

## **“Small in Size, Great in Power”**

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Text: James 3: 1 - 12  
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The story is told of a novice in a strict monastic order who was permitted to say only one word every month. After the first month, when given permission, he started with the word: "The". A month passed and he spoke a second time: "food". The third month came and when given permission to speak he said "stinks!". His superior shook his head, and stated with great sadness, that the young novice would have a tough go of it in that monastery, for when he spoke he only complained! A humorous way of coming at a very serious subject. At one point or another, most of us have experienced the stinging power of words, whether it's been something we've said or something we've heard. Our words can hurt more than fists. They can create dividing canyons faster than rivers. In this age of coronavirus, it is important to remember what we all already know about this topic. Being holed up in our homes...living in close quarters for days with our loved ones...can certainly lead to frustrations and frayed nerves, causing stress that can lead to unfortunate things being said.

James in his letter to the churches described very well the power found in one's tongue: the force it can exert to build up or tear down. In his little sermon in the middle of his letter he picked up many real, practical aspects of the difficulties and dangers of our talk... things that we all know because it's such a common experience. His starting point is the honest statement: "we all make mistakes". There is no doubt of the truth in this statement, if for no other reason than the many opportunities we are presented with daily. Those mistakes can be made so innocently. I don't know about you, but there have been times when things have come out my mouth that I really wanted to grab and pull back before they got to the hearer's ear! It reminds me of the common wisdom that my dad occasionally shared with my brother and me: "always load your head before you shoot off your mouth".

I think the honest acknowledgement of this common reality – “everyone makes mistakes” – should prompt us in life to be more understanding, more forgiving, when others incidentally and accidentally say things that can hurt. No one is perfect. James points this out in the illustration, "Anyone who makes no mistake in speaking is perfect, able to bridle the whole body". What he was saying was that control of one's speech is the hardest of things to do. The inference is: that because it is the hardest thing to do, and we all make mistakes, we need to be patient, understanding and forgiving in how we receive what is said by others.

Our speech can not only hurt others, but it can also reveal what we harbour in our hearts. James writes that the tongue is akin to the rudder of a ship: hidden from view, and comparatively small in size relative to the boat. And yet the rudder controls the direction of the whole ship, and reveals the nature of the pilot inside steering the ship. In other words, what we say can be a reflection of our very nature. Our beliefs, values, attitudes and priorities are commonly reflected in our speech. Some of the greatest

insights we can gain of ourselves can occur by simply being attentive to what we say. For example, one thing that I've learned about myself by being attentive to my speech is that I am more of a glass-half-empty kind of person, rather than a glass-half-full kind of person. I lean more into "realism" than into "hopefulness." While that may be my nature, the more important question for me is, "am I OK with that nature?" Not entirely. Being mindful of the patterns of our speech is (to use James' analogy) like watching the rudder of your ship...pointing back to the pilot steering the ship. It can lead to course-correcting our nature...that in turn can change the habitual things we say. So...that young novice in the monastery should ask himself, "Am I a complainer?"

James points out another reality about our speech. An ill-spoken word may start off small, but as it moves through a crowd or community or family it can gain power and ferocity like a blazing fire. The Fort Mac fire was probably started by human activity fire in a remote location some 15 km from the city. 2 days later it entered the city, eventually consuming about 2,400 houses and buildings. James wrote, "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire". 4 months ago NATO leaders met in London. At one moment at that meeting French President Macron was significantly late arriving at a scheduled event. Macron, when he finally arrived, joined Boris Johnson and Justin Trudeau, who were wondering what the hold up had been. Apparently the hold up was President Trump. Prime Minister Trudeau commented, "He (Macron) was late because he (Trump) takes a 40-minute press conference off the top." A comment intended as a small inside joke among three leaders. Except there was a hot mic and a recording of the conversation went viral. On his way home President Trump heard the recording of the slight and criticized Trudeau as "two-faced." For weeks after that the media speculated regarding how those words could have been shaping American foreign policy regarding Canada.

Proverbs 21.23 reminds us of a practical bit of wisdom that we all know so very well: "To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep yourself out of trouble". But the concern James has in his letter is not a personal and pragmatic one. His concern for watching what we say is ethical and spiritual.

The first concern has to do with our witness before others. James wrote that the same mouth we bless our Lord with is often used to curse our neighbour, and James says very simply, "things should not be this way" (10). There was once a well respected church leader who worked at a factory. A serious accident left one of the employees on the floor and very near death. Before the doctor had arrived, one of the workers looked around into the worried faces of his co-workers and asked if anyone could "console him with the Gospel". No one said a word, not even the church leader. That night he went to his pastor and told him the story. The minister wondered why he could not pass on the hope of Christ to the dying man. After all, the fellow had taught in Sunday School and prayed openly at meetings. The man confessed: "my life sealed my lips". What he meant was at work he was the one known for his foul language and bawdy tales. Thus he felt captive, unable to give the help he could have to a dying man. He thought his words would be seen as hypocritical and thus false comfort.

The other concern James is raising is more implied rather than stated: that we are to use our language to build up and support our family, friends and neighbours. Paul, in writing to the Ephesians, said, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so your words may give grace to those who hear" (4.29). Back in London there was one congregant who always had something affirming to say to me each week after worship. Many weeks he greeted me at the door saying, "I appreciated your sermon this morning". Some Sundays he would say, "That was a meaningful prayer". One Sunday, it seemed, nothing really appealed to him, and his comment going out was "nice teeth!". Yes, it was funny, but I can tell you his affirmation and positive encouragement for me was very supportive and helpful. And so it can be among us in our families, in our workplaces, with our neighbours, in our church.

But at times life does call us to speak something that is difficult for others to hear. That's true about life as well. But before we speak something that can be difficult to hear, there are three simple questions we should consider. Ask yourself: "Is it true? Is it important? Can I say it kindly?" Speaking in kindness is an expression of Christian love. Ensuring something is true before we share it will avoid the consequences of speculative gossip. Knowing when it is important to speak something that is difficult is an expression of wisdom.

So what we've considered in our reflections this morning...none of this is news. Our upbringing has taught us such things and our experience in life (including the unfortunate ones) have reinforced it as well. Like James we know the wisdom of such things without being told it. But here's the thing. James' letter is only three pages long...and he is writing as an early church leader to a number of congregations. Of the very few things he could focus on in this brief letter, he chose the topic of our speech as one of those few topics. To remind his readers of something they all knew...that we all know...and need to re-remind ourselves as we anticipate several more weeks of being holed up in close quarters with our loved ones. Perhaps Jesus captured the same wisdom best in one simple teaching: "the good person out of the good treasures of their heart speak forth that which is good" (Matt. 12.34-35). May our speech always reflect these things in us.