Control Your Speech

Read James 3:1-12

Key verse: “Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn’t be this way!” (James 3:10)

My ministry and vocation have depended on the use of words. First, as a Christian editor and writer for over a decade, then as a preacher and teacher for almost 30 years, I know well the power of words. So, James 3:1 comes to me as a particularly important warning: “My brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers, because we know that we teachers will be judged more strictly.”

All Christians should inspect their lives by the truths of James 3:1-12. This passage of Scripture reminds us how powerful are our words, for good or for evil, to help or to harm.

James uses three examples from his first-century world to illustrate the power of our words:

1. A horse’s bridle.
   All of James’ readers would have been familiar with the function of a bridle in a horse’s mouth. James uses this common sight to illustrate how something as small as the tongue can control our lives and influence the lives of others. A person who, with God’s help, can control his tongue is a person who is strong and mature in faith.
   “We all make mistakes often, but those who don’t make mistakes with their words have reached full maturity. Like a bridled horse, they can control themselves entirely. When we bridle horses and put bits in their mouths to lead them wherever we want, we can control their whole bodies” (vv. 2-3).

2. A ship’s rudder.
   The sight of a majestic sailing ship cutting through the Mediterranean waters provides James’ next illustration. “Consider ships: they are so large that strong winds are needed to drive them. But pilots direct their ships wherever they want with a little rudder. In the same way, even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts wildly” (vv. 4-5a).

3. A forest fire.
James’ next example, a forest fire, illustrates not only how something as small as the tongue can have great power. This third example illustrates also the tremendously destructive effects of uncontrolled speech:

“Think about this: a small flame can set a whole forest on fire. The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives. Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire. The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell” (vv. 5b-6).

“No one can tame the tongue,” says James (v. 8). If this is true, why should we even try? Should we just give in and give up to gossip, slander, lying, verbal abuse, and other sins of the tongue? The answer is that we can’t control our tongues, not in our own strength. But God, through the Holy Spirit’s work in us, can help us use our words to heal and help rather than to hurt.

In fact among the “fruit of the Spirit” listed in Galatians 5:22 is “self-control.” As we yield our lives to the Holy Spirit, God helps us control what we say. Instead of using our words destructively—to gossip, ridicule, and tear down—we can learn to use our words to encourage, build up, and help others.

Florence Littauer shared this personal experience: “On the spur of the moment, I was asked to give a children’s sermon in a church I was visiting. My mind raced to Ephesians 4:39 – ‘Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good....’

“I asked the children, ‘How can we make our words good for others?’ They answered, ‘Say nice things. Give out compliments. Be cheerful. Tell the truth.’

“Then a little girl piped up, ‘Our words should be like little silver boxes with bows on top.’

“What more could I say? The children had taught the verse to each other and to me in a way none of us could easily forget.”

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