

More on Words
James 4:11-12
4-7-2024

after a three-week break Easter break, we return to the book of James with its emphasis on practical Christian living.

as we do so we return once again to an issue which he comes back to time after time throughout the book, our tongue.

he has more to say on our words probably because it is one the most difficult areas of our lives to bring under control.

in chapter 1 he connects our tongue with our temper saying we should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

advice not that different from telling your child who is getting upset to slow down and breathe

if you have difficulty controlling your temper, maybe you need to step back, begin to listen, and get a grip on your tongue

he will say a few verses later, if we are unable to control our tongue, our religion is worthless

in chapter 2 he wrote about the danger of empty and meaningless words

faith, he said, without deeds or any actions to back it up and support it, is dead.

it's just empty words.

then in chapter 3 he condemns using our words as a weapon to tear apart and destroy rather than strengthen and build up our brothers and sisters

saying in :6 "the tongue is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."

and in verse 8-9 he calls it a restless evil full of deadly poison which we use both to praise God and to curse our brother and sister.

How many times have we all said things we were embarrassed we said, words we wish we could take back?

some of the more famous examples of such things are:

even though they relied on the telegraph, when a new technology we call the telephone came out, an internal memo for Western Union shows why they rejected it

they called called the telephone inherently useless and said it has so many shortcomings that it could never be taken seriously as a means of communication.

when he was Commissioner of the US Patents Office at the turn of the 20th century, Charles Duell wrote a letter to President McKinley urging him to abolish the office saying that everything that can be invented has already been invented.

when David Sarnoff, founder of RCA was trying to raise money for the development of radio, he was turned down by one major investor who told him, the wireless music box has no imaginable commercial value. Asking who would ever pay for a message sent to nobody in particular.

in 1938, actor Gary Cooper famously said, Gone with the Wind was going to be the biggest flop in Hollywood history. I'm sure glad that it'll be Clark Gable who's falling flat on his face and not Gary Cooper.

in 1943, Thomas Watson, chairman of the Board for IBM, said I think there is a worldwide market for about 5 computers

At one time, Digital Equipment Corporation was one of the major computer companies in the world. Yet today it is out of business largely because of the attitude of its founder, president, and chairman of the Board, Ken Olsen, who said in 1977 that there was no reason anyone would ever want a computer in their home.

when Fred Smith, founder of FedEx was in college at Yale, he wrote a paper for one of his management courses proposing an overnight delivery service. His professor called the concept interesting and well-formed, but then gave him a C, saying that if he wanted a better grade, he had to come up with an idea which was feasible.

Decca Records never has been able to live down their refusal to sign the Beatles to a recording contract in 1962, saying, we don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out.

and my favorite was a couple of 20 somethings who approached Atari and said, Hey, we've got this amazing thing, we even built it with some of your parts. What do you think about funding us? Or we'll give it to you, just hire us, give us a salary and we'll come work for you.

Atari said, no.

So, they went to Hewlett-Packard and were told not interested, you haven't even finished college yet.

so, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak went out and started Apple computers, which after not even 50 years, has become one of the most valuable companies on earth

Like I said, these are some of the better-known examples but haven't we all stuck our foot in our mouth from time to time?

said things we wish we hadn't? spoken words without thinking and wish we could take them back?

usually such words may embarrass us, but aside from bruising our ego's, they are often relatively harmless

but what about the things we say which are not harmless

words spoken about someone that we know are not true or only half true

words that are exaggerated and blown out of proportion intended to hurt or damage reputations

words spoken in anger or jealousy?

Malicious words used as weapons, meant to cut and tear down

these are the type of words James is talking about when he writes in James 4:11-12

“Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another (that word for another means a brother or sister, a fellow believer), or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:11–12)

speaking evil, or slander as some translations have it are false, misleading, malicious statements about someone

slander and speaking evil are intentional statements meant to hurt and do damage
condemnation without compassion or care
using our words to attack others through things like hate speech, insults and derogatory comments to and about others

James feels so strongly about it that he not only condemns its practice, he used the word three times in verse 11.

in addition to James, it is condemned by Jesus in Matthew and Mark, by Paul in Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, Timothy, and Titus, and in both Peter and Jude

slander, along with gossip, judging, and lying, which are all closely related, are universally condemned in scripture so there is no way to defend or justify them

how we need to turn down the rhetoric which so dominates not just our politics but social media, the airwaves and our society as a whole whenever someone does or says something we don't like or agree with

it has become a major problem, with a rapidly growing body of evidence of the immense harm it is doing to the mental state especially of young people and the polarization of our society

God cares about the words we use to and about each other, intending for us to build up and strengthen rather than tear down and destroy one another

because he cares for every person regardless of color or political party or part of country or the world they come from

James writes so strongly against it because when we slander and speak evil it means we have lost sight of the fact that every person is made in God's image and Jesus died for when we are speaking evil, we certainly aren't going to be sharing our faith or telling about Christ

Remember Jesus' words in Luke 6 that we are to not just love our enemies and do good to those who hate us, AND we are to bless those who curse us and pray for those who mistreat us.

he even modeled this for us, as Peter said, when people hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate, and when he suffered, he made no threats. instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness, for by his wounds we have been healed and made whole.

in Ephesians 4:29 Paul commanded, “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 4:29–5:2)

Our words not only reflect what is in our hearts, for out of the abundance of the heart our mouths speak, but they also affect the state of our soul!

speaking evil of one another divides and destroys fellowship
it is associated with darkness not the light of God’s presence
which is why it is never acceptable in scripture and especially among the people of God

as John said, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7)

in his emphasis on relevant Christianity and a practical faith, James says our faith must have an effect on what we say to and about each other, regardless of whether we agree with them or not

Jesus even warned in Matthew 12 that everyone will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. for by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you **will be condemned**

Our words matter!

after spending more than 10 years at the top of the Contemporary Christian Music industry, Michael W Smith was one of its most popular and bestselling artists including some very popular worship songs like Great is the Lord.

Then in 1993 he released the song titled Kentucky Rose, a fictional account of a respected preacher and farmer who lived in a tiny town in the foothills of Kentucky and dies while saving a boy’s life.

at the very end of the song there is one line, only 16 words, which overnight almost sank his whole career.

in speaking of the hill overlooking where he had saved the boys life, the song ends with the words, Now on that hill one flower grows. they say it is the spirit of Kentucky Rose.

Only 16 words in an entire career. But when one man heard them, he immediately starting faxing Christian radio stations all across the country accusing Smith of being New Age for poetically referring to the spirit of Kentucky Rose, Without ever trying to contact Michael W Smith or find out the meaning behind the words, he instead served as judge, jury, and executioner, questioning Smiths motives and seeking to destroy his reputation.

and many people believed him and sales plummeted.

that's the problem with simply accepting words from any source with no fact or evidence to back them up, they are often believed for no reason other than we want to believe them they feed our biases, prejudices, and hunger for a juicy story about someone

for anyone who slanders his brother or sister James said, has already stood in judgement of them they have already decided and think the worst

but why try to put ourselves in the place of God as verses 12 says, who are you to judge your neighbor? only God is in a position to judge anyone because only He knows their heart and motives

Jesus said, “Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged. “And why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye.” (Matthew 7:1–5)

to judge is to say we know better

James even goes so far as to say that to speak evil or judge someone is to speak evil and judge the law itself

the law which said *“Do not go about spreading slander among your people...for I am the LORD.”* (Leviticus 19:16)

“Do not spread false reports. Do not help a guilty person by being a malicious witness.” (Exodus 23:1)

to judge is to turn a deaf ear to Gods word, to put ourselves in the place of God and to say that our thoughts or feelings about someone or prejudices are right regardless of what God has said to the contrary

James is likely referring even more directly to another law, one he had already referred to in chapter 2:8 when he wrote, “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.” (James 2:8)

ultimately, that means to judge the law is to sit in judgement of God himself who made the law

law of love which encapsulates all Gods laws to break it by speaking evil of fellow believers is to speak evil of the God who indwells them

and as Mother Teresa put it, if you judge someone it means you have no time to love them

and an old proverb points out that if we love people, we will see them as God intends for them to be

as made in his image, beloved and precious to him
and ones for who Christ died

the great law is to love God and our neighbor, how can we ever really love when we are speaking evil
and judging them

James words against speaking evil and judging others are especially relevant for our times when we are
constantly inundated by conspiracies and attacks on social media
people willing to believe the worst in others not based on fact or evidence but simply because its what
they want to believe

and because they can do a google search and find web sites to tell them what they want to hear they
will believe the worst in those they already don't like

yet the royal law found in scripture is to love our neighbor as ourselves
for our love for one another is a direct expression of our love for God

**an ancient Rabbi once asked his disciples how they could tell when the night had ended and
the day was on its way back. Could it be, asked one student, when you can see an animal in
the distance and tell whether it is a sheep or a dog? No answered the rabbi. Could it be,
another student asked, when you look at a tree in the distance and can tell whether it is a fig
or a pear tree? No said the Rabbi. well then, what is it, all his students asked. It is when you
look on the face of any person and can see your brother or your sister. because if you cannot
do this, then no matter what time it is, it is still night.**

But Jesus, who is the light of the world, calls us to walk in his light and to spread it to this dark world not
add to the darkness by the things we say, speaking evil and judging others instead of loving them