

Sermon Series: Wisdom that Works

#5 Take care with commentary James 3:1-12

Intro

When is the last time you said something to someone to **inspire them**?”

When is the last time you said something to someone that **caused harm**?

All of us knows the **power of words**, whether for **good**, or for **evil**. It’s evident every day in the modern world in the **Twitterverse**.



But in the ancient world, it was the **power of speech** in **pure oratory** form that had the **greatest impact**, for good, or for harm.



In the Letter of James chapter 3 we return to the **second** of three major themes: **wisdom**.



James **wants wise words** in the church.

1. Think twice before Teaching (James 3:1-2)

This lesson from James begins by addressing those in the church who **aspire to be teachers** of God’s wisdom. He says, in verse 1:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Jesus, in the Gospels, warned of a **greater accountability** for who assume to be teachers.¹ James concurs here. **So why would new Christians in the early church want to become teachers?**

- **Was it for money?** Well, **not likely**. In those day, Rabbis in Jewish communities, with very rare exemptions, were **non-professional**. They were **not paid** cash money to help avoid corruption common in the Roman world associated with public speaking that served its own supporters.
- **Was it for power and status?** Most likely, **yes!** Oriental culture centred around **shame** and **honour**. Those who were teachers were often “**looked**

¹ Matt. 23:1-36

up to” and considered **special** and influential. Teachers or rabbis attracted a tight group of followers who **hung on every word**.

James is **quick to re-set** their theology of human beings. He writes in verse 2:

For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect², able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.

So elevated above ordinary mortals were teachers in the ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish world, that James must remind that **no-one is perfect** in the church. The Greek word here means “**complete**” or “**mature**”. There **are** some rare and mature people we meet whose wise teaching is paired with good, **humble** character **and a life of self-control**.

REFLECT – Sadly, today, we know of too many Christian teacher/preachers who are motivated by the praise of their **fanbase** or by **financial** gain or **by power**. **Their** disciples often **lack objectivity**, not believing their revered pastor could **ever speak wrongly or falsely**.

Jesus reversed the values of the world’s systems of status. He rated **the last as first**, the **humble** as most **honoured**.³ This is the lens through which Christians should assess what is good and godly.⁴

Perhaps an important test we can take from James 3 is to count the times a preacher or teacher in the church says something like “on this topic I give my **opinion**” or “there are various views among scholars”. A teacher of God’s wisdom always claiming **unqualified authority** should be a warning sign to churches.

Paul also taught that listeners should “**weigh up**” collectively what is taught in the church; they should judge in community what is right.⁵ The writer of 1 John said to “test the spirits” and assess whether words spoken are wisdom “come down” from God, **or not**.⁶

² The Greek word telios is translated here “perfect” pointing to completeness or maturity in this instance.

³ Mary, Jesus’ mother, sang of how God exalts the humble while bringing the powerful low (Luke 1:55), and Paul branded Jesus as the humble servant whose attitude we should emulate (Phil 2:3-11)

⁴ 1 Peter 5:5

⁵ 1 Cor. 14:29

⁶ 1 John 4:1

In light of all this, perhaps we too should **think twice** before becoming teachers of God's Word in the churches. But we should also **judge carefully**, and collectively, the motivations and the source of wisdom associated with those who do teach. This is critical for the health and wellbeing of congregations.

2. Our speech can bring profit or pain (James 3:3-8)

Secondly, James turns from addressing aspiring teachers to **the whole congregation**. In verses 3-8 he shows how the power of speech can produce great **profit**, or great **pain**.

Listen to verses 3-5. The tongue can do a world of good disproportionate to its physical size...

³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to



drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.



1. A **small bit** in the mouth of a huge animal gave the ancient world, victory in **battle**, movement of **heavy loads**, and powerful **manual labour**.
2. A **small wooden rudder** could guide great sailboats through raging winds and seas to carry people to far-reaching destinations.

In the same way, says James, **such a small instrument** of the body as the tongue, used wisely toward one another, can **make a huge impact for good**. It can **guide, counsel, care, create, inspire** and share **kindness** to great effect disproportionate to its size.

But James also illustrates the **opposite potential**. Listen to verses 5-8:

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole



body, sets on fire the whole course of one's life,⁷ and is itself set on fire by hell.⁸ ⁷ For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,⁸ but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

James highlights the **speed and spread** of destruction **disproportionate to the size of the instrument**. A small spark can take out a whole forest. A small drop of venom from a funnel web spider, for example, can kill in a moment.

Premier Daniel Andrews said of our lockdown “We had no choice”... “the Delta... variant would [otherwise] be **running wild without measure**.” James has this speed and spread in mind when talking of the tongue’s negative powers.

Like **infected removalists crossing state borders**, like the wildfires and floods amplified in effect by climate change today, the spoken word can bring down many communities in a flash, says James. Disproportionate to the size of this instrument (the tongue), says James, like nothing else, it can **produce a world of good** or a “**world of unrighteousness**”.⁹

3. God’s wisdom should be common sense (James 3:7-12)

Thirdly, James concludes this lesson on wisdom by showing how speech that consistently blesses others makes **common sense** (vss 7-12).

The world around you, says James, is like a billboard reminding you of what the Scriptures teach about speech. Look at verses 7-12:

*⁷ ...every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,⁸ but **no one can tame the tongue**... ⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and*

⁷ An idiom well-known among Stoic teachers of the day meaning “the totality of life” or “every generation”

⁸ Gk *Gehenna* – the name given to a rubbish tip in Jerusalem Jesus referred to when illustrating wrath and judgment. It constantly burned, igniting itself over and over.

⁹ Or “world of iniquity” suggesting that when it has done its work God is no longer represented by the behaviour

*brackish water?*¹² *Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters,^[e] yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt-water yield fresh.*

At a youth service a long time ago in another galaxy I hung an ox's tongue, bought from the butcher, from a rope and an Indiana Jones type figure entered the stage with a whip while someone read from James chapter 3.



Just after this the youth-worker's dog escaped his lead, jumped up and retrieved the ox's tongue and ran to the yard where it was consumed with haste!

James taught that **no-one can tame the human tongue**. Domestication of **animals** in the ancient world was quite sophisticated as today. Not so **human speech**. It has, James says, a **unique inconsistency**. A typical daily Jewish prayer in ancient times might go something like, "Bless you O Lord for all your goodness to our household. Destroy our enemies O God, for those who oppose us, also oppose you." Such an attitude, both sweet and bitter, is what James wanted to eradicate from Christian communities. We follow the one who exemplified and taught love born of God even blesses enemies.

Even for us **urbanized Christians**, James' lessons from **pets, waterways, fruit trees**, and **vineyards**, readily remind us of James' teaching that Christians should bless with their words, and not curse others in the same breath.



In chapter 3, James teaches wisely about the tongue:

1. Think twice before becoming a teacher of God's word (1-2)
2. Our speech can produce either profit or pain (3-8)
3. Consistency of blessing from our mouths should be common sense (7-12)

Wise use of the tongue today

REFLECT – **Abraham Lincoln** said, “It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.”



Today perhaps we’d recognise similar proverbial instruction from the sayings of Ted Lasso.



But long before either of those men gave their advice, the **Book of Proverbs** gave plenty of sound teaching on the benefits and dangers of speech.¹⁰

So, the question must be asked, with such readily available wise instruction in the Old Testament already known to these Jewish converts originally reading James’ letter, **why did he have to write this lesson?**

The **stubborn inconsistency** of the human tongue is a **spiritual problem**, not merely to be overcome by education. James was not merely giving “self-help” solutions by way of cognitive growth. Instead, the **teaching and example of Jesus** tells of our need for a transformed “heart”, the source of what comes out of our mouths. Jesus said to those distorting the Word of God,

*...the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them...*¹¹

And elsewhere Jesus said,

*...the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*¹²

By Jesus’ saving grace, we are promised that the work of God’s Spirit is transforming our hearts to conform with God’s ways.¹³ James is urging that Christians **put into action** the **transformed heart** and mind promised to those

¹⁰ E.g. “Those who guard their mouth and tongue keep themselves from calamity” Prov. 21:23 “When words are many, sin is present, but the one who holds their tongueis wise” Prov. 10:19

¹¹ Matthew 15:18

¹² Luke 6:45

¹³ Romans 6:16-18; 8:1-11

who have the Spirit of God at work in them by faith; in this case for **profitable speech**.¹⁴

What can **we** do with James' lessons today? I suggest we take the time to THINK before we SPEAK. In those important moments of life, before we speak, we can ask these **five helpful questions**...

- T- ask "is it True?",
- H- ask "is it Helpful?",
- I- ask "is it Inspiring?",
- N- ask "is it Necessary?", and
- K- ask "is it Kind?".

The Apostle Paul wrote wisely in Philippians 4:8,

...whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Not merely another proverbial, cognitive lesson alone, the Scriptures encourage us to PRAY, then THINK, and if necessary and helpful, SPEAK.

AMEN.

¹⁴ E.g. Matthew 9:3-5; Luke 6:27-29