

JAMES 3: 1 – 11 – Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2013

Words – speech, language – one of the things that separate man from the animals - the means by which we as human beings get information and our thoughts and opinions from one person to another – from head to head. Apparently, children have already learnt certain words before their first birthday – by the time they enter school they have a command of 13 000 words. By the time they leave school (I presume including the sixth form) they have the command of 60 000 words – and as an adult have about twice that number.

There is a popular theory – certainly one I have heard – that on a typical day a woman utters 20 000 words while the male averages a mere 7000 words.

Have you come across that? Do you think that is true?

Not true! In 2011 a team of scientists did the research and came to the conclusion that the true figure is the same for both sexes – around 16 000 words uttered in a typical day.

When it comes to speech remember that sometimes less can be more.

As Abraham Lincoln once said:

“Better to remain quiet and be thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt”

Whatever the number we say per day I think that we would all agree that words have power – both for good and for bad.

For James words are of central concern in his call for Christians – believers in the Lord Jesus Christ – to live integrated lives – lives which reflect God’s character and concerns. He is convinced that the words from our mouths are a key indicator as to whether or not our profession of belief in Christ is actually authentic.

This is our sixth week in the book of James – I want to go back to chapter 1 to help us understand what is on his heart as he writes this letter:

Chapter 1 verses 26, 27:( read it together)

“Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world”

This sets the agenda for the rest of the book. He basically focuses upon three priorities – to control our tongues, to care for those who are vulnerable and to guard our hearts against worldliness.

In Chapter 2 there is the call to keep the royal law of Love – “To Love our neighbour as we love ourselves”. This means we are to care for all – we are not to judge people on outward appearance – there should be no favouritism – our attitude should be one of “what can I give you rather than what can I get from you”. James asserts that without a practical love for our neighbour our Christian profession is empty and that if we have faith without works then it is dead.

When we get to Chapter 3 the focus is upon the awesome power of our words under the general heading of “Taming the tongue”.

Throughout the whole letter James has much to say about our speech.

For example:

Chapter 1 – “everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” - we have that warning regarding angry speech.

Chapter 2 – “If one of you says ( to someone in need ) “go in peace; keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about their physical needs what good is it? – That is a warning against empty speech.

Chapter 3 – we have a whole section on the power of words we will be considering shortly.

Chapter 4 – “Brothers and sisters – do not slander one another” – a warning against slanderous speech.

Chapter 5 – “Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged” – a warning there against grumbling speech.

So our speech and the power of words is a big concern throughout the whole letter. When it comes to angry speech, empty speech, slanderous speech or grumbling speech – how many of us can say “never me - not guilty”.

So is this not an area that is highly relevant?

Chapter 3 is the main chapter in this book on the significance of our words – that they are right at the heart of the call to live a life of integrity.

We will read this section in chapter 3 in three parts starting with:

1. OUR WORDS ARE IMPORTANT – JAMES 3: 1, 2

James starts this Chapter by declaring that no one should be quick to want to be a teacher of scripture – for those who do so will be judged more strictly.

This is something I am particularly aware of and rightly challenged by.

Being a teacher of Scripture is never to be taken lightly – not least because any teacher will be judged more strictly.

It can be a very vulnerable place.

Any teacher must guard against having the wrong type of ambition – must guard against pride and hypocrisy- no teacher should live a life that contradicts what they preach and teach.

We are all familiar with the phrase “practice what you preach” which is very important.

You could also turn it around and say “preach what you practice”.

That may well reduce the length of most sermons.

For any teacher – including the one standing before you now - the biggest challenge is to live as scripture says - not just teach what is in the scriptures.

Any teacher must also be faithful in teaching what is actually in the scriptures.

The New Testament has a lot to say about false teachers – meaning those who preach from selfish ambition and give people what they want to hear for their own gain rather than preaching God’s truth even when it is not popular or welcome.

I hope that we all agree that what is taught from up here – or whatever context where the scriptures are open – does matter and is of the highest importance! The Christian faith is founded upon God’s words to us – it is the primary way He has chosen to speak to us. The ministry of the word of God – meaning how it is taught, understood and acted upon – is vital for the health of any Church and is an essential component for our wellbeing individually and corporately.

So a teacher of scripture will be held accountable as to what they actually teach - and also for their motive for teaching it.

But please – never think that speaker in front of you up here is infallible.

I am, of course, really challenged by verse 1 – but somewhat relieved at verse 2 which begins with the sentence: “We all stumble in many ways”

James is saying “we all sin – and then goes on to say that if you want confirmation of this – listen to yourself!

If a person is never at fault in what they say – they are perfect.

But who can say that – can you?

I can’t! If there was a small microphone attached to me for a few days and all that I said was played back – you would at various points find something that is unpleasant – or unkind – or not true or not necessary.

Am I alone in this?

How many here would feel comfortable in having themselves recorded for a week and have the highlights – or the lowlights – played to us all next Sunday.

Think about that.

The truth is that “we have all sinned”.

And what comes out of our mouths is proof of this.

James is very clear – our words are an outward indicator that that something is wrong with our hearts.

Now, if you are perfect in everything that you say – the rest of this talk won’t be relevant to you so you may want to have a doze for the next 20 minutes. But if you recognise you are not perfect in this area then take this teaching very seriously.

Next section from James – James 3: 3 -8 – “OUR WORDS HAVE POWER”

The tongue is small – but it can cause great damage. It is little – but lethal which is why it has been called “The world’s smallest -but biggest - trouble maker”

James gives us three illustrations to help us understand how something so small can have so much power and effect. The first is the small bit in the mouth of a horse that controls the whole animal. With just a flick of the reins the animal goes in the right direction.

Then there is a big ocean liner – a slight adjustment of the rudder and it is guided away from rocks or any other danger.

The point is – the tongue may be small – but it has power.

Basically it can bring peace or it can start a war.  
It can bring great good – but if it breaks loose and its power is abused – it can cause immense damage.

That is particularly underlined in James's third illustration:  
"Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark"

Do you know what happened on September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1666?  
There was the great fire of London.

It began in a bakery in Pudding lane – apparently the oven hadn't been put out and the sparks ignited a nearby pile of wood. The fire that followed burned for three days destroying 13 000 homes, 84 churches and leaving 80 000 people homeless. Remarkably only 5 people died – but what devastation resulted from some sparks falling on a pile of wood.

You may recall the politician Christopher Hume – he was secretary of state for energy – who was caught speeding but then conspired with his wife to say it was her, not him, at the wheel. Years later that one lie was like a spark that set ablaze a fire that destroyed a marriage, two careers and a family.

Words have power – the power of life and death we are told in scripture.

We can control so much – we have tamed all sorts of animals.  
We can make chimpanzees drink tea and dolphins play volleyball.

We can control the temperature of our home at the touch of a button – but what about controlling our tongues – the words from our mouths?

Which is why it is so important to engage our brain before we engage our lips.  
Swift words, angry words, sharp and poisonous words are immensely destructive. Sarcastic remarks, words that humiliate or intimidate – they can wreak havoc.  
How many of us have been deeply hurt by words spoken in the past – whether the context is home, school, work – maybe even church?

The whole of Scripture uses different images to illustrate how wounding and destructive words can be. Just in the Psalms they are likened to deadly weapons – potentially as destructive as spears, swords and arrows in their effect and impact upon people.

Were you taught as a child this rhyme:  
"Stick and stones may break my bones – but words will never hurt me?"

It is not true is it?  
"Stick and stones may break my bones – but words will tear my heart out"  
That is more accurate.

The challenge is this – that our words must be deployed for God's good purposes – speaking the truth in love – bringing healing not hurt – building up rather than breaking down.

The third section from James:  
"OUR WORDS SHOW US OUR HEARTS" – James 3: 9 – 12.

Challenging inconsistency in our lives is one of the major themes throughout the whole letter of James – and here the focus is upon the matching of the words that come from our lips and how we live our lives. James declares that there is something seriously wrong if we use our tongues to praise God and then use them to hurt or harm those who are made in God's image.

There is a lack of consistency - and thus integrity - in our lives if we are praising God on a Sunday but then on a Monday we are cutting others down with our words.  
If that is the case then our sung worship is empty and meaningless.

There was a sermon by John White called "Ten minutes after the benediction". The benediction is a posh name for a prayer of divine blessing that is said at the end of the service to send us out to be witnesses for Christ in the week ahead.

To quote him:  
"Something is wrong when we move from the Gloria to gossip – from the creed to criticism – from praising God to putting others down with our words"

James would agree. Look again at what he says in verse 10:  
"Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing – my brothers and sisters this should not be".

What should be - surely – is a consistency and integrity in our lives – a matching up of our life and the words from our lips.

This is challenging is it not?

James underlines the extent and magnitude of the challenge in verses 7 and 8:

“All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by human beings. But no one can tame the tongue – it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

“No one can tame the tongue...”

If that is the case - is there any hope in this area?

How can we change? Is it possible?

It must be possible – and the solution begins by recognising where the problem lies. For the problem of the tongue – of our words – is obviously not the tongue itself. The solution is not to cut out our tongues is it?

Where is the source of the problem then?

It is Jesus who gives us the answer (Luke 6 verse 45)

“The good person brings good things out of the good stored up in their heart, and the evil person brings evil things out of the evil stored up in their hearts. For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks”

Thus, the use of our words – the extent to which we use our tongues to encourage and empower others – to witness for Christ and for the truth – to build others up – this is the measure of what is in our hearts. The expression of the inner state of our being – our motives and desires - is actually our words.

So, at the end of this talk a good place to finish is to honestly ask:

“What does my speech say about my heart”.

If our hearts are full of bitterness, anger, envy, jealousy, unforgiveness – it will show in what we say and – to quote James – our words will be like deadly poison.

But, if our hearts are being transformed by the work of God’s Holy Spirit and by the love of Jesus then that will show in our speech - and our words will be gracious, encouraging, bringing healing and hope, building unity rather than undermining it.

I want to suggest we need to do three things to finish now.

Firstly, we need to examine our hearts by reflecting upon our words and thinking about what our words say about our hearts.

Secondly, we need to confess our faults. If we know our words have wounded others, or deceived others, or slandered others – or our speech has been empty, angry or boastful – we need to confess this and put it away.

Thirdly, we need to receive the forgiveness of Christ afresh and ask the Holy Spirit to control that which in our own strength we can’t control – to change that which in our own power we can’t change.

It was once said of Jesus:

“Never has a man spoken like this”

That was, of course, about the way he taught, but also because what he taught was always matched by how he lived.

When he spoke, he spoke truthfully, courageously, graciously, humbly lovingly – and always with authenticity and with integrity.

Let us desire to be like him in order that we show we belong to Him.

Who can tame the tongue?

Is it impossible?

Yes, humanly speaking - for we cannot tame our tongue on our own.

But did not Jesus also declare that:

“What is not possible for man - is possible for God”

We do need help in this area – let us come and ask for it then.

## QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS

1. Think of those areas of life where what you say is especially significant?  
(At work, at home, in church – whatever!)  
How do you think your words stand up to the scrutiny which James is calling for?
2. What disciplines would help you to speak with integrity in the following situations:  
Sending emails or writing on facebook.  
Talking about other people who have hurt you or you feel have let you down.  
Defending yourself when someone criticises you.  
Responding to others when you are tired or emotionally drained.  
  
Are there other situations where you know you are specifically vulnerable to speaking the wrong words?
3. James is concerned with inconsistent Christian behaviour.  
Think of those times when our words are an example of “double - tonguedness” – saying good Christian things in one context and speaking very different in another.
4. Read Matthew 12: 33 – 37.  
What similarities and what differences can you see between Jesus’s teaching and what James teaches in James 3: 1 -12.

This passage highlights one of the most demanding aspects of Christian discipleship.

Think about the words we speak - are there people we have hurt whose forgiveness we need to seek?

Are there untruths that we need to correct?

Are there attitudes behind our words that we need to address and change?

Maybe finish the study by praying and asking for God’s help in this whole area.