

**James 3:1-18****Introduction**

Many of you know that I often tune in to talk radio and enjoy listening to the discussions that take place. I enjoy hearing the news and being able to think about it in discussion with others. One of the things that amazes me is the skill of good journalists who can switch from presenting one side of an argument to proposing an entirely opposite view almost at the flick of a switch. They would say they are being impartial and presenting a balanced view of a situation but there is something about this fluid use of words that I find disturbing.

I was also disturbed, this week, to hear Dominic Raab, after the results of the enquiry about potential bullying saying that he thought that the bar for bullying was set too low. Words, speech, the use of the tongue are incredibly powerful things. They can be used to do an enormous amount of good and they can equally be extremely destructive.

The third chapter of James, which is our sixth study in the epistle of James begins with a serious warning about how difficult it is to come up to the mark as a teacher. He points out that taming the tongue is extraordinarily difficult for anyone and so for those with the responsibility of teaching others the challenge is very difficult. He is particularly referring here to those who are teachers of religion but all of us teach each other throughout life whether we are actual trained teachers, parents, colleagues or neighbours. The things we say can affect others profoundly and so our responsibility is to make sure the influence of the tongue is positive.

He tells us, 'Teachers beware; we all stumble and slip up'. Teaching is dangerous and words, teaching and ideas are dangerous things. A little word, a simple idea can create great control. It can bring peace, order and wisdom or it can create chaos. We see this daily on the internet where people freely say what they like with no attention to the effect it can have on others. They claim the right to free speech – whatever the damage it causes. Thoughtless words can be devastating. We

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remembered in our study this week the effect that Gerald Ratner's careless words had on his business empire when he jokingly said that he could sell his jewellery so cheaply because it was rubbish. The share price collapsed and the business disintegrated. It has entered the English Language as 'A Ratner moment' 'A situation where one harms one's reputation or standing by making ill-advised remarks.' And of course, we have the power to harm other people's reputations in the same way. We might call it 'gossip' but often things we say can amount to slander. People's views have a power of their own and when spoken can have enormous effect. We have all seen and felt the results of Liz Truss's financial ideology and the effect of a 'mini budget'. And just this week a Russian opponent of Vladimir Putin has been jailed for 25 years to stop him criticizing the Russian regime: speaking the truth is enormously challenging.

Believers in Christ live by a powerful idea, a revolutionary truth; that God reveals truth itself to us. It's not based on human opinion or human ideas or things we have been able to work out for ourselves. Truth is something revealed to us by God. In fact the 'word' himself is revealed to us from heaven. We could never have made up the salvation story of God. The gospel message is given to us from God. By God's word we know what truth is. And our words (what we say, and teach and meditate on and believe) are crucial. We need to work hard to understand what God reveals to us and to be careful how we pass the teaching on.

William Shakespeare said, " He has a heart as sound as a bell, and his tongue is a clapper, for what the heart thinks the tongue speaks". The psalmist, in psalm 141 asks God to put a sentry on our mouths: "Take control of what I say, O LORD, and guard my lips."

Jesus, in his teaching said that the tongue was a spiritual indicator of the heart. Matthew 15, <sup>18</sup> But the words you speak come from the heart—that's what defiles you. <sup>19</sup> For from the

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heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander." The way we use our tongue is an indicator of our true character.

This is why James warns people who teach because they are handling the very word of God and need to use the word of God accurately and with integrity. James tells us that none of us will totally conquer our unruly tongues but we must aim to become mature people who think before speaking and choose words carefully and consider how their words will be heard.

All of us know that we don't control our tongues as well as we could. I am aware that often I don't engage my brain before opening my mouth. James warns us it is important that we do because what we believe is going to come out of our mouths.

It is said that there was a King who lived in Egypt who asked his High Priest to bring him the best and the worst parts of the next animal he sacrificed. The priest sent him the tongue of the animal and a papyrus scroll which read: "The tongue is the best part for it carries the soothing words of friendship and the whisper of love, and it is also the worst part for it bears the sting of hate and humiliation".

So let's think a little more about the tongue.

**It is influential** – and can be used as a good or a bad influence. In fact it has enormous influence for something so small. It can be used for great things, praising our God, preaching the Gospel, speaking well of others and encouraging others; but too often it is used negatively which causes great damage.

**It is also inflammatory**

It has the potential to arouse anger and hostility. James reminds us how a small spark is able to set a whole forest ablaze. It was found some years ago that one of the largest Forest fires in North America had been caused by a young boy dropping a match. The writer of proverbs says, "For lack of

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wood the fire goes out,  
and where there is no whisperer, quarrelling ceases.

<sup>21</sup> As charcoal is to hot embers and wood to fire,  
so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.”.

This verse is very striking because it reminds us of the effect that our words can have. If we simply learn to hold our tongues and not enter into quarrelling the argument or the gossip will run out.

**It is also incorrigible**

James tells us, and we all know, that left to ourselves we are not capable of taming our tongues successfully and consistently. We are sinners and no amount of grit and human effort will result in us overcoming an unruly tongue. We must watch our words; how we talk to others, how we talk to our children, our spouse, our neighbours, our co-workers, our fellow church members.

**And The tongue is inconsistent**

James points out the irony that with the same tongue we praise God and then turn round and destroys others. We are consistent in using our tongue for good. James points out that when we speak evil of another person we are attacking someone made in the image of God.

I found James's example of fresh water coming out of a salty pool very powerful. It is sobering to think that we who have come here today to use our tongues in praising our wonderful God will probably be using it later to cause damage. One of the challenges of the teacher is that before teaching others we have to fully process, understand and apply what we are teaching to our own lives; otherwise there is no authenticity. The message of James is all about authenticity. What I long for is that I would be like a stick of seaside rock and that wherever you slice through you will find the word 'holy'. Not in a boastful way, but in the meaning of the word Holy that is 'set apart', dedicated to God. In order for this to happen in our lives is for us to allow the Holy Spirit to fill us, to cleanse us, and to transform us every day.

**Readings**  
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**Using words wisely**

**Foxton/Fowlmere**