

Words of Wisdom

You know what James is talking about in this passage: A neighbor living in the house on the corner that's



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referred to as “having a tongue like a poisoned dart!” The office co-worker described as “talking out of both sides of his mouth to get what he wants.”

Someone told me when I was young, “Be careful what you say, because your words can come back to hurt you and once said they can't be erased.” It is inevitable that James, teaching about the significance and power of living a Christian life, includes “the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits” (v. 5) and “no one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (v. 8). Simon Peter, writing about Christ as the Lord of your life, reaches back to Psalm 34:12 to advise: “Let him who means to love life and see good days refrain his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile” (1 Peter 3:10).

Words, like actions, either confirm or refute the truth of one's faith in God. Salvation is not merely a philosophical concept; it is the power of God's love and grace affirmed in Jesus and replicated in the actions and words of those who are believers. James understands that if we as Christians control our emotions we will also be able to control our tongues.

He uses three illustrations showing the power of the tongue (vv. 3-5). The tongue is like the bit in a horse's mouth that enables a person to control that larger animal, turning him in the desired direction. The tongue is like the small rudder that turns a great ship in the necessary direction. The tongue is also like the awful power of a smoldering ember that can cause the devastation of an out-of-control forest fire. The warning is clear that this small muscle in a person's mouth can turn words into a boastful, dangerous and powerful force.

Have you witnessed the damage a teacher's words can have on a student's life, the hopelessness defined by a

parent's harsh words, the devastation of a friend's cutting comments? No wonder James warns “the tongue is a fire ... placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell ... every creature of nature can be tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (vv. 6-8).

Jeremiah 9:8-9a expresses God's accusation against his rebellious people: “Their tongue is a deadly arrow, it speaks deceit; with his mouth one speaks peace to his neighbor, but inwardly he sets an ambush for him. Shall I not punish them for these things?” Jesus warned about our deceptive misuse of words in Matthew 5:33-37 when he talked about swearing an oath on everything but God's name. The questionable practice was to swear on Jerusalem, heaven, earth or whatever, knowing the oath was not legally binding. Jesus said: “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No,’ anything more than this comes from the evil one” (Matt. 5:31). Words are not detached from your character, your reputation or your claim to be a Christian. It is impossible for blessings and curses to come from the same mouth if we expect the world to hear and believe us as God's people.

James proceeds to talk about the foundation of faith in God that must shape our words and actions into a believable witness to the world. We see in our day the tragic failure of society to be truthful, respect one another in spite of our different philosophies, and to divide people based on their racial, ethnic, social and political identities. James has stated words of cursing and blessing should not come from the same mouth (vv. 9-10). So, “who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom” (v. 13). Can you imagine James being interviewed on any of our in-depth news programs? James is timeless as he confronts the destructive power of words, saying to us “do not be boastful and false to the truth ... such wisdom does not come from above,

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but is earthly, nonspiritual, devilish ... for where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will be disorder and wickedness of every kind” (vv.14-15).

Words are powerful, so we must pay attention to the foundation of our attitudes and actions. Background, habits and emotions are powerful influences on our actions and words. Your background cannot be changed, but its influence and lessons can be altered by faith in Christ and a study of the Bible. Habits can be unlearned and replaced by a better way of living based on the example and teachings of Jesus. Emotions are part of your personality, but you can learn how they influence you and choose to limit their control. As a Christian, you have the wonderful resources of God's love, the new life that comes by faith in Christ and the companionship of God's Spirit every day.

You cannot live a Christian life by your strength alone. God is the power and strength as he gives you “the wisdom from above (that is) first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (v. 17). Over my 76 years I have known people who were rich, poor, powerful, dishonest, compassionate, hardworking, crushed by circumstances, trapped in despair, egotistical or evil. What continues to amaze and inspire me are the many I have known who by the grace of God in Christ broke free of the destructive patterns of this world and found hope and joy in Christ. Their struggles inspire me, their failures burden me, and their spiritual growth has shown me the surety of God's promises in Christ.

James' words are easy to understand, a clear directive for the Christian life. He tells it like it is. Life is hard in so many ways, but Jesus has shown us how to live against all the odds even to the cross. I know I will never attain perfection in this world, but I also know that my Savior has given me a life in which my voice and actions can help someone else find their way. Thank God for James' words of wisdom.