

“Directed by words”

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James 3:1-10, Mark 8: 27 - 38

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.” The words of the Psalm!

We are saturated with words. You may have been confronted by words, encouraged by words, challenged, questioned, affirmed, disturbed, enlightened and more - all by words.

Like me, you may have heard bitter and disturbing words of protesters and politicians. You may have heard the words of world leaders speaking about calamity or significant events and either cringed or felt comforted. Words have much power. Words have been used to bring about great change.

In Hebrew, the term “dabar” means both “word” and “deed.” So, to say something is to do that. To say the words, “I love you, I hate you, I forgive you” are not just ideas. They do things - hard to measure exactly what they do, but whatever it is, it can't be undone. Something within a person is given shape and existence through our speech, tossed like a stone into the pool of history where the ripples radiate out, traveling far from where they were cast.

Words have power, words cause action, words create action. In the language of Genesis, when God said, “Let there be light,” there was light.

In the poetry of Psalm 19, the heavens **tell** of the glory of God, day to day pours

forth speech, the night declares, the voice goes out, words to the end of the world.”

And what effect do these words have, what deeds do they do?

- the law **revives** the soul
- the decrees **make wise** the simple
- the commandments of the Lord **enlighten the eyes.**

These words have effect, they are action, they have power, these words of God. “More to be desired are they than gold, sweeter also than honey.” And God never seems to weary of speaking such words to us.

In a snippet of the words of Jesus, who is “the Word made flesh” from the gospel, Jesus, about half way through his ministry says to his disciples that he must suffer and be killed and after three days rise again. Words that must come to pass in painful history: word and deed together as one. But Peter opens his mouth to argue with Jesus. No, these words can't be right, no, there must be a better way, no it must be a mistake!

But Jesus word to Peter makes it clear there is no mistake - these words will come to be. He says to Peter, “get behind me Satan.” Strong words, mind your tongue words. Words can be creative and positive, building good things, bringing about good action, but they can also be wrong, destructive, damaging.

Turn the pages in your mind then, to the words of James, to the stern and colourful words of chapter 3. James begins his new train of thought with the confronting words, “let not many of you become teachers.” Teachers trade with words. Teachers communicate and pass on wisdom and instruction with words;

lives are shaped, thinking is developed attitudes informed and prejudices passed on.

I vividly remember the first time I spoke on this passage. I was completing the Lay Preachers course and needed to have my minister review a sermon. The opportunity fell in the middle of an evening service series that was running - and the passage I was allotted was this third chapter of James. I began preparation nervously.

Now let's see, verse one; "let not many of you become teachers." Well that was nearly the end of it!! A mark of stubbornness, or not listening perhaps - I kept at it. I'd also been in the teaching profession for a few years at that stage and I had seen something of the wisdom of this warning in schools.

It was very clear from the position I had as a year level coordinator that there were some teachers who would delight in crushing the fragile spirit of students they didn't like - and others who worked to do just the opposite.

And the tools used for these teaching tasks - the cutting sarcasm, or encouragement and affirmation, were words. James, it would seem, saw this happening among the teachers of the first & second generation of the Christian Church.

The opening comment about teachers could put everything which follows into perspective. Is it all about false teachers perhaps? Does the threat of greater judgement against them lie in the background of all the comments about bridling the tongue? My feeling is he has a broader audience in mind, but it's also sobering reminder, of the responsibility people in roles like mine

have and the care which we ought to take with our words. Yes, we all make mistakes, we are all sinners as Paul notes - we all have tongues that slip sometimes. But - take care!

So watching your tongue, says James is like bridling a horse or controlling the rudder of a boat. The ancient world was well aware of the need for that control. Writers spoke often of the mind or reason being like a rudder for the whole person or like a pilot. Our author is speaking about words, and communication generally. James, I think would not have liked the current fashion of the strident opinion writers and commentators of our day. I'm inclined to think that if he were writing today, the category "shock jock" would have been at the top of James' list of examples for how not to use the tongue.

If we use speech to attack and abuse, to gossip and malign, James has us in his sights. Perhaps that is the topic in view with the image of fire. James focuses on the act, the effect of the tongue. How many fights start just with a few words? How many international tensions are fuelled with over enthusiastic rhetoric?

James concern is all about how we relate to people and all about our attitude towards others. It's a spirituality which focuses on the importance of getting some basic things right. Without it, there will be discord and violence, like we see.

Taming our un-trainable tongue is about much more than learning to be tactful or to hold back expressing what we really think. It's an aspect of who and what we really are.

We are, in a sense, what we communicate.

James becomes clearer as we read on into the final verses. Do we bless God and curse people? You see, the problem with cursing people is not so much that they are made in the image of God - as if only the God aspect matters - but that to curse people runs contrary to the attitude of God and the good news of Jesus.

Like many in his day James is pessimistic about the chances of people being healthy communicators and he's realistic enough to say that we all make mistakes. This is another way of saying that we are in process, we make mistakes but we are not doomed to always make the same ones, we can bridle the tongue. The wisdom here is as relevant today as it was then. It's good to be reminded that communication does things to people, the givers and the receivers. Words make things happen, have real effect. Wisdom is about getting things together, seeing how they connect, and becoming more of a whole person.

Advice like this is good, but I would want to plead that there is more here than just a sterile set of sage advice for living a happy, well-adjusted life. For me, these words are part of a larger reminder that the way you and I speak, the way we act, the things our words bring into being, or the things our tongues cut down are our part of being a sign post pointing to the way of God's kingdom or away from it.

It's a reminder that my tongue and yours can point others to, or away from the way of Jesus. Our words will bear fruits, they may be signs of hope, of healing and of heaven. They might start fires of the Spirit that enliven or inspire or destructive fires that damage and consume.

For me, James words are hopeful. Hopeful that we, as Jesus' followers, can be in control of our words, that we can speak and live the things of God's way into being around us. Along with these writers, I'm hopeful that we too might join with the heavens and all of creation in telling the glory of God. Amen