

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
Paul Gunn, Pastor
A Way with Words Series

THE POWER OF WORDS

James 3:2-12

October 15, 2023

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I hope you enjoyed my messages on famous falls from the Bible. Coming up at the end of October, I will begin a series about finding your way back to Jesus. Be thinking now about who you might invite during those Sundays.

Today is the first of two messages called “A Way with Words.” I will be making three points today.

- Words direct.
- Words destroy.
- Words deliver.

1-WORDS DIRECT

SCRIPTURE: James 3:2-4

We 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. ³ When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ Or 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.

ILLUSTRATION: A “bit” is a piece of horse tack, which is a device or equipment used for controlling and communicating with a horse during riding. The bit itself is usually a U-shaped bar made of metal, rubber, or plastic. It fits in the horse’s mouth, between its teeth. The two ends of the bar are attached to the cheekpieces, and the cheekpieces are attached to the reins. When the rider pulls on the reins, the bit applies pressure to different areas in the horse’s mouth and head. For example, pulling gently on one rein can guide the horse in that direction, while releasing pressure or using a different rein can indicate stopping or changing gaits.

A boat's rudder is a flat or curved vertical surface designed like an airfoil to control water flow. It is located at the back of the vessel and is linked to the steering mechanism. By turning the rudder left or right, the water flow is redirected, causing the boat to veer in that direction. The rudder is designed and positioned to balance steering efficiency and maintain overall stability.

EXPLANATION: Although humans have learned how to master animals and maneuver large vessels, James reminds us that we often fail at keeping ourselves in check. Just like bits and rudders fight against elements of nature, we fight against our sinful human nature when we try to control our mouths.

ILLUSTRATION: On July 19, 1989, United Airlines Flight 232 suffered a catastrophic engine failure, resulting in the loss of all hydraulic controls. The plane was en route from Denver to Chicago with 296 people on board.

Without hydraulic controls, it was nearly impossible to steer the plane or maintain altitude. The crew had only engine power and the throttle controls at their disposal. The officers aboard the plane had to rely on verbal commands and coordination to manage the engines' thrust and attempt to control the aircraft. They enlisted the help of a United Airlines training instructor who happened to be on the flight.

The crew and the instructor communicated and coordinated their efforts with precise verbal commands to manipulate engine power on the left and right sides of the aircraft. By adjusting the power of each engine independently, they were able to achieve some degree of control and to crash-land the aircraft.

The incident was considered noteworthy for many reasons. In particular, the captain was commended for his cockpit resource management. He did not rely only upon his knowledge or expertise but utilized the ideas and skills of many people. Because of clear and effective verbal communication, the plane was directed towards the airport landing strip, and 184 people survived a crash that was thought to be unsurvivable.

APPLICATION: In the same way that Captain Haynes and his crew man-handled an out-of-control plane, we must take control of our speech. A bit does not just

make a horse stand still. A bit controls the direction a horse moves. In the same way, a rudder guides a boat to where the sailor wants to go.

When our emotions get the better of us, when we have been hurt or mistreated, it's easy to lash out and say ugly, hateful things. If we let them run loose, our words will be like a wild horse, stomping and running over everything in its path. Or they may be like a rudderless boat, aimlessly floating around with no purpose or plan. Or they may be like Flight 232 destined to crash and burn. But we have a choice. We can take a breath and think before we speak.

Proverbs 15:1 says, “*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*” Our words help de-escalate problems. Our words can help settle raging emotions. Our words can point the way and make our paths a little less difficult to travel. But we have to be intentional.

- Words direct. -- James also tells us that...

2-WORDS DESTROY

SCRIPTURE: James 3:5-8

Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶ The 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. ⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

ILLUSTRATION: A forest fire spreads through a combination of heat, oxygen, and fuel. When a fire ignites, it heats nearby fuel (trees, plants, dry leaves), causing it to release flammable gases. These gases mix with oxygen in the air and ignite, producing more heat and flames. The heat dries out more fuel, creating a cycle of ignition and combustion that allows the fire to rapidly expand and spread through the forest. Wind can also carry embers, helping the fire jump and spread to new areas.

Poison enters the bloodstream through ingestion, inhalation, absorption, or intravenously. Once inside the body, it is dispersed through the circulatory system.

As it travels, it damages organs and systems by disrupting their normal functions. James says that our words are often like a dangerous fire or deadly poison.

ILLUSTRATION: In 1994 in Rwanda, Africa an estimated 800,000 people were brutally killed within a span of 100 days. Although this nation was already torn by ethnic tensions, radio broadcasts and hate speech are said to have played a significant role in inciting the violence. Radio stations disseminated hate-filled propaganda against the Tutsi ethnic group, dehumanizing them by calling them "cockroaches" and encouraging listeners to murder. Much like the reign of Hitler, words played a significant role in the attempted genocide.

APPLICATION: Proverbs 26:20-21 says, *“Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down. ²¹ As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.”*

Like kindling, the words we say often seem so small, so unimportant. Just a tidbit of information here, just a phone call there, just a little gossip, just one cynical comeback. Before we know what we’re doing, the damage is done. Like a poison, what we speak in secret rarely stays that way. Our words can dismantle lives, break hearts, and ruin reputations.

Here’s a term I use that I want to share with you. When something sensitive is going on and you have to include other people, I suggest keeping the circle small. I’ve used that term numerous times, keeping the circle small. The more people who know something sensitive, the more the possibility for miscommunication and misunderstanding.

- Words direct.
- Words destroy.

3-WORDS DELIVER

SCRIPTURE: James 3:9-12

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and

salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

EXPLANATION: Throughout this passage, James has used examples that his audience would have known well.

They did not have cars, but they understood horses and boats. Many were probably farmers or fishermen who relied on such things to help them produce food.

They did not have electric heat and modern medicine, but they understood fire and how quickly it could get out of control. They knew about potions and how the wrong kind or the wrong dosage could make you worse instead of better.

They did not have a fast-food chain on every corner or a grocery store down the street, but they knew where to get food and drink. They understood that if they wanted fresh water, they did not need to get it from the Dead Sea or off the banks of the Mediterranean Sea. If they wanted figs, they looked for fig trees. If they wanted grapes, they looked for grape vines. They knew where to find the items they needed to sustain life.

In the same way that a spring delivers water and a fruit tree delivers fruit, our words have the power to deliver. Proverbs 18:21 says, *“The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”*

ILLUSTRATION: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a speech emphasizing the importance of racial equality and civil rights. His words continue to inspire generations and have been instrumental in advancing the civil rights movement in the United States.

Billy Graham, whose sermons led countless numbers of people to the cross, said that the words of a revival-meeting preacher were the catalyst in his spiritual journey and decision to become an evangelist.

Christian author C.S. Lewis at one time claimed to be an atheist. Yet his spiritual discussions with Christian friends played a pivotal role in his eventual conversion to Christianity.

APPLICATION: Dr. King, Billy Graham, and C.S. Lewis knew the power of words. Proverbs 10:11 says, *“The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.”*

Proverbs 12:18 says, *“The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”*

Every day, each word we speak delivers something to the person who is hearing it. Like fresh water and sweet fruit, our words can be encouragement, hope, help, love, peace, joy, and life to those within our audience. Or, like salt water or rotten fruit, our words can be negative, condemning, condescending, and critical. We can speak life, or we can speak death. The choice is up to us.

- Words direct.
- Words destroy.
- Words deliver.

INVITATION: Like every other good gift that we have in our lives, our ability to verbally communicate with one another comes from our Father. As such, he wants us to be good stewards of all that we are given.

- Do you think about how you steward your words?
- Do you think about who they are directed at, and what direction they point the listener?
- Is your tongue like a wild beast destroying everything in its path?
- Do you even give your conversations any thought at all?

The Bible has a lot to say about the power of our words. The best delivery of words known to man is that Jesus came to save sinners from our own sin and the wrath of God. The apostle Paul says in I Timothy 1:15: *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.*

The altar is open if you want to come forward and pray.

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn
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