

Sound Faith

James 3:1-12

Introduction

The title of my sermon is a play on words. The beginning of this chapter we are told that what comes out of our mouths by way of teaching will incur a stricter judgment; therefore, anything we teach concerning God or His word must fall into the category of “sound doctrine.” On the other hand, the noise we make with our speech is evidence of what is really in our heart. Words matter. I will take it one step further—words matter to God. Proverbs 18:21 puts it this way: **“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”** Words matter.

The Bible and Creation begins with words! The first words in our Bible are about the first words responsible for everything beautiful and living: **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was a formless and desolate emptiness, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light”** (Gen. 1:1-3). I love these verses in Genesis! In the beginning there was nothing but God... until He had something to say about it! His words brought life. Then what follows in Genesis 1 is a series of phrases like: “God said...” “God called...” What made all that exists a reality were WORDS! Not just any words from any old mouth, the Words that came from God made everything and all of it was good.

On the sixth day, God spoke more words: **“Let Us make mankind in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the livestock and over all the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls on the earth. So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them”** (Gen. 1:26-27). Then, God used Words to bless the first couple by telling them: **“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”** Listen to me... WORDS MATTER.

Three chapters later, after God used His words to speak beauty and life into existence out of nothing, we are introduced to a serpent. In an effort to tempt Eve to sin against God, he got her to doubt the words of God spoken to Adam: But the Lord God warned him, **“You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die”** (Gen 2:16-17; NLT). Listen carefully to what the serpent said to Eve and her husband: **“Did God really say...?”** and then proceeded to get Eve to doubt the word of God and His goodness towards her (see Gen. 3:1-5).

Not only does God value His words, but He is concerned about the words of people too. Jesus even said, **“I tell you that for every careless word that people speak, they will give an account of it on the day of judgement. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned”** (Matt. 12:36-37).

Our Words Matter Concerning What We Say About God

Chapter 3 begins with these sobering words: **“Do not become teachers in large numbers, my brothers, since you know that we who are teachers will incur a stricter judgment.”** Here is how the ESV translates this verse: **“Not many of you should become teachers...”**, which is the way most of the major English translations translate this verse. What is the point? The point is that what we say about God is serious and God takes what we say about Him seriously. James is warning us not to take on the mantle of teacher in the Church recklessly, for those who speak on God’s behalf will be held to a stricter judgment.

Many rightfully apply this verse to the serious call of pastors who are entrusted with preaching the word of God such as myself. The passage Dr. Ed Hardesty selected to deliver at my ordination charge was from 2 Timothy 4:1-2, **“I solemnly exhort you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and exhort, with great patience and instruction.”** In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul instructed a young pastor and son in the faith with these words: **“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a worker who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.”**

The Bible reserves some of the harshest words for those who use the word of God to lead others from the truth of His word. In the Old Testament, we are told that if anyone claiming to be a prophet speaks claiming to speak on God’s behalf prophetically that God did not command him to speak, was to be put to death (See Deut. 18:20-22). Similar language is used in 2 Peter regarding false prophets who claim to speak for God when they do not:

But false prophets also appeared among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their indecent behavior, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. (2 Pet. 2:1-3)

There is a stricter judgment that is coming upon those who teach and claim to speak on behalf of God. It doesn’t matter what people think or what they want, the mandate is the same: **“Preach the word.”** Not just sometimes, not just when it is convenient, not even when you feel ready. Those who have been called to equip the church are to, **“preach the word”** and to, **“be ready in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and exhort, with great patience and instruction.”** Why? Because the authority is not with the one preaching, but the word he has been called to preach!

This is why, in my opinion, whatever church you find yourself in, ought to be a church where the regular diet of preaching is expository instead of topical preaching. Permit me to give you three reasons why:

1. Topical preaching is the kind of preaching where the one preaching chooses a subject and builds a sermon around that subject with verses he believes to support that subject. Expository preaching is the kind of preaching where the one preaching chooses a scripture passage and builds a sermon around that particular passage, so that the point of the scripture passage becomes the point of the sermon.
2. The difference between topical and expository preaching is that with topical preaching, the one preaching determines the point of the sermon; with expository preaching, the scripture passage determines the point of the sermon.
3. The one who regularly preaches topical sermons will never preach more than what he already knows. The one who regularly preaches expository sermons will have to study a particular passage to understand it in order to preach/teach it, forcing the one preaching to grow beyond what he already knows.

Mark Dever, in his book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, wrote the following helpful observation regarding the strengths of expository preaching:

In being committed to preach a passage of Scripture in context, expositionally—that is, taking as the point of the message the point of the passage—we should hear from God things that we didn’t intend to hear when we set out to study the passage.... And from your repentance and conversion to the latest thing the Holy Spirit has been teaching you, isn’t that what it means to be a Christian? Don’t you again and again find God challenging you and convicting you of some things you would never have thought about a year ago, as he brings to unearthing the truth of your heart and the truth of his Word?

What Dever says next, is so insightful:

To charge someone with the spiritual oversight of a church who doesn’t in practice show a commitment to hear and to teach God’s word is to hamper the growth of the church, in essence allowing it to grow only to the level of the pastor. The church will slowly be conformed to the pastor’s mind rather than to God’s mind. And what we want, what as Christians we crave, are God’s words. We want to hear and know in our souls what he has said.¹

James 3:1 is to warn those who wish to or do teach, to do so faithfully to the word of God because this is the best way to serve His people and to protect the church from the wolves who would seek to harm God’s people. However, that warning is not only for pastors and teachers and we know this because of the following verses.

¹ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Weaton, IL: Crossway; 2021), 47.

Our Words Matter Concerning What We Say to Others

James 3:1 is not just for pastors, but for anyone who claims to speak on behalf of God. Think about what we know; the heart of Jesus' great commission includes the responsibility every Christian has for teaching: **"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations... teaching them to follow all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age"** (Matt. 28:19-20). The apostle Peter wrote in epistle, **"...always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, but with gentleness and respect"** (1 Pet. 3:15). And what is it that we are to be ready to testify with words? In the words of the apostle Paul: **"We proclaim Him, admonishing every person and teaching every person with all wisdom..."** (Col 1:28).

Christ has gifted His church with pastors, teachers, and evangelists to help His people to speak what they have been called to say with clarity and in accordance with what God has actually said (see Eph. 4:11-13). And when we get it wrong, Christ also called men who are able to teach the word of God, to serve as elders whose responsibility includes: **"holding firmly the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it"** (Titus 1:9). What we say about God matters, and for those like myself, who have been entrusted with teaching the word of God, we will be held to account for the words we have spoken in His name, so we dare not be reckless with our words.

But it is not just what we say about God that matters to Him, it is also what we say to others in general that matters to God. What we say can do so much good for our neighbors, but our words can bring so much harm as well. Verses 2-12 is for all who have been redeemed by Jesus and therefore born again. James continues in verse 2, **"For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to rein in the whole body as well."** It is true that if you are a Christian that you have been born again, however, that does not mean we still do not have a nature that gravitates towards sin. Perfection is coming for the Christian, but not until after death or a resurrection when our sin nature is finally and categorically put to death.

It is true that when you placed your faith and trust in Jesus Christ as savior and Lord over your life, you were born again. When you were born again, you received what was promised in Ezekiel 36:26, in that God, **"gave you a new heart and put a new spirit within you..."** and replaced your heart of stone with a spiritual heart of flesh—you received a new nature. However, we still must contend with that part of us that is tethered to our old nature of sin. We still **"stumble in many ways"** and because we do, we still say stupid stuff! We can still use our tongues to speak great harm. What Jesus said about the heart is still true of the Christian: **"The good person out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil person out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart"** (Luke 6:45).

James gives us three illustrations that convey just how powerful the tongue is and why we must exercise great caution over what comes out of our mouths:

1. The tongue is like the bit in a horse's mouth. A bit weighs about 2 pounds while the average weight of a horse is about 1000 pounds. A bit is used to communicate with the horse, but if used by an unskilled and undisciplined rider, a bit can become the source of stress and anxiety for the horse. An unskilled rider can use the horse's bit to injure the horse. An unskilled rider can use the horse's bit to cause the horse to become confused. An unskilled rider can use that little 2-pound bit to harm his 1,000-pound horse.
2. The tongue is like the rudder on a large ship. A rudder controls the direction of a ship, it is used to avoid harmful obstacles, it contributes to fuel efficiency by minimizing drag and optimizing water flow, a rudder helps provide stability, and it is critical for the captain of the ship to maintain the right course. However, without a skilled captain maintaining control of the rudder, it can be catastrophic to the rest of the ship.
3. The tongue is like a fire. Instead of using oxygen for life, fire consumes oxygen as fuel. In enclosed spaces, a fire depletes the available oxygen so that it can continue to kill and destroy. The effects of a fire are also harmful, for it irritates the respiratory system, it can exacerbate heart conditions, and it can even cause certain cancers over time.

Think about the damage a person's tongue can cause. James points out that we are able to tame wild animals, but **“no one among mankind can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison”** (vv. 7-8). The reason why we cannot tame the tongue is because our problems are deeper than what comes out of our mouths. The irony is that there is good that can come out of our mouths, but we will spend a lifetime needing to keep what comes out of our mouths in check. We can train and tame voracious and giant creatures, but not our tongues! James continues: **“With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing”** (vv. 9-10a). How can we sing songs of worship about our great and awesome God and at the same time use destructive words against another person who is made in the image of the God we claim to love? In reaction to this, James concludes: **“My brothers and sisters, these things should not be this way”** (v. 10b).

So what do we do? How do we address the problem within for those of us who have been “born again”? How can we make sure our words are life-giving instead of destructive? How can we have the fruit of our words flow out of our new heart instead of our old nature? Well the good news is that as a Christian, you have been sealed and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live and speak in a way that is pleasing to the God who redeemed you (Eph. 1:13-14; Acts 1:8).

Permit me to leave you with five things to remember and practice that will help
:

1. **Remember that you are now a child of God.** As a child of God, you have been sealed by His Holy Spirit and empowered to life, His way over your ways; you have been given power through the Holy Spirit to live the life God has called you into (Eph. 1:3-14; Acts 1:8).
2. **Saturate your heart with God's word.** You cannot know how to live for God if you do not know what God has said about living for Him. We are told, **“Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh”** (Gal 5:16). Whatever you are putting into your mind, you are filling your heart with, and whatever you are filling your heart with, will come out through your speech. So, read your Bible. Listen to songs about the things that please God. Consume more of what lines up with the things of God than what dishonors Him.
3. **Be quick to listen and slow to speak.** You will be less reckless with your words, if you carefully consider your words before you say them (Jas. 1:19)
4. **Ask God to guide your speech by asking Him to give you wisdom in what you say (Jas. 1:5-8).** When you honestly seek God for wisdom to guide your speech, besides the fact that God honors such prayers, your prayer alone will give you the kind of awareness that assists in being less reckless with your words.
5. **Remember the image of God.** Remember that you bear the image of the living God not to make much of yourself, but much of God. Be mindful that regardless of a person's performance, that person was carefully created by God to bear the image of God too, so do not curse those who were created in the image of God.