.

So here are just some questions for your own reflection and your own application of what this might look like. Just a few questions. What do you find funny? What motivates you to say what you say? And I would even go so far as to ask what motivates you to think what you think even though you may not say it? Meaning the speech that is in our own mind before we form words. How does what you say about yourself, the world, even God Himself inform your attitude, your emotions, and your choices? James is making the connection that indeed the words of our speech have connections with where we go in our bodies, in our lives, and how we carry ourselves, and how we engage with other people.

And this moves us to a third point. Here, he continues the images. But here in these images, as a continuation, he goes into discussing how the potential power of speech truly displays our heart's direction. Verse 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." James is using size comparisons to show the potential power, the leverage of how we can use our speech. And where we take it is where there is great consequence. There is great blessing to people. There is great damage to people. Jesus again in His own teaching from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 15:18 says this, "But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart."

Now, I have small children. I have two daughters. And we love singing. Now, I'm not a good singer at all, but my wife is. We enjoy singing together. And there is a song that we love to sing. It's called "Good Fruit," and it's by a group called Rain for Roots. And the chorus of this song "Good Fruit" is a wonderful picture of Jesus's teaching. It's a beautiful compliment to what James is writing in his letter. This is the chorus. "Your heart is where the words of your mouth grow. Your mouth is where the thoughts of your heart go. Jesus, change our hearts to bear, to bear good fruit." These images that James

gives us were very common in Jewish literature as well as Greek philosophy, and they explain the potential power of our speech. Such a small thing truly can have big consequences.

My mother had a wonderful habit of saying this to me growing up, and I wonder if your mother said something similar. "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." I will say it's always wise to listen to your mother. But as I conclude this morning, I just want to expand on that a little bit more.

There is a popular story attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates called the triple filter test. He was visited by an acquaintance who wanted to share with him a bit of gossip. But before the man could say anything, Socrates stopped him, and he asked him these questions. The first filter he asked regards to truth. "Have you made absolutely sure that what you are about to say is true?" And he goes on to another question. "Is what you want to say something good or kind?" And then lastly, he asks the question, "Is this information useful or necessary to me?" These are great questions.

The irony of this story is that it's probably not true. Socrates probably didn't say it. There is some evidence. Some people ascribe this story actually becoming popular through the 20th century missionary Amy Carmichael who spent her life living in India. She wrote a book called *Edges of His Ways* where she writes this, "Perhaps these three sieves will help to keep some words from being spoken that would grieve the spirit of love and hurt someone whom our Lord loves. Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?"

Today, we focused on how our speech has great potential, great power in what we say and that it has very big consequences and this contrast between the small nature, the small organ that the tongue is that can bring about great things. Here, boasting is very neutral. It just means the magnitude, the amplification of how our words can land and the impact that they can have.

Today, we wanted to just introduce this larger section with just the potential power of our speech. Next week, pastor Randy will continue in the following verses looking more at the destructive power of our speech. But all the while, as we think about how we are using our words, our speech, to the very people who are closest to us, those who we have acquaintances with, we're friendly with, those people we don't care about, or even those who might find us or think us to be an enemy, or maybe in your heart you think they are an enemy of yours, the Lord cares greatly about our speech because He cares greatly about our hearts.

The reality is I can pretend very well by not saying things or by filtering and editing what I am thinking. I can follow this good advice to say kind things, to say true things. Those things are good things to do. I commend them to you, and I think they are connected to how we would even understand what is true and good in our speech and reflection of our relationship to Christ as well as our relationship to each other in the life of the church. But it's incredibly important that we realize where our words come from, and that is our heart. It points, it guides, it directs to an outcome that has big consequences.

So as you think about what words you choose, that's important. Yes. But think about why you want to say those things. What impact do you want your words to have on someone's life? How are you reflecting the glories of God and the promises of the scriptures in someone else's life? How might you be unknowingly tearing someone down in a way that doesn't reflect the abounding grace and mercy and love of Christ to them or His words, His words of gentleness, His words of kindness, His words of truth that call us to listen to Him, the teacher who speaks true, who speaks what is necessary, and who Himself is full of mercy and kindness?

Hear His words, not mine. Listen and find life in His words. And all the while, may the Lord put on your minds and hearts as you consider these things, that there is a greater responsibility placed on teachers, that our words certainly have a relationship with our bodies and the direction that we go, and our attitudes, and our emotions, and our choices. And certainly, our speech flows out of our hearts. May the Lord continue to bear fruit in your life so that your speech may glorify God and be of good benefit to others. Just imagine how different the church would be. Imagine how different the world would be if we

actively engaged in this work of peace, this peace that starts by knowing the power of our speech. Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven, you speak. You speak from the very beginning in creation, and you speak forth in your redemption. May we hear your words and find life in them. Bear your fruit in our lives by the power of your Holy Spirit that we may demonstrate your good fruit in our lives. And may that be on display not that we would boast in ourselves but that we would boast as a reflection of your work in our lives. Bring about this work of peace in us and through us. In Jesus's name. Amen.