

# “Speak Words of Love”

James 1:17-19, 3:2b-12, Deuteronomy 5:20, Proverbs 12:18, 15:4, 64:3, Philippians 4:8 & Colossians 4:6

Pastor James York

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**Prayer for Understanding** Gracious God please help us listen to your good news. Amen

A reading from James: **James 3:2b-12NLT** “If we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way. We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong. In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches. But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire. The tongue is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. The tongue can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself. People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. Sometimes the tongue praises God, and sometimes the tongue curses those who have been made in the image of God. And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my siblings, this is not right! Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water? Does a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? No, and you can’t draw fresh water from a salty spring.”

“Wise people think all they say, fools say all they think.” A school teacher sent this note to all parents on the first day of school: “Dear parents, If you promise not to believe everything your child says happens at school, I will promise not to believe everything they say happens at home.”

The words that roll off our tongues have tremendous power. My third grade teacher was Mrs. Zuber. Whenever I was struggling academically, she would gently place her hand on my shoulder kneel down and say, “I believe in you. You can do it. You are smart.” It was after a year with Mrs. Zuber that the state education assessors first noted that I may be intelligent enough to complete grade school.

Conversely, I have also wasted a tremendous amount of energy by letting negative words hurt me. It is challenging for many to realize that negative words are most often spoken because the speaker is struggling with something and have little to do with the target of those words.

**Proverbs states: Proverbs 15:4 “Gentle words bring life, healing and health; a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.”**

Science has discovered that our entire physical being reacts and responds to words of care and words of condemnation. A word activates 24,000 tiny nerves in our ear which react through the limbic system and results in the pituitary gland sending hormones into the body. When we hear harsh or painful words, the physical-chemical reaction they produce takes three days to subside.

The Bible has 137 illustrations of the tremendous power of the tongue. Cruel, hateful, and careless words are described as great evil, that take away life. The psalmist illustrates, **Psalms 64:3 “They sharpen their tongues like swords and aim their words like deadly arrows.”** Contrarily the tongue also can bring healing, life, community and understanding. The presence and power of God among us was symbolized by tongues at Pentecost.

**Proverbs states: Proverbs 12:18 “Some people make cutting remarks, but the words of the wise bring healing.”**

Today we are awash with words. Words thought, spoken, and in media. James has timeless advice for us. Be aware of the power of the tongue. What we listen to, read, and think shapes us. What we speak reveals our heart and has the power to do tremendous good or harm. James says the tongue is like a bit in a horse’s mouth. A bit weighs only a few ounces yet controls the direction and speed of a horse that may weigh over a ton. The tongue is like a rudder on a ship. The wind, waves and current can all work together to send the ship in a different direction yet the rudder overcomes them all. We need to be aware of how what we listen to influences us and how what we say influences others. A single careless word is like a spark that can burn down and destroy an entire forest. All the life, animals, and beauty can be burned by a single spark, a single word. Your tongue has tremendous power. You can create life by what you say. You can destroy life by what you say.

The power of the tongue goes way beyond our daily speech. The tongue proliferates in many forms. How you vote, what you write, what you buy, where you get your media from and the shows you watch effect you and the entire world. Words shape our world and determine how money, education, health care, and resources are distributed.

A mere email can be read by millions. Your purchases speak volumes about you and shapes everyone's future. Do you buy products that are green, made by ethical companies, that pay fair wages? Do you support media that educates and portrays both sides of the issue or do you support media that is sensational, entertaining, and spreads fear? Do you watch shows and movies that portray community and goodness or division and destruction? Politicians, companies, the media, the entertainment industry for the most part all respond to your tongue. They are all pursuing your support, your dollar. Our small decisions, our small movements of our tongues, get combined with others and add up and speak to the world on our behalf.

James says: **James 3:9 “Sometimes the tongue praises God and sometimes the tongue breaks out into curses against those who have been made in the image of God.”**

James is urging us to make wise choices with our tongue to bring about goodness and wholeness. James wrote a few verses earlier. **James 1:17-18 “Whatever is good and perfect comes to us from God above, who created all heaven's lights. Unlike them, God never changes or casts shifting shadows. In God's goodness God chose to make us children by giving us God's true word. And we out of all creation become God's choice possession.”**

Our tongue is to be a conduit of God's true creative word bringing healing, life, goodness, wholeness, love, and joy to all people. We are to set no bounds on our creative love just as God set no bounds on God's creative love.

Pastor Ronald Allen wrote, “We should use the tongue in ways that serve God's purposes. God's speech in Genesis 1 is the paradigm for the positive use of human speech. When God speaks, the world as we know it comes into being as a true community in which all elements have the chance to be fully what God created them to be and to live together in mutual support and encouragement. God creates the human being in God's own image, which means that we are made to do in our spheres what God does in the universal sphere, namely, help all elements of creation live in mutual encouragement and in such a way that all experience abundance. When faced with another human being or a group, you have the opportunity to speak a word that will help that person or group experience as much fullness of identity and community as they can. I know it's hard, but perhaps you can stop and think, “What can I say...to my child...to my partner...to my spouse...to my neighbor, or colleague, or student or parishioner...or to someone I meet in the grocery line or in the bar or at the game, what can I say that has a chance of helping them experience the sense of love, affirmation, possibilities for growth and participation, and being a part of the great belonging that God wants for all?”

Our scripture present us with a choice every time we speak a word. We can either bless God or curse God and those who are made in the likeness of God. Our tongue shapes the world in which we live. Reflect upon your speech. How can you speak more blessing than cursing? How can your tongue be more gentle speaking words that bring life, healing, and health instead of crushing the spirits of those around you?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* wrote, “The proper use of the tongue will result in beneficial fruits. Where the discipline of the tongue is practiced right from the beginning, each individual will make a matchless discovery. They will be able to cease from constantly scrutinizing the other person, judging them, condemning them, putting them in their particular place where they can gain ascendancy over them and thus doing violence to them as a person. Now they can allow them to exist as a completely free person, as God made them to be. Their view expands and to their amazement for the first time they see, shining above their fellow human, the richness of God's creative glory. God did not make this person as I would have made them. God did not give them to me as a fellow human for me to dominate or control, but in order that I might find above them the Creator.”

James urges us to make wise choices with our tongue. **James 1:19 “My dear siblings, be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry.”** The first step in controlling our tongue is being quick to listen. Listening to God's true word revealed in scripture, the beauty of creation and through people. Our listening is to be active, discerning, meditating until we can think God's true word in our thoughts and hear God in us and all around us. We are to fully listen to the situation or the person speaking; resisting the urge to speak. The apostle Paul puts it this way **Philippians 4:8 “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”**

Socrates recommended a three filter test of truth, goodness, and usefulness before one speaks. The first filter is truth: are you sure what you are about to say is true. Second is goodness: will the words you speak bring about some form of goodness. The third filter is usefulness: is the statement useful in some way. We are to be slow to speak as we are enlightened by God's true word and reflect on the impact of what we are about to say. Will our words bring healing, health, and life; if not, then listen some more.

Speak the truth. We are commanded. **Deuteronomy 5:20 NLT “You must not testify falsely against your neighbor.”** Any word spoken without verifying it is true is lying, testifying falsely. Forwarding any social media

without verifying the accuracy is testifying falsely. Any attempt to deceive or manipulate or exaggerate is testifying falsely. You have a responsibility before every word you speak to make sure it is truthful.

We are to be slow to get angry. Many times our words have more to do with us and our anger than with the person we are speaking to. Are we angry because we did not get a good night sleep or are not getting our way? Are we angry with someone else, God, or even ourselves? Anger and fear are close companions. Our fear of loss, security, or failure, our fear of those different from us or a new way of being or doing often produces anger and angry words. Angry words spout sparks that can quickly cause numerous deadly fires destroying friendships, marriages, churches, communities, and on and on. Ponder how your tongue says far more about yourself than those you speak about. What does your tongue say about you? Does it say that you are a person who needs to put others down in order to feel okay about yourself? Does it say that you believe you are better than other people? Or does it say that you are a person who knows themselves to be blessed by God, and who tries to use words to bless others as well? Do you passionately believe that change is needed? Most of the time that change starts with you. Most of the time positive transformational change is the result of loving, affirming, encouraging words. Control your tongue by being quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry

God has created us with the ability to be wise. God surrounds us with wisdom. Proverbs says that God sends wisdom to us and she calls out to us and begs us to listen. God has given us the ability to understand and make right choices. James suggests that if we can control our tongue then we can bring life, wholeness and completeness to ourselves and the world.

Your tongue through the words of prayer and worship can make Jesus more and more at home in your heart. As God lives in us, the tongue is tamed and controlled from cursing to blessing. Is your tongue constantly inviting God to take control of your life?

When you do speak, seek to choose words that build up the other person. The apostle Paul wrote: **Colossians 4:6 "Speak the truth in love". "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt"**. In those days, salt was the primary preservative. In other words, speak in ways that preserve all around you.

Those who are to be most aware of their tongue are teachers. All of us are called to be teachers. Jesus in the great commission commanded all of us to teach God's redeeming grace to all people. The tongue can be a destructive fire or a spring bubbling forth fresh water. Is your tongue burning down those around you or is God's wisdom speaking through you providing refreshment for everyone? Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry then speak the truth in love. **Proverbs states. Proverbs 15:4 "A deceitful tongue crushes the spirit, gentle words bring life, healing and health."** Amen