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Jas 3:1–12

James begins chapter 3 by warning believers not to be too eager to become teachers. In the early church, teachers had an important and respected role because they were responsible for explaining God's truth and helping others grow in their faith. Because teachers use their words so much, they carry a greater responsibility. The more influence and knowledge we have, the greater our responsibility to use them well. James reminds teachers that they will be judged more strictly because their words can influence other people's understanding of God and how they live. James isn't saying that people who are called and gifted to teach shouldn't teach. Rather, he is warning us not to seek the position for the wrong reasons—such as status, recognition, or influence—without understanding the responsibility that comes with it. Ultimately, those who teach God's Word must make sure their lives match what they teach. It isn't enough to know the truth or speak the right words; we need to demonstrate that truth through the way we live. This connects directly to the larger message of James 3: our words carry tremendous influence, and the greater our influence, the greater our responsibility to use our words wisely.

While James begins by talking about teachers, I don’t want you to hear this passage and say, ‘Well, I'm not a teacher, so this isn't really about me.’ Because whether we realize it or not, we're all teaching someone. Our children are learning from us. Our friends are learning from us. Our coworkers are learning from us. People are watching how we respond, how we speak, how we handle conflict, and how we talk about people who aren't in the room. Whether we intend to or not, our lives are teaching a lesson.

Sometimes one sentence of encouragement can change the direction of someone’s day—or even their life. A child who constantly hears, “I’m proud of you,” may grow up with confidence. A person who is struggling may keep going because someone reminded them that their life has value. Someone who feels like giving up may find the strength to try one more time because another person spoke hope into their situation. But words can also tear down.

Most of us can probably remember something someone said to us years ago that we wish we could forget. Maybe someone told you that you weren't good enough. That you would never amount to anything. That you were a disappointment. Maybe someone laughed at your dream, questioned your abilities, or constantly pointed out your failures. And the painful thing about words is that once they're spoken, you

can't simply take them back.

I had physical wounds as kid, of which they healed, and the scars, for the most part, have faded. But words can remain in our minds long after the conversation is over. We can find ourselves replaying what was said. We can begin to believe the things that were spoken over us. Someone else's opinion can become the voice we hear in our own heads. That is why words matter. Words are not just sounds that disappear into the air. Words have the ability to influence how people see themselves, how they see others, and even how they see God. And if we're honest, we've probably been on both sides of this. We've all had words spoken over us that gave us life—and we've also spoken words that wounded someone else.

On October 17, 1947 a fire was discovered near a cranberry bog on Mount Desert Island. No one knows exactly what started it, but they believe it was from either a cigarette, or a piece of broken glass focusing the sunlight. Whatever the cause, it started with something incredibly small. At first, it didn't look like much. For the first few days, the fire remained relatively contained. But then the conditions changed. Strong winds came through, and that small fire suddenly became something much bigger. By the time it was over, more than 17,000 acres had burned, hundreds of homes had been destroyed, and the fire had become

an international news story. Think about that for a moment. Something that began so small eventually became something enormous. That's a picture of what can happen with our words. As James states in James 3:5–6 “So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.”

Sometimes we think, “It's just one comment.” “It's just one joke.” “It's not that serious.” “It was only one angry response.” But sometimes one little spark is all it takes. One word can start an argument. One criticism can become a wound. One piece of gossip can damage someone's reputation. One harsh sentence spoken to a child can become a voice they carry with them for years. And just like a spark needs fuel in order to become a fire, our words can find fuel in someone's heart—fuel like insecurity, anger, hurt, fear, or resentment. That's why James takes the issue of our words so seriously. Because we may think we're only releasing a spark, but we don't always know what that spark will ignite. And just as a tiny spark can become a massive fire, a few words can have an impact far greater than we ever intended.

Scripture tells us that our words have power—not

because our words are magical, but because what comes out of our mouths reveals what is happening in our hearts and has the ability to affect the hearts of others.

As James continues in James 3:9–10 “With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.” Or Proverbs 18:21 says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”

That's especially meaningful for us on Thanksgiving weekend. Thanksgiving is a time when we intentionally stop and remember what we have to be grateful for. Some may gather around tables with family and friends, share a meal, and give thanks to God for His goodness. But perhaps Thanksgiving should also cause us to think about how we speak to the people sitting around that table, or those in our lives. Because James gives us an interesting challenge: How can we use the same mouth to praise God and then use that same mouth to tear down someone who was created in God's image? We can come to church and sing, “Thank You, Lord,” and then go home and speak harshly to someone. We can lift our hands in worship and then use those same hands to text words that tear someone down. We can thank God for His blessings while complaining about the very people He has placed in our lives. James is reminding us that our worship isn't only about what

happens when we're gathered together in church. Our worship also shows up in the way we speak to one another.

The same tongue can encourage or discourage. It can heal or hurt. It can restore or destroy. It can speak hope into someone's life, or it can reinforce the very lies they've been fighting to overcome. As James finishes off verse 10 “My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.”

As school teachers, one of the ways they sometimes demonstrate the power of our words to a class is by taking a tube of toothpaste and squeezing it all out onto a plate or a piece of paper. Then we ask the students a simple question: “Now, I want you to put it all back into the tube.” And, of course, they quickly discover that it’s not so easy. They might try to scoop it up with their fingers. They might try to push it back into the tube. They might laugh and say, “This is impossible!” And that's the point.

It only takes a few seconds to squeeze that toothpaste out, but putting it back where it came from is a completely different story. Our words can be the same way. Before we speak, we should ask ourselves: “Is this something I really want to release into someone else's life?” It can take only a few seconds to say something hurtful. We can say something out of anger, frustration, jealousy, or even as a joke. The words leave our

mouths, and in that moment, we may think, “It's not a big deal.” But once those words are out, we can't reach into the air and pull them back. We can say, “I'm sorry.” We can try to explain what we meant. We can say, “I was angry,” or “I was only joking.” And forgiveness may be given—and thank God for forgiveness—but we still can't pretend the words were never spoken. Because words leave an impression. That child may remember what their parent said. That spouse may remember what was said during an argument. That friend may remember the words spoken when they were already struggling with their confidence. And sometimes, years later, those words are still sitting in the back of someone's mind.

As Christians, there is another dimension to this that we can't overlook. Our words don't just affect people’s opinion of us—they can affect their perception of Christ. People are watching how we live. They're listening to how we speak. They're paying attention to how we respond when we're frustrated, how we treat people who disagree with us, how we speak about others when they're not in the room, and how we speak to the people closest to us. And sometimes, our greatest witness isn't what we say from a pulpit or what we post on social media. Sometimes, our greatest witness is how we speak when we're angry.

Because if we tell people about a God who is loving,

gracious, patient, and forgiving, but our words are harsh, hateful, critical, or tearing people down, there can be a disconnect between the Gospel we proclaim and the life we live. Our words can either reinforce the message of the Gospel or contradict it. Someone may never open a Bible, but they may be reading our lives. They may never step into a church, but they may be listening to the way we talk. They may never hear a sermon, but they may hear how we speak: to our spouse, our children, our coworkers, our neighbors, and even, or especially, the person who has wronged us.

For some people, the closest thing they may ever get to seeing Christ is the way a Christian treats them. Our lives don't replace the Gospel, but they can either reinforce the Gospel we proclaim or contradict it.

And that's a sobering thought. What if the words we speak are one of the ways people decide what they believe about the God we serve?

That doesn't mean we will always speak perfectly. We're human. We will make mistakes. There will be times when our frustration gets the better of us. But when we do fail, our response should also point people to Christ. We should be willing to say, “I was wrong. I'm sorry. Please forgive me.” Because even our apologies can be a witness. The goal isn't simply to learn how to speak nicer words. The goal is to allow Christ to transform our hearts so that what comes out of our mouths reflects

who He is. As it says in Matthew 12:36–37 “I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”” Speech is a barometer of spirituality, for it reveals what’s in the heart.

When your children hear you speak, what do they feel? When your spouse hears you speak, do they feel loved or belittled? When your friends hear you speak, do they feel encouraged or judged? When someone who is struggling comes to you, do your words point them toward hope—or make them feel even more hopeless? And when you speak to yourself, whose voice are you listening to? Because sometimes the most destructive words aren't the ones someone else speaks to us. They're the ones we've started speaking over ourselves. “I’m not enough.” “I’ll never change.” “God can't use someone like me.” “I've messed up too badly.” “There’s no hope for me.”

But those statements don't have to have the final word. Because as powerful as human words can be, God’s Word is more powerful still. People may have spoken rejection over you, but God speaks acceptance. People may have told you that you are worthless, but God says you are created in His image. People may have reminded you of your failures, but God offers forgiveness and restoration. People may have told you

that your story is finished, but God is still writing. Words have power, but there is greater power in allowing God to transform the heart from which those words come. If we want different words to come out of our mouths, we need more than a vocabulary change. We need a heart change. James tells us what comes out of the mouth. Jesus tells us why it comes out of the mouth. Matthew 12:34 “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” The tongue is the symptom. The heart is the source.

So the question shouldn’t just be, “Are my words hurting people?” But also, “When people hear my words, do they hear something that points them toward Jesus?”

So this Thanksgiving, don't just count your blessings. Speak them. Tell someone you're thankful for them. Tell someone you're proud of them. Call that friend you've been meaning to call. Encourage someone who has been struggling. Forgive someone who has hurt you. Tell someone what they mean to you while you still have the opportunity. Because one day, the people sitting around your Thanksgiving table may not all be there. Don't assume they know. Don't just feel gratitude. Speak it. Don't just thank God for the people He's given you. Thank them. And don't just count your blessings. Be a blessing with your words. Because they are not just people around your table. They are people

made in the image of God. As we thank God for all He has given us, let's not overlook one of His greatest gifts—the people He has placed in our lives. And let's use the gift of our words to remind them how thankful we are that they are there. Our words reveal our hearts, influence the people around us, and are part of our witness for Christ. May we always be people pointing others towards Christ. Lord, let the words that come from our mouths be words that reflect the heart You are creating within us.