
The Power of Words and Speech

SCOTT HOEZEE

Maybe it was a children's sermon at church, or perhaps an object lesson in Bible class at school, but many of us can remember the time when the pastor or the teacher handed a kid a tube of toothpaste and then instructed the kid to squeeze out the whole tube onto a paper plate; and then, "Okay, now please put it all back into the tube," the teacher or pastor would say; and of course, the kid would naturally respond, "It can't be done," and then, that is just what happens when you open your mouth to say something. Once you say it, you cannot put it back, so be very careful how you talk.

Well, back in his day, the Apostle James did not have tubes of Crest toothpaste at his disposal, but we just know he would have loved that analogy, because in James 3 the Apostle has a lot of dire warnings on the power of the human tongue. Today on Groundwork, we dig into that chapter to wonder about the power of speech, and the need to seek control over our mouths. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we welcome our listeners to this fourth program of seven that we are doing on the letter of James, and we are up today to the third chapter now. We have already looked, in the first three programs, at James 1 and 2; and we have learned a few things about James; among them that he is a veritable drill sergeant of a writer. He is mostly in the imperative mood, issuing and barking out commands to the people to whom he is writing; so, James is anything but subtle, as we have seen, and he certainly is not subtle in what we are going to talk about in this program, which is the power of speech and how terribly injurious – how much damage gets inflicted by what we say to each other.

DAVE BAST

And certainly, his words here have a real ring of practical wisdom. That is what James is all about. We pointed out that he is very Jewish in his own personal background – the brother of Jesus – the head of the Church in Jerusalem – sort of the acknowledged leader of the Jewish wing of the Christian Church; that is to say, Jewish people who had become Christians – who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah. Paul is the leader of the gentile wing, more or less; Peter is kind of straddling both worlds; but James – very Jewish – very practical – very oriented to wisdom, like the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, and a lot of true-to-life stuff and down-to-earth examples. Certainly, the famous passage from Chapter 3 on the nature of the tongue and the way language affects us is a great example of that; so maybe we can just dive into that. It is a fairly long passage, but we will pick it up at James 3:1:

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers; because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ²We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

SCOTT HOEZEE

³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes

great boasts. Consider what a great forest you set on fire by a small spark. ⁶The tongue also is a fire; a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body; sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

DAVE BAST

⁷All kinds of animals – birds, reptiles, and sea creatures – are being tamed, and have been tamed by mankind; ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil full of deadly poison.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁹With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹²My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. So, there you have it. Lots of analogies; lots of strong language. One thing that we should just maybe note right at the beginning here, and think a little bit about it in this first segment, James is relentlessly negative here. There is not a glimmer of hope. He basically says: Well, let's see here. Who on planet Earth among human beings can control his speech? Well, no one.

DAVE BAST

Nobody; that is right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Nobody. Everybody has this thing in them they call a tongue and it is like a flame that sets other things on fire and, oh, hell set your tongue on fire in the first place; so, there is really hardly a glimmer of hope here.

DAVE BAST

It is kind of a hopeless situation. I mean, he comes right out and says: Look, humans have tamed every kind of animal; and all you have to do is think of one of those shows on TV about weird pets, you know? It is true. Somebody has a crocodile for a pet or some such thing; but no human being can tame the tongue, James says. In fact, he says early in the chapter: If you could tame your tongue – if you could control your speech – you would be perfect.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You would be a perfect person.

DAVE BAST

And who is perfect? Hey, forget about it, is his message. It ain't gonna happen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He even personifies the tongue. I mean, just to make it more interesting, he makes the tongue out to be a character in its own right. So, it is sort of like what James is saying is that for every one of us there is me: So, hello, my name is Scott; but inside me there is somebody who is not me; it is my tongue who is its own little character, and I am not really in control of him, and he is often in control of me; so, wow. I mean, again, what relentless language James has here for warning us about the power of negative speech and cursing; but also, sort of leading us almost to the brink of despair in terms of having any hope.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the impossibility in what he is saying. Well, the other thing, I think... Another general observation is how much James goes in for analogy here. Especially the comparison of little things that have big effects, like the rudder of a ship, he says. You have this great big, gigantic ship – maybe not big in our terms, but big; and there is this little stick or board on the back end at the stern, and you can steer the whole thing that way; or the bit that they use for a horse. Whoever invented that was one smart person. Somebody figured out that if you put a piece of metal in the back behind a horse's teeth, you could control this whole massive animal

just by pulling on the reins. Well, that is how it is with the tongue.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, forest fires... So, every year in California or Arizona – the dryer climates – there are these horrible fires that wipe out scores of houses – sometimes take people's lives; and how often have we heard that it was just one careless person flicking a cigarette out of a car window. One little cigarette and 10,000 acres burn; and James says: Yes, that is the tongue for you, all right.

One other thing we should note before we conclude this segment is that he says here is another weird thing about human beings: You know, in nature, if you have a spring of water, it is salty or it is fresh; you can drink it or you cannot; it is never both at the same time, and it never alternates; but human beings do this all the time, weirdly enough. You go to church and you sing the doxology and then you go out into the narthex and you are having coffee and five minutes later you say something to somebody that cuts them to ribbons. Same person – same tongue; salt water – fresh water. That is weird, James says; it does not happen in nature, but it happens to us.

DAVE BAST

And one last analogy: He talks about a tree. You do not have two kinds of fruit on a tree; now, we are not counting if you have grafted in pears and apples, but he says a fig tree does not bear olives; a grapevine does not bear figs; but the tongue, in this same double way, can be both wonderful and positive, and out of the same mouth comes foul talk, blasphemy, lies, slander, gossip, you name it. So, a lot of weird stuff goes on with our speech, and it really is... If you think about it, maybe we tend to think of the big things – the big human crimes or sins: murder or adultery or what have you; but so much of what goes wrong with us has to do with the language that we use and the way that we employ our tongues; and we want to ask the basic question: How can this be? How does it happen like this? James will say: Well, in a way, it is kind of mysterious, but we will look at that more closely in just a moment.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are continuing in James Chapter 3, Dave, where we are noting that James is relentless, and relentlessly negative when it comes to the power of human speech – that nobody can control it – and of course, James is concerned about this because James is one of the great practical letters in the New Testament, where almost from first to last in James he is concerned with Christian behavior. On the assumption that we believe we have been saved by grace and that God has given us the gift of faith, James' relentless question is: Okay, so what; now what? It has to show up in how you live; and in this chapter, it has to show up in how you talk; but apparently, left to our own devices, there is not a whole lot of hope that we are going to behave in how we talk.

DAVE BAST

Right; and there is not much hope in this passage. It is almost completely negative. I mean, it is certainly true to life. We all read it and say: Yep, uh huh. I get you, James. You are talking about me. The tongue is full of poison. I try to control it. I find myself forgetting, and before I know it, I have said something or I have done something to somebody through... and it may not just be verbal speech, you know. In this day and age, we have to think about social media and Facebook bullying and Twitter, and all the kinds of ways there are comments. You know, you talk about a spark that will set a fire – a lot of – especially young people are saying things that will never be forgotten. They are there forever. They are in cyberspace and they can be called up. You cannot erase them, I guess.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You mentioned bullying, Dave, and what a tragedy in our day today. We have had suicides of young people because of what was put on Facebook that all of their friends could read, and they could not recover. So, for James – in James' day – there was only one way to communicate with somebody. You had to be eyeball to eyeball – there were no telephones – but of course, today we have lots of options, and although writing does not fit per se with the tongue, it is essentially our communication... so, you are right.

DAVE BAST

It is using words.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes. It is our words that give life. It is our words that take life. You know, sticks and stones will hurt me, but words will never hurt me – no. Words do hurt; very, very badly. So, there is not a lot of hope in this chapter. The subtext – the assumption of James is that, well, there is hope. When the Spirit of God has given you faith, it is going to change everything, as we saw in the last program, too. For James, faith changes everything. So, the implication here is that it will change your speech; and we will talk more about that; but, maybe in this segment, too, we can note that the almost over-the-top nature by which James addresses the evil of our harsh speech to each other – what that says to us is I think this needs to become – if it isn't already – this needs to become for us a regular part of our confession of sins before God. If it is really as bad as James says, wow, then this is something we need to be checking ourselves against all the time.

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, he calls it a poison, and fire, and all the rest – all images of deadly kinds of things that really kill people – really reduce them – really make them ill; and if the law – James will talk about the royal law of love – if that is what we are called to do, to love our neighbor as ourselves, then part of our regular self-examination – our regular confession – has to be what about my speech? Have I said something to someone, or have I said something about someone to someone else that I need to confess before God? And do it in connection with worship, because as James says, his concern is about worship...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And our lives together.

DAVE BAST

Yes. We saw in an earlier program the kind of hypocrisy that says piously to some poor person: Oh, be warmed; be filled; God bless you; I will pray for you, rather than doing something tangible to help that person in need. We also have to be concerned with the hypocrisy that sings: Praise God from whom all blessings flow, and then turns around and just cuts somebody terribly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That just lashes somebody.

And you know, we have mentioned before the great confession document, the Heidelberg Catechism that came out of the Reformation, and I think the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism had James in mind when they wrote about the sixth commandment – you shall not murder. So, the Catechism says: Okay, so the sixth commandment is you shall not murder. What does that mean? What is God forbidding? And so, the Catechism, ironically, rather swiftly dismisses – well, you know, it counts if you actually slip a knife between somebody's ribs – that is bad; but...

DAVE BAST

That is murder, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is murder...

DAVE BAST

Okay, technically.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But it spends most of its time in that question and answer talking about how we talk to each other; belittling speech; slandering someone; taking down someone's good name. The Catechism says: You know what that is? Murder. You are killing somebody. Of course, Jesus said that, too.

DAVE BAST

Killing...

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you call somebody you fool, Jesus says, you have killed them.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so angry speech would certainly qualify; but also that sort of sly, snide, mocking speech that tries to kill someone's reputation...

SCOTT HOEZEE

[0:15:07.3] Yes; and boy, oh boy; on the split screens of cable TV today it is an indoor, non-contact sport to see who can cut each other to ribbons quicker on cable TV, and we absorb this stuff as entertainment. Or think about all those, which I never watch, but I catch glimpses of every once in a while if I am traveling – they are on daytime TV – these reality shows where the host – you know, Montel Williams, or some of these other shows – Maury Povich – where they bring people together who are angry with each other, and then stir the pot so that they are swearing at each other on TV, and they throw chairs at each other. We ingest this as entertainment; and James would look at it as likely the equivalent of being entertained by a nuclear war. These people are killing each other with their tongues, and we think it is funny?! We think it is fun to watch?! What a horrible thing! So, for us to make this a regular part of our confession of sins, as we said a minute ago, to make it a habit to say: Dear God, how did I talk today? What were my Facebook posts like today? What was in that e-mail I sent to my colleague today? That has to be a regular part of our self-assessment and probably we will find stuff to confess to God; and the more we confess it, the more that becomes a habit for us, of course. Hopefully, the Spirit will then help us to keep a better check on our tongue and on our Facebook posts and on our e-mails tomorrow; but it has to become that engrained in us because look how important James says it is.

DAVE BAST

Well, I don't know, Scott. I mean, I had an illustration on the tip of my tongue there about the importance of slander, and all that. You went right to trash TV, and I was going to quote Shakespeare, but it is gone now; I mean, the opportunity has passed; but I agree with you that this is something that James wants us to take really seriously, and talk to God about it regularly in our prayer life; and then begin to think about that more and more in our speech.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have been talking about worship, and so, in just a moment there is also an implication here of how we talk all week long, and then how we talk to God come Sunday in worship, and we will look at that next.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, and we are focusing on James' practical words of exhortation about the tongue; about how we use language; and especially about the

danger of how words can hurt; how they can kill; how they can destroy people's reputations, their feelings, even their lives; and also the strange dichotomy between the way we use language in worship, for the most high and exalted of all purposes, the praise of God. There is no greater end to human life than that, and no higher or nobler use of speech; or even, on a different level, but also we use language to express love for others. How wonderful that is; and then, out of the same mouth comes a spew of sewer kinds of words and taunts and hurtful things. So, that sort of anomaly – that sort of bifurcation – that schizophrenia in our speech – how do we overcome that?

SCOTT HOEZEE

James says it in James 3:9; we read it earlier in the first segment, but let's listen to it again:

With the tongue, we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. So, there is an interesting connection, right? So, we would lament in confession – or our proper modes of biblical praying – it is okay to offer laments to God: How long, O, God? Why, O, God? That is okay; but generally speaking of course, for people who love God and are pious and revered before God, we mind our Ps and Qs when we are praying and when we are in church. We would never think of cursing God. We would never think of swearing at God in church or anywhere else. That would be pretty rare for a person of faith to do that. So, when we are talking to God, James says, we are in the mode of praise, but then we can turn right around and just let some person have it, and cut into them, and James says: Whoa, whoa, whoa, time out. That is God's image – that is God's picture right in front of you; so how can you mind your Ps and Qs with God, and then take one of God's image bearers down and just give him a tongue lashing?

DAVE BAST

This is pretty basic stuff. We do not need James to tell us this. Our mothers probably told us, if you cannot say something nice about someone, do not say anything at all; you know, that sort of thing, just sort of practical wisdom; but the thing about speech and being respectful to people, I think a lot of Christians – a lot of Christians who take the Bible seriously – are very careful about coarse talk. They do not want to use foul language or vulgar language; some of which... I mean, one of our spiritual heroes on this program is Martin Luther. He felt quite free about using barnyard talk at times; and I am not advocating that we do that. I mean, Paul says somewhere: Let no coarse talk come out of your mouth; but I think we need to recognize that it is far more serious to gossip about someone, even if our words are proper language – there is nothing foul about them – it is far more serious to say things that are hurtful; even if we believe it or think that we are being helpful, or we call it justifiable criticism. That is the kind of thing that James says is poison.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, we have seen it again and again in our lives; it is a theme in literature; it is a theme in movies. I mean, how many movies do not end sometimes either climactic scenes, or sometimes the whole film, with someone in complete despair because of something someone had just said to them. It was far worse than any slap to the face could ever have hurt; and we know that that is true. James is reminding us first of all here, then, that that should not happen. If you can see the image of God deep in every person you meet, remember who they are, then you will treat them with the same respect you would treat God if it was God Himself standing in front of you, you would not curse God, so do not curse the people.

DAVE BAST

The call for consistency, just to repeat what James says: ^{3:10}Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing; my brothers and sisters, this should not be. ^{11ff}Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring, and can a fig tree bear olives, and all the rest. So, consistency is the great thing. Say the same thing. Treat everybody alike. Do the right thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We saw this, Dave, in the first program in this series on James, that the community at worship seems to be one of James' focal points here. How do we treat each other, particularly when we are together as a community in worship; and here, by way of analogy, I think what James would have us to remember is... You know, it is sort of like if you go out for lunch and you have a pastrami sub sandwich with raw red onions

and pickled jalapenos on it; well, three hours later when you have a meeting with somebody and you are sitting close to them, guess what they are going to get blasted from your mouth, right? You are kind of sensitive to that, right? You really do not want your jalapeno sandwich to be blasted into somebody's face. Similarly, James is saying: You know what? How you talk all week long is going to leave an odor on your breath; and so you might get to church on Sunday morning and you might say all the right things and sing the Doxology and pray piously to God, but God is going: Sniff, sniff, sniff; whooph... oh, man; all that stuff that has been in your mouth all the rest of the week – it still stinks. James is saying: Make the connection. You cannot come into worship having talked that way all week and expect God not to notice.

DAVE BAST

It spoils your praise, yes, absolutely. It hangs over into that. So, you know, I take away from this... here is something else for me to feel guilty about, and rightly so; that is at least a start. At least recognize what you are doing and come before God and try to get clean; especially before worship; and not just any vague and general: Oh, please forgive us our sins; just sort of self reflection, self awareness: Create in me a clean heart, O, God – the psalmist praised; well, create in me a clean tongue, O, God, and forgive me for those things that I said about that person or to that person.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And given how dark and dire James was in these verses, we know, it is only God who can create that pureness within us; including how we talk and communicate with one another.

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are you hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit the website, groundworkonline.com, and suggest topics and passages we can dig into next on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-power-of-words-and-speech>

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