

The Small Spark

James 3:1-12 (NASB 1995)

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. ² For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. ³ Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.

See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. ⁸ But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰ from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. ¹¹ Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

Introduction

Starting today, for the next seven Sundays, we are going to think about the power of words we speak. This morning, we will begin with the power of the tongue.

It was 2018 in California. A single spark from a hammer striking a metal stake ignited one of the largest wildfires in the state's history. Hundreds of thousands of acres were burned.

Nobody woke up that morning thinking, "Today I will start a massive fire." It just began with one tiny spark.

James warns that our words work exactly the same way. One sentence. One angry comment. One piece of gossip. One careless joke. One social media post. One rumor.

And suddenly relationships are damaged, churches are divided, and lives are wounded.

The tongue may be small, but it carries the power of fire.

This morning, I am going to present to you four biblical truths about the tongue.

I. Words Carry Great Responsibility

In verse 1, James warns the readers not to become teachers: *Let not many of you become teachers*. They are judged more strictly because of the words they speak.

But, then, James quickly broadens the application: "*We all stumble*" (v. 3). Nobody gets a free pass. Everyone struggles with the tongue.

The Bell Illustration

A man once slandered his neighbor. Later he regretted it and asked a wise man how to make things right. The wise man handed him a bell. "Ring it loudly in the town square." He did. "Now go and collect every sound." He replied, "That's impossible." The wise man said, "So it is with your words."

Once spoken, they cannot be taken back.

Applications

So, ask yourself:

- Has anyone been hurt by my words?
- Who still remembers something cruel that I had said twenty years ago?

People may forget faces. People may forget events. Yet, people rarely forget words.

Proverbs reminds us of the power of the tongue: *Death and life are in the power of the tongue* (Proverbs 18:21).

Transition

Since words carry such influence, James now asks another question: If words are so powerful, where are they taking us?

II. Small Words Determine Great Directions

James 3:3-4

³ Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.

Have you noticed here? The bit and rudder are both about **direction**, not size.

Small things steer big things. Tiny rudder. Huge ship. Tiny bit. Powerful horse. Tiny tongue. Entire life.

The Steering Wheel Illustration

A steering wheel is small compared to a car. But move it one inch and eventually you're in another city.

Likewise:

- one encouraging word changes a marriage;
- one bitter word changes a family;
- one cynical spirit changes a church.

Application Questions

So ask yourself: What direction are your words steering?

Are they producing:

- faith?
- hope?
- encouragement?

Or are they steering you toward:

- bitterness?
- criticism?
- anxiety?
- unbelief?

Here's another important truth about our words: they don't merely reveal our emotions.
They reinforce our emotions.

The more we complain, the more negative we become. The more we give thanks, the more joyful we become. Our words shape our hearts and our lives.

Transition

But James doesn't stop with direction. He warns us that words don't merely steer our lives. They can also destroy lives.

III. Small Sparks Cause Great Destruction

James 3:5-6

⁵ So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.

Fire always spreads farther than intended. Nobody intends to burn down a forest. Nobody intends to destroy a friendship. Nobody intends to split a church.

It begins with:

- "Did you hear?"
- "I'm just concerned."
- "Please pray for so-and-so."
- "I'm just being honest."

James says: See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire.

The Toothpaste Illustration

Squeeze toothpaste onto a plate. Now put it back. Impossible. So are careless words.

Applications

Some fires started by the tongue:

- gossip

- criticism
- sarcasm
- angry outbursts
- social media posts
- harsh parenting
- careless jokes

Ask yourself:

- What fires have my words started?
- Whom do I need to apologize to?
- What sparks am I carrying today?

Transition

At this point you may think: "I just need to try harder."

James says: "No." The problem goes deeper.

IV. Small Words Reveal a Big Problem

James 3:9-12

⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰ from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. ¹¹ Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

Please get this: the tongue problem is really a heart problem. You cannot permanently change your speech without changing the source.

The Water Filter Illustration

If dirty water keeps coming from the faucet, you don't repaint the sink. You inspect the source.

Likewise: Harsh words, bitter words, critical words, gossip— all reveal something happening in the heart. Sometimes we say: "I didn't mean it." Usually, and truthfully, we did. It simply escaped. The mouth reveals the heart.

Jesus speaks: *The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart* (Matthew 12:34).

The Fruit Tree Illustration

Consider a fruit tree. An apple tree doesn't struggle every day to produce apples. It simply produces what it is. Likewise, our speech reveals what's already filled in our hearts.

The Gospel Solution

James says: *No one can tame the tongue* (v. 8).

That is shocking. Why? Because it drives us to grace and truth that we cannot fix ourselves. We need a new heart.

God speaks through Prophet Ezekiel: I will give you a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26). Jesus transforms our hearts. Remember. Only from a transformed heart can we speak transformed speech.

Conclusion

As for closing, I would return to the wildfire. One spark burned hundreds of thousands of acres. One sentence can burn a marriage. One rumor can burn a friendship. One criticism can burn a church.

But praise God—one encouraging word can also heal. One prayer can restore. One apology can reconcile. One testimony can save a soul. Small words have enormous power.

Three Closing Questions

This week, before you speak, pause and ask yourself three questions:

Is it true?

Is it necessary?

Is it edifying?

Those three questions alone could prevent a lot of unnecessary fires.

Let us pray: Lord, transform our hearts. Fill our hearts with Your love and grace. Then, make our mouths instruments of grace rather than sparks of destruction. In Jesus' name. Amen.