

Text: James 3:1-12

Sunday 9th February 2020

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I read this past week that if we include scientific words, there are over one million words in the English language. Of all those words, the average person knows about 20,000, uses roughly 2,000 different words each week and speaks about 16,000 words a day, on average – though I guess the number goes up for ministers on a Sunday! **The book of Proverbs** reminds us that: ‘The tongue has the power of life and death’ (Pro. 18:21). So, our words matter, not so much the number of words we speak but the kind of words and the purpose for them.

Fourteen years into married life I can well affirm this because I am still very much learning to speak in life-giving ways. One year into ministry here at Brightons, having spoken more words than in any other year in my life, and I am aware that my words have likely touched on both parts of that proverb.

So, we can likely resonate with the writing of James today because we know his assessment in verses 2 to be true: we all say wrong things, because (after all) who amongst us is perfect, who lives a perfect life? No one. So, if we stumble in our deeds, then we sure stumble in our words, we all say wrong things, and for this reason what James is about to detail is relevant for us all, even though he begins with teachers. For they must be especially careful, since the weight and quantity of their words will be greater.

In verses 3 to 5, James is seeking to quickly help us grasp that our tongue is powerful by giving us three pictures. Firstly, of the bit in the horse's mouth, able to turn such a powerful animal. Secondly, the lowly rudder, which the pilot can use to steer the largest of ships even amidst powerful winds. Thirdly, the small spark, which can set the greatest of forests aflame, laying low even the most powerful of trees. Across all three pictures, James highlights the disproportionate power of the tongue.

As a result, the tongue can boast. James says in verse 5: 'the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.' Boasting here is not in a negative sense, simply a neutral sense, that the tongue does have considerable influence for it does have great power.

Now in our digital age, it's worth bearing in mind that if James was writing today he'd probably include all forms of communication, both electronic or printed, because we utilise these to say things. So, let's keep in mind every social media post, every electronic message, or the notes we send one another; they are all powerful means of speaking; it's just that in James' day the average person could only utilise the spoken word and so with a focus on the tongue James wants to help us see the destructive power of our words.

In verses 6 to 8, James speaks of the tongue being a fire, of it corrupting the whole body, setting the course of one's life on fire, that it has at its disposal deadly poison. Again, this echoes the earlier Proverb '...of life and [of] death' (Pro. 18:21).

God's Word is full of examples where the tongue can lead to death:

- **Gossip and Slander – Proverbs 16:28**
- **Flattery – Proverbs 26:28**
- **Bragging – Proverbs 27:2**
- **Breaking Confidence – Proverbs 11:13**
- **Complaining – Philippians 2:14**
- **Lying – Proverbs 12:22**
- **Crude Humour and Language – Ephesians 5:3-4, Colossians 3:8**
- **Deceit, Cursing and Bitterness – Romans 3:13-14**

So, our words are powerful, and all too often that power leads to death - because none of us are perfect, none of us, as James reminds us in verse 8, none of us can tame the tongue, it is a runaway fire, it is a viper waiting to strike with its poison.

But not only does it affect others' lives, it affects our lives; the words we use can have a powerful impact upon the course of our own lives, upon the actions we choose to take. That rash word, that flippant comment, which lead to that argument, which then shaped the months and years to follow. Truly the tongue, truly our ability to communicate has have power and too often that power etches wounds, scars, and unhealthy patterns of thought and behaviour into our lives and the lives of others'.

I've spoken at The Guild about my call into ministry, which came upon me at the age of 20, at that time into youth work, and so I left the study of chemical engineering. Fast forward six years, I'm was working as a youth pastor in a church and things seemed to be going well, though there were the usual challenges...

And one morning I'm called in to find out that my contract is not going to be renewed at the end of the year. I'm being encouraged and "freed up" to explore a broader call, rather than singularly to young people. It's meant to be supportive and done in a timely manner such that I can explore options, but sadly, for a variety of factors, those words, at that time, lead me to have a touch of depression, and I avoided youth ministry after that job for three years – I just couldn't it, it was too painful.

Words have power and they can set the course of our lives and the lives of others, for our words, our tongues, have the power of life and death. I think we all know this to be true, I think we can all resonate with what James writes. So, I want to talk about two responses to this issue.

The first response, is: how should we use our tongues?

Yes, it can lead to death, but it also has the potential to be life-giving, so how can we lean-in to that? What wisdom does God have for us that we and others might know life through our words as well?

We've seen in James in previous weeks, that he has some wisdom to pass on, wisdom that is quite easy to gloss over.

He said earlier: 'My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...' (James 1:19)

We know this sentiment, we've probably heard it many times. At present, I'm working through some pre-marriage material with two couples...

who will be married in the coming months. What's striking so far in the material is that it really does try to put this verse into practice. It gives tools to the couples so that they can slow down their responding, whether it be anger, or defensiveness, so that their response does not lead to rash words nor block effective listening, listening that is full and deep. But it is easy to gloss over James' encouragement here to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry; yet if we put them into practice they can be life-giving.

I said at the start of today's message that I'm one year into ministry here at Brightons, in fact one year into full-time ministry at all. That means I've got a lot to learn, it means I'm going to make mistakes. It likely means that I will communicate things, which in principle I stand by,

but which I also don't communicate clearly enough or in the best way. Personally, I appreciate that you have been slow to speak and slow to react, especially if you feel loss as things have changed in the past year. I hope you'll continue to be like that and not jump to conclusions about my motives, about what I might be saying or might not be saying. Can I also encourage you, if you are struggling, to come talk with me – I'm not looking for you to lambast me, or pin me against a wall, but come asking, "I wonder...?" Questions. I promise to be quick to listen and slow to speak. I've had a number of such conversations with folks already and I believe those times have been of benefit to us both.

But, whether we feel that way or not, let's heed this piece of wisdom, that our words might be life-giving.

We could also turn to Ephesians chapter 4 and explore the wisdom Paul shares there on the issue, for he says: ‘each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour...‘In your anger do not sin’: do not let the sun go down while you are still angry...Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs ...Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other...’ (Eph. 4:25-32)

This passage is chock full of wisdom: to speak truth; to be careful of anger; to only speak what is wholesome, to speak what gives life, which builds others up, and meets their needs. As such, there should be no talk...

which is bitter, or disparaging, but only that which is kind and compassionate, with a readiness to forgive, because none of us is perfect, we all stumble in many ways.

I suspect we've heard this many times, indeed the Church has apparently been teaching it for two thousand years, and yet folks like Henri Amiel, Swiss philosopher, poet, and critic of the 19th century said: 'In order to see Christianity, one must forget almost all the Christians.'

How terribly sad, and all because of the power of the tongue which can cause such harm, rather than foster life. But what if we took God's words more seriously? Might we see in our day a community where faith is vibrant and true, where there is an active love for neighbour, and where all experience the Kingdom of God

in our midst, such that the sceptics and the critics are encouraged **to wonder afresh about Jesus**, to wonder that maybe His claim was true, that He came to give life and life in all its fullness? Our words have the power of life and death, so will we heed the wisdom of God that we might be a community who is life-giving in our words?

But here's the rub my friends: even with all that wisdom, we cannot be that community in our own strength, and this is the second response we need to explore. **Jesus said**, 'A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.' (Luke 6:45)

The tongue has the power of life and death, and the extent to which we foster life or make way for death,

depends on our hearts. The mouth speaks what the heart is full of. The heart in this verse is the real you, the core of who you are, your nature, your identity.

James said similarly in our passage today. He said that our tongue is ‘...a world of evil...set on fire by hell...It is a restless evil...’ (James 3:6, 8) Is that true?

Well, we’ve already seen in the words of Jesus, that the mouth speaks what the heart is full of – evil words, evil heart. The internal world of our soul, of our hearts, will flow into our words. So, James is 1 for 1 so far. What about James saying that the tongue is set on fire by hell?

Earlier I quoted from John chapter 10, where Jesus said that He came to give life in all its fullness. But earlier in that same verse, Jesus also said that ‘the thief comes only

to steal and kill and destroy'. He is speaking about the powers of hell and any deed, any word which leans away from life, may in fact be a partnership with the dominion of darkness. **Paul said:** "In your anger do not sin': do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.' (Eph. 4:26-27) It is possible in our anger, as Christians, to give space, influence in our lives to the devil, and he has used such footholds and open doors to wreak havoc, like a fire, upon the Church. So, yes, the tongue can often be set on fire by hell, and indeed to call it a restless evil, as James does, ties in with this, because restlessness is a readiness to break out and cause harm, and that is characteristic of the demonic whereas peace is characteristic of God and His good kingdom.

It is under such influence that the tongue can be led into duplicity as James outlined in his final verses today: of praising God yet cursing the one made in God's image, thus maligning the Creator Himself. As James says, this should not be, for we are meant to be like a fresh spring, life-giving, and by our fruit we will be known. Where there are bitter words, there is a bitter heart. Where there are defamatory or unloving words, then there is a heart where the love of Jesus is absent.

The heart is the real you, the core of who you are. So, if we want our power-laden words to speak life rather than death, then the heart cannot be in league with evil and hell, instead it must have a different ruler – not ourselves, but Jesus, King Jesus. Because when Jesus comes into our lives,...

when He becomes our Lord and Saviour, then the heart changes. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: ‘if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here.’ (2 Cor. 5:17)

It was such an understanding that lead Paul to say to the Ephesians, in the very same passage we looked at earlier, he said: ‘...we are all members of one body...do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption...[forgive] each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love...’ (Eph. 4: 25, 30, 32; 5:1-2)

When we become that new creation through Jesus, when we realise that we are members of His body,...

when we realise that God lives in us and can be grieved, when we realise how greatly God loves us and such that it took Him to the Cross – well then, we truly are a new creation, we have a new identity within us which begins to change us from the inside out, for it begins to change our heart and from that changed heart comes a changed life both in word and deed.

Friends, our words have the power of life and death, and if we want to be a community who is life-giving in our words, if we want to be life-giving in our marriages and families and friendships, if we want to be life-giving in our places of work or leisure, then it begins with the heart, but you can't change your heart on your own, you need Jesus. So, it's good news that He's ready to help.

He's ready to step into your life, if you will but call upon Him and let Him rule in Your heart. He promised long ago through **the prophet Ezekiel: 'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.'** (Ezek. 36:26)

The Lord has been faithful to His promise, for in these last days He has sent His Holy Spirit, not just to be around us but to be in us, as Paul said, to take up residence and make our hearts, our bodies, a temple of His presence. By that Spirit we are made new creations. By that Spirit we grow in the likeness of Jesus, bearing the fruit of love and joy and peace. Friends, if we want our words to have the power of life rather than death, then it's time to humble ourselves, it's time to call upon the Lord for mercy and grace, it's time to be filled with His Spirit.

For Paul also **exhorts the Ephesians**: ‘...be filled with the Spirit.’ (Ephesians 5:18) The idea behind this phrase is that we are to experience the receiving of the Holy Spirit so that (in time) every part of our lives is permeated and controlled by the Spirit. This is not a ‘once for all’ experience, of which the early chapters of the books of Acts make clear. This filling of the Spirit is repeated a number of times with the early disciples, **for we read**:

‘All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.’

(Acts 2:4)

And then a little later on with the same people:

‘After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.’ (Acts 4:31)

The implication of Paul's words in Ephesians is that Christians are to keep their lives open to the repeated filling by the Holy Spirit. Notice too here in Acts, that this filling of the Spirit then lead to speech that was holy.

So, how do we do this? Well, it's just simple prayer. We don't have to make it overly complex; we pray simply that ancient prayer, 'Come, Holy Spirit.' And then we wait upon Him. We might sense something, we might sense nothing, but we pray it in faith as the Church has done for centuries, and then leave the rest to God.

Friends, if we want to be a community of life-giving words, then we must let Jesus change our hearts, and He does that by His Spirit, filling us afresh day by day, as we pray, 'Come, Holy Spirit, come.' So, why don't we do that just now. Let us pray.