

# James 3:1-12

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St Andrew's - Sunday 29th June 2025 - James 3:1-12

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The topic today has come up already in James, that topic being speech and what we say.

## v1

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

James tells us that those that teach, who have that position of leadership, will be judged more strictly than others.

One way in which this works out is that having greater knowledge leads means greater judgement. We sometimes hear the expression, with relation to human laws, that 'ignorance is no excuse'. Nobody is totally ignorant - Romans 1 says as much. All are without excuse when they reject God. But God does take ignorance and knowledge into account.

Jesus says, in Matthew 11:

*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. 23 And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. 24 But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.*

Even the great sin of Sodom, that warranted God to wipe them out with fire from heaven, is judged less harshly than those who saw the miracles of Christ. With greater knowledge and revelation, comes greater judgement.

Luke 12:47-48:

*47 And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. 48 But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.*

Another way in which teachers are judged more strictly, is that they are to set an example. Hypocrisy in leadership is more dangerous to the church than hypocrisy in the pews. Both are bad, but leaders should be, in the words of 1 Timothy, 'above reproach'. The standard is high, because they set the standard for those beneath them.

And what James I think is really getting at in this verse, before he talks about speech and the tongue, is that teachers can lead people astray by their teaching. Whether it's outright false teaching, or whether it's imprecision, flippancy or ambiguity, we can lead people astray in what we teach. God is gracious in our teaching, but we are in a position of great power. What someone in authority or leadership says, has far greater impact than what others say.

Yet, whilst teachers are judged more strictly, that doesn't mean only teachers are judged on their words.

## **v2-5a**

*2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.*

James tells us that we all stumble, and that if we don't stumble in what we say, we have mastered everything. The implication seems to be that if someone were to be able to control their speech perfectly, they'd be able to control the rest. The tongue is a particularly hard thing to get a handle on and none of us is perfect in this.

We typically think of the heart or the mind directing us - that we do and say flows from that, rather than the other way around. Jesus says in Matthew 12 (verse 34b):

*For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*

However, James makes out that the tongue directs us in some way.

One way the tongue directs us is that it reveals what is inside - it's not separate from the heart, despite our attempts sometimes. We've all had the situation of not thinking before we speak, which really means we spoke what we actually thought, what was actually in our heart. The tongue reveals to others our heart, in the manner and content of our speech.

The tongue also influences us in that it is the organ that commits us to things. We use our tongues to make vows and promises. Hopefully these are made for good, but often for ill. Think of Jephthah who made a rash vow to the Lord that upon victory against the Ammonites, whatever came out of his house when he returned, he would sacrifice. But then he gets home and his only child, his daughter, comes out to greet him. (Judges 11). Proverbs 20:25:

*It is a trap to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider one's vows.*

And our tongues direct us, in that our outward words reinforce what is inside. Sometimes when we talk out loud, things become more real, or things change. This is part of how people find therapy helpful - just verbalising things does make a difference. The danger of course, is that we verbalise things that aren't true, and with enough repetition, we start to believe our own lies. What we say does change us.

So the tongue, yet a seemingly small thing, does have an outsized influence on us. And not just us, but others too.

*How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.*

Our tongues can do great damage. Like a spark can cause a forest fire, so a small comment can lead to big consequences. We see this in history and politics - much of our news cycle is about what someone said, that some felt offended or misled. We have arrests for tweets and arguments about free speech. The tongue, or today, the tongue and the fingers at the keyboard, same principle, can do much harm.

We all remember insults more readily than we do compliments. We can remember the hurtful thing said to us by someone, even if everything else they said was pleasant. Gossip and slander can rip apart groups of people. We say 'sticks and stones', but it's not true is it.

Evil speech, be it blasphemy, gossip, lies, false promises, or more, has the power to stain a person - to corrupt their whole moral character.

But the tongue can be used for good also - with it we bless our Lord and Father, with it, we praise God. We can use the tongue to build each other up, to encourage one another, and it is essential to sharing the gospel.

Proverbs 15:1-4:

*A soft answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger.  
2 The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,  
but the mouths of fools pour out folly.  
3 The eyes of the Lord are in every place,  
keeping watch on the evil and the good.  
4 A gentle tongue is a tree of life,  
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.*

We can use our tongues for both good and bad, but James calls us to be consistent in our speech. How can a spring bear life-giving fresh water and undrinkable salt water? How can it be that we, who are in Christ, can produce foul words as well as good? Does a tree not bear the fruit consistent with its nature?

James uses similar analogies to Jesus in Matthew 7 (verse 15-20):

*15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.*

What we say and how we act is a reflection of the heart beneath. Our inward attitude will make it out and affect what we do. What we really feel will come out in some way.

## Conclusion

So we learn that the tongue is a dangerous thing, but also an essential thing. We struggle with it, but we can't do without it. It can bring great blessings as well as great curses.

Are we mindful of our speech, are we thinking about what we should say? Sinful speech comes very easily. Do we gossip, or slander people? Do we encourage each other?

But to change our outward attitude requires change of inward attitude. It's very easy to pray along the lines of 'help me God to hold my tongue', 'help me to avoid saying something I'll regret', or 'help that person not be offended'. Much harder is to pray 'God change my heart' or 'help me to see in that person the image of God', 'help me to really love my neighbour'.

The charge today is to not just watch what we say, though that's good, but to pray the hard prayers that ask God to change our attitudes. We should want to be people characterised by, truth and love and grace and humility. The place we find such traits is in Christ, and we attain such things, by the Spirit, through our union with Christ.

## Prayer

Lord God, help us to see where we are using our tongues wrongly, convict us, and give us grace to improve.

Holy Spirit, work within us to change our attitudes and conform us to the image of Christ.

We ask all this Your name Lord God.

Amen