

It's something you can't see but has incredible power to bring life or to destroy. You can have 10 of these that are very positive but one negative one will cause you to crumble. Long after they are gone, you remember the one negative one and it can shape your sense of identity or self-esteem.

Words. They are invisible yet powerful. They are life giving or destroying. They create and they tear down. The impact of one negative word can undo 10 positive ones. Words can have more of an impact than a bomb. Someone has said that the tongue has no bones but can break a heart. And that is so true. Words are powerful. Our God made the universe by speaking words, and each one of us knows the impact of a timely word.

James has a lot to say about words because he knows the power of words. He can compare our words to a spark that can start a forest on fire or steer a ship like a rudder. He knows how hard it is to tame the tongue, and so it is important to consider this question: how should we use our words?

Let Words Come Slowly

As I stand here, I am spending 30ish minutes to talk. One of the things that people will often say to me is that they love when I speak from the heart. There is something that feels very authentic about it. But there is something dangerous too – when you speak off the cuff you can say things that you should not say. James knows how dangerous words can be, so he says that we should be slow to speak, and not have many who are teachers. The reason for this is that words and actions need to be connected. And the one who teaches should have a bridle on his tongue.

So as I stand here, even though I don't have a manuscript in front of me, I am not shooting from the hip without thought or intention. The sermon is prepared with thought and prayer. I write a manuscript. I change things. I pray about what needs to be said and what should be said. And then I stand up here and I pray that in the moment that God would take my words and use them for our good.

Those who do public speaking recognize that every word matters. The vast majority of politicians use a teleprompter because they recognize that careless words can cause a firestorm. One of my favourite shows is *The West Wing* – a drama from the early 2000s that shows the behind the scenes workings of the White House. On one occasion, as the president is getting ready to give the State of the Union address, two of the top speech writers, Sam and Toby, are seen at a table outside the House of Representatives labouring over some final sentences before they go to the teleprompter. And the reason is simple – the President's words will have a profound impact on the direction of the country.

This is why James wants us to...

Examine Our Words

Once words are out, they can't be taken back. We can say sorry for them, but we can't retract them. This happens all the time with politicians – they say something and then they have to “retract” it – but it is already out. Or the microphone is hot and catches them in an unvarnished moment. Every person in this room can remember a time when someone said something to you that pierced your soul. Some have gone to counselling because of something that was said that wounded your soul. And you can hear it as clearly today – it still resonates in your soul.

The reality is that one careless word can hurt people more than 10 encouraging words. If we are to be slow to speak and quick to listen and receive the implanted word, which is able to save your souls (1:19ff), we need our words examined. The source of this examination, according to James, is that our words need to be tested in light of God's Word. We ought to be shaped by what God has said so that what comes out of our mouths has been formed by God's Word. The 19th century pastor Charles Spurgeon would say this about our speech:

“Oh, that you and I might get into the very heart of the Word of God, and get that Word into ourselves! As I have seen the silkworm eat into the leaf, and consume it, so ought we to do with the Word of the Lord—not crawl over its surface, but eat right into it till we have taken it into our inmost parts. It is idle merely to let the eye glance over the words, or to recollect the poetical expressions, or the historic facts; but it is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your very style is fashioned upon Scripture models, and, what is better still, your spirit is flavored with the words of the Lord.

I would quote John Bunyan as an instance of what I mean. Read anything of his, and you will see that it is almost like the reading the Bible itself. He had read it till his very soul was saturated with Scripture; and, though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his *Pilgrim's Progress*—that sweetest of all prose poems — without continually making us feel and say, “Why, this man is a living Bible!” Prick him anywhere—his blood is Bimeline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his very soul is full of the Word of God. I commend his example to you, beloved.” (From: “Mr. Spurgeon as a Literary Man,” in *The Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon, Compiled from His Letters, Diaries, and Records by His Wife and Private Secretary, vol. 4, 1878-1892 (Curtis & Jennings, 1900), p. 268.*)

Since the mic is always hot when it comes to God, our words are always heard loud and clear by him. No careless word is missed. He hears every word. No word spoken in the dark is beyond the ear of an all-hearing God.

If God will judge all of our words, how important it is that we be shaped by the One who has spoken every word intentionally. We come to this Word and receive it so that we are formed by

it more and more and we examine our words in light of this Word. We have a standard by which our words are measured, and it is by the One who has given us His Word.

Use Humble Words

What are humble words? To put it simply, they are not proud. They are submitted to the Word of God. They aren't divisive, but peaceable, pure, and righteous. They produce a good harvest (3:17-18). And one of the ways that these words are humble is that they say things with confidence that they shouldn't have (4:13) instead of living in light of a God who works out our lives for our good (4:15). Boasting about our plans, James says, is evil (4:16).

What displays our humility is heard in what we boast in. James says it is evil to boast about our plans. But it is not evil to boast in our position in Christ. This is James's point in 1:9-11. When we boast in the fact that we are under Christ's Lordship, we display how we have been shaped by his Word.

Words show what our trust is in. Is it in our plans? Is it in our strategies? Is it in our abilities? Or is it in our dependence, our neediness, our great God? Humility is first heard and then it is seen. It is in our humble speech.

Use Truthful Words

But humility and care doesn't mean that we sugar coat our words. It means that we speak truthfully in a way that does not grumble or cause harm to another brother or sister. Rather, our words ought to be solution oriented rather than just a criticism.

There is a tough balance here. James does not want us being critical towards fellow Christians by grumbling, but he also doesn't want us to speak divisive words. Finding this balance that we speak truthfully in a way that isn't harsh or condemning while not being divisive requires that we think about our words and use them to build up rather than tear down. This doesn't minimize our disagreements, but it reframes them. It means we aim to disagree so that people know where we stand but also enables them to help them to move forward.

James wants us to be rooted in the truthful words of the Word of God. And the reason for this is that the powerful words that God spoke to create all things brought forth that which was good. When God saw all that he had made, he saw the effect of his good words. But when we didn't believe God's words to be good, God sent the Word to live and dwell among us. By sending us the Word of God to live and walk and move among us, he showed us how we can speak truthfully to one another, humbly, and carefully. For Jesus only said that which he had been told by his Father to say (Jn. 12:49). Jesus did not speak carelessly, boastfully, or dishonestly. He spoke so that the weak were strengthened, the discouraged were lifted up, the sick were healed, and the dead were raised. He spoke life-giving words. But just because he spoke life-giving words didn't mean that he was well-loved. He was hated and despised. He was crucified

for his claims. But he took the insults, the shameful words, the hateful speech and bore those sins upon the cross so that the words that have hurt us might be replaced with healing words, life-giving words, the words of hope.

And now, when we trust in the One who has borne our sins and carried our sorrows, including those harmful words, we can receive his Word which is able to save our souls. His word tells us the truth about who we are – we are sinners – but it also speaks the word of grace that forgives, restores, and declares us to be righteous. And his words say that we are no longer enemies of God, but friends (Jas. 4:4) and beloved brothers. So let these words shape your soul so that you might speak in a way to others that does the same.