



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Let's Talk About Words

James 3:1-12

David Anguish

### Introduction

1. In her novel, *Saint Maybe*:

Anne Tyler tells the story of Ian, a young man who's eaten up with guilt because he wrongly suspected his sister-in-law of having an affair and of being unfaithful to his brother. She hadn't. But he told his brother anyway. His brother, believing Ian, became so despondent at the news that he took his own life. Ian is haunted by the guilt of what he's done that cannot be undone. He can't sleep; he can't eat. "Oh God," he pleads, "how long will I have to pay for a handful of tossed-off words? . . . Can't we just back up and start over? Couldn't I have one more chance?"<sup>1</sup>

2. We can think several things when we read that, beginning with how bad Ian was to lie to his brother; after all, the passage says that he only *suspected* an affair. But, his actions ruined three lives: his brother; his sister-in-law, who after dealing with the accusations was left to grieve; and Ian himself, miserable in his guilt.

3. All because of the *power* of words, something many do not notice, as Stacy observes:

Words, it seems, are fickle, capricious little things that twist and turn with the slightest provocation. Perhaps that's one of the reasons speech has become so discredited and devalued in our culture. The quickest way to deprecate something is to banish it to the lotus land of words. "Ah, it's just hearsay." "Talk is cheap." "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words. . ." (Stacy, 230).

4. As a Jew, James knew of stories like Jacob's trickery to get the blessing from Isaac that was supposed to be Esau's (Gen. 27) and thus believed "words had power which, once spoken, once let loose in the world, could not be called back or retrieved" (Stacy, 231).

5. Before showing the havoc words can wreak (4:1-2, 11-12; 5:9; etc.), James will adapt illustrations common in his world to forcefully expose the danger. We need to hear him, and periodically review him, for while "We talk with words" and "talk without words only with great difficulty," only "rarely do we talk *about* words" (Stacy, 230, emphasis mine).

### Body

I. Words Are Powerful (3:3-8).

<sup>1</sup> R. Wayne Stacy, "The Power to Bless: James 3:1-12 (a sermon)," *Faculty Publications and Presentations*, Paper 318, [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts\\_fac\\_pubs/318](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/318), p. 231. Accessed July 27, 2011.

- A. James uses common figures (among Jews and non-Jews) to show the power of words.
- B. “The tongue’s effectual power is grossly out of proportion to its size”<sup>2</sup> (3-5a).
1. The illustrations fit his culture, but are also easily understood in ours.
    - a) Able to carry great weight or run rapidly, “A horse is half a ton of raw power! Yet, place a bridle and bit in its mouth and a 100-pound woman on its back who knows what she is doing and the animal can literally be made to dance.”<sup>3</sup>
    - b) In the same way, ships — whether ancient or the massive ocean liners of today — are steered by one man at a rudder a mere fraction of the ship’s size.
  2. Likewise, “the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things” (5a).
    - a) Of course, the tongue is capable of doing good (e.g., Churchill),<sup>4</sup> as implied by the existence of the words in James’s letter, his implied commendation of teaching,<sup>5</sup> and the Old Testament (cf. Prov. 15:22, 31; 16:24).
    - b) But, we must not undervalue its potential for harm, as also taught in the tradition (Prov. 15:1b, 4b; 16:27; 18:21); James will elaborate more.
- C. Its “potential for damage... extends well beyond its point of origin” (McCartney, 190).
1. James notes how a small spark can set a forest ablaze (5b).<sup>6</sup>
  2. Verse 6 forcefully makes the point.<sup>7</sup>
    - a) “The tongue is a fire.”
    - b) It is “a world of unrighteousness” or “an unrighteous world,” both the home and outlet for all manner of evil.<sup>8</sup>
    - c) Thus, the tongue is “set among our members, staining the whole body, . . .”<sup>9</sup>
    - d) It is “setting on fire the entire course of life.”
      - (1) The phrase is literally, “wheel of generation” (τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως, *ton trochon tēs geneseōs*), or “wheel of birth” (ESV note).

<sup>2</sup> Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 184.

<sup>3</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, 137.

<sup>4</sup> Craig Blomberg and Mariam Kamel (*James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 163) cite Frances T. Gench who “reminds us that v. 2 teaches us to ‘bridle,’ not ‘zipper,’ the tongue!”

It is important to note that the tongue is often used for good, a point some think James intends in vv. 2b-5a (see the outline in Blomberg & Kamel, 148). The word “boasts” (from αὐχέω, *auchēō*) in v. 5 is important in this consideration. Though tempting to take it always as a condemnation, James does not always “boast” that way. The form used in 3:5 is found only there, but four other times, James uses other forms of the word family. Two are definitely negative (3:14; 4:16). But, the lowly brother is told to “boast” (καυχάομαι, *kauchaomai*) in his circumstances in 1:9, and since the same word found in 3:14 is used in 2:13 (κατακαυχάομαι, *katakauchaomai*), the latter verse could be translated, “mercy *boasts* over a judgment,” hardly a negative thing.

<sup>5</sup> The warning about the danger in vv. 1-2 applies to the teacher’s *misuse* of influence, not to his influence per se.

<sup>6</sup> Many languages note the resemblance between tongues and flames, a parallel also seen in Judaism (Psa. 120:3-4). Again, this is not always a negative spark. As McCartney observes, “The tongue . . . can set the heart aflame with fury, or patriotic fervor, or courage, or love, or hate, and it can inflict damage that goes on for generations” (184-185).

<sup>7</sup> “. . . one of the most problematic verses in James” (McCartney, 185).

<sup>8</sup> Think about all the sins that begin with harsh words, or seductive words, etc.

<sup>9</sup> William Baker compares this image to a red dye that quickly spreads to discolor every part of what it stains. See the citation in Blomberg and Kamel, 158.

(2) The likely meaning here is something to the effect that the tongue creates problems in every phase and activity of life.<sup>10</sup>

- e) Finally, it is “being set on fire by hell,” a phrase that may point to the origin of the problem or may mean the punishment that can be expected from failing to control the tongue.<sup>11</sup>

D. Verses 7-8 show the extent of the problem. In a more literal, expanded translation it says:

1. Every “kind” (φύσις, *physis*), or category, of creatures in creation<sup>12</sup> is being and has been tamed<sup>13</sup> (something of which the ancients were proud) “by mankind” (literally, “the kind of man” [τῇ φύσει τῇ ἀνθρωπίνῃ, *tē physei tē anthrōpinē*]), “but no human being has been able (δύναται, *dynatai*) to tame the tongue.”
2. It is “an unstable (ἀκατάστατον, *akatastaton* - see 1:8; “restless,” ESV) evil”; “uncontrollable” is more the point (Blomberg & Kamel, 160).
3. “. . . full of death-bringing poison,” a “dramatic” image “considering that tongues normally are used to taste life-giving food and drink! The metaphor suggests the image of a serpent, poised to strike” (Blomberg & Kamel, 160).<sup>14</sup>

## II. Words Expose Our Hearts.

A. The descriptions in vv. 7-8 set the stage for the major problem James sees where the tongue is concerned – “its duplicity” (Blomberg & Kamel, 160).

1. On the one hand, we use it to “bless (εὐλογέω, *eulogēō*) the Lord and Father” — the use of the key word from the Eighteen Benedictions of Jewish worship ritual suggests that James has formal praise in mind.
2. On the other hand, we “curse” — in the sense of devaluing (cf. Matt. 5:21-26) — “people who are made in the likeness of God.”

B. The problem, as the illustrations of vv. 11-12<sup>15</sup> show, is what our misuse of speech shows about the condition of our hearts (in the Jewish sense) and priorities.

1. If the product of a spring is salt water, then its “heart” is salty.

<sup>10</sup> Grant Osborne notes that it “likely means the ‘ups and downs’ of life. The tongue turns upside down every aspect of life in the community as well as in the individual” (*ESV Study Bible*, 2395).

<sup>11</sup> For the second idea, see the discussion of this point by Richard Bauckham, in Blomberg and Kamel, 159. Evidence for this understanding is found in this example from *Psalms of Solomon* (1st century B. C.): “Lord, save my soul from the criminal and wicked man, from the criminal and slanderous tongue that speaks lies and deceit. The words of the wicked man’s tongue (are) twisted so many ways; (they are) as a fire among a people which scorches its beauty. His visit fills homes with a false tongue, cuts down trees of joy, inflaming criminals; by slander he incites homes to fighting. May God remove the lips of the criminals in confusion far from the innocent, and (may) the bones of the slanderers be scattered far from those who fear the Lord. May he destroy the slanderous tongue in flaming fire far from the devout.” (*Psalms of Solomon* 12:1-4; trans. R. B. Wright, in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, 662).

<sup>12</sup> “Kind” is better here than “species” (NASB). The categories are the four groupings found in Gen. 1:26 (cf. 9:2), namely, the fish of the sea, birds of the heavens, livestock, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

<sup>13</sup> “Is being tamed and has been tamed” translates the repeated use of [δαμάζω (*damazō*), first in the present tense and then in the perfect tense.

<sup>14</sup> See Psa. 140:3; also Gen. 3:12 where the first sin following the fall was a sin of speech (Alec Motyer, in Blomberg & Kamel, 153).

<sup>15</sup> “Figs, olive oil, and wine were the three chief products from Israel’s horticulture” (Blomberg & Kamel, 162, citing Hiebert, *The Epistle of James*, 225).

2. If the product of a set of plants is figs, olives, or grapes, then those things are at the “heart” of those plants.
  3. Coupled with these figures, the word “unstable” in v. 8 points us to the larger point James intends: the inability to surrender the tongue to the control of God sets up the most terrible of troubles and demonstrates the double-mindedness against which James warned at the beginning of the letter (1:5-8).
  4. His point is not just that we are inconsistent, but “that a bad person cannot utter good statements” (Blomberg & Kamel, 162, quoting Bauckham).
- C. James wants to get his readers’ attention to see that when we treat speech casually, we really are playing with fire.
1. As the section’s theme statement (v. 2) shows, it’s about being “perfect” (τέλειος, *teleios*; see 1:2-4).
  2. And, as he will show (3:13-18), the key to solving the problem is submitting to God’s wisdom, not that which comes from the devil.

### III. Examining Our Use of Words.

- A. Coming to terms with James’s teaching is hard because our constant use of words may make it difficult to evaluate ourselves honestly.

He is saying, “Be honest. Are you skilled in your religious vocabulary so that at church you appear holy and good, but at home you are sarcastic with your family and critical of others?” What about us? Do we enjoy the gossipy tidbits that come our way at the office, and even pass on a few ourselves? What do we laugh at or about? How do we respond to others? Would the answers to these questions give the lie to our profession of love for God? (Hughes, 142)

- B. Coming to terms with James’s teaching is hard because we tend to minimize our failures in this matter.

Consider the habitual verbal abuse that occurs in our churches — how commonplace it is for us to speak of others with ridicule or with cutting remarks, how quickly we accuse others of evil motives when they do things we don’t like and how easily we can have angry fights in our churches. Where is our biblical sense of shock at all of this?” (Blomberg & Kamel, 166, quoting from George M. Stulac, *James*, 128-129).

### Conclusion

1. Like the fictional Ian with whom we began, we have doubtless found ourselves wishing, if not praying, “how long will I have to pay for a handful of tossed-off words? . . . Can’t we just back up and start over?”
2. We can’t change the past, but we can be forgiven for it. And we can start fresh, letting God take control as we become more mature in our faith. Maybe you need to pray privately about that. Or see someone in person (Matt. 5:23ff.). Or make a public commitment to God before we leave today.

July 31, 2011; updated August 20, 2016  
[www.davidanguish.com](http://www.davidanguish.com)