

The Difference Our Words Make

Jonathan Rue

James 3:1-12

05.10.09

'What Difference Does God Make?' Series

We've been doing a series called "What Difference Does God Make?"

SLIDE:
Series Graphic

And in this series, we're taking a look at the practical difference God makes in our real life. So we're going through the book of James and seeing the ways in which God makes a difference in our lives—beyond just believing in Him, but the places where belief translates into life change. Last week, Insoo Kim spoke about the difference faith and deeds make. And he talked about how important it is that we don't just have a faith in God, but that if our faith is genuine in God, it will translate into deeds, into action. And he made the point that actions speak louder than words. That the loudest proclamation we could make of our faith in Christ is to do something about it.

And so immediately after James makes this point in his letter, right after talking about the importance of deeds and of action in our spiritual life, the next thing James is going to bring to our attention is the importance of our words and our speech. Because to James, it's not the case that words are insignificant, that because deeds speak louder than words, that words are hollow and empty and meaningless. No. To the biblical mind, *words ARE action*, they are a form of action, just not quite as loud as a deed. But words in the Bible do something.

SLIDE:
What words "do"

Words are not just communication vehicles to relate facts, but words can also perform deeds. We see in Genesis 1, that the way that God created the universe was through speaking it into existence.

SLIDE:
Genesis 1:1-3 (TNIV)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

3 **And God said**, "Let there be light," and there was light.

SLIDE:

Genesis 1:6 (TNIV)

And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.”... And it was so.

SLIDE:

Genesis 1:9 (TNIV)

And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so.

SLIDE:

Genesis 1:11 (TNIV)

Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation”... And it was so.

Are you picking up a theme here? Each and every stage of the creation process is spoken into being, culminating with the creation of humanity,

SLIDE:

Genesis 1:26 (TNIV)

Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness”

And so God created the universe, and he created you and I, by speaking us into existence. God spoke and it did something. He spoke creation into existence. And so from the very start, the beginning of the Bible, we see that words do something. They're more than a blank description of fact, but they perform action.

And it is not only God's words that perform action, but he gave us the same ability to do things with words. And if we can do things with words, that means that we can do *good things* with words, and we can do *bad things* with words. We see a bad thing done with words right after the sin of the fall, when Adam and Eve rebelled against God by eating the forbidden fruit in the garden. When God comes into the garden, the very next sin that they commit is the sin of speech. We see this in Genesis 3:12.

SLIDE:

Genesis 3:12 (TNIV)

The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

So Adam uses speech to sin against God. He sins by shifting the blame onto Eve. “It's not my fault. It was her. Eve forced me to do it.” I'm not responsible. It's somebody else's fault. It's my parents' fault. It's the way I was raised. It was

the school that I had to go to. It's my friends that influenced me. Anybody else in my position would've done the same thing. When we shift blame onto others, we are sinning against God through speech.

And so we see that speech can be used both for good purposes but also for evil purposes. And this is why, when Isaiah the prophet is in the temple and sees a glorious vision of God and of God's throne and of angels calling out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory." Isaiah sees this and his response, immediately, is the uncleanness of his lips.

SLIDE:

Isaiah 6:5 (TNIV)

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of **unclean lips**, and I live among a people of **unclean lips**, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

When he catches a vision of God's glorious splendor and God's holiness, he is struck immediately with how unworthy he is because of his uncleanness of lips. He is not thinking, "Wow, I'm glad I stayed away from the big sins like murder and stealing and idolatry. Sure, I've said some bad stuff, but that doesn't really matter." No way, Isaiah knows that he has not used his words in a way that honors God, and that this is a big deal to God.

The apostle Paul echoes this. When Paul is explaining to us in Romans, chapter 3, how all of humanity, the whole world has turned away from God, and turned in rebellion toward sin. The examples he uses of how we have turned away from God are number one, in our speech, and number two, with our violence. Look at Romans chapter 3, verse 10.

SLIDE:

Romans 3:10-14 (TNIV)

"There is no one righteous, not even one;

11 there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.

12 All have turned away, they have together become worthless;

there is no one who does good, not even one."

13 "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit."

"The poison of vipers is on their lips." 14 "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

Paul then talks about violence. And so the two big examples that Paul uses to make a case that everyone in the world has sinned, he uses the examples, first of speech and secondly, of violence. So all throughout scripture, we see two things. First of all, that speech really is more than words; that words really do something. And secondly, that words can do things that are both good and evil.

Well, just a few years ago, back in the mid 1950's, linguistic philosophy began to catch up with where scripture has been for thousands of years. Up till that point, the predominant view in the philosophy of language was that the chief purpose of language, of sentences was to state facts and to describe things. And then a philosopher named John Austin gave the William James lectures at Harvard University on the title, "How to Do Things With Words." And this began a revolution in linguistic philosophy by introducing the concept of a speech act.

SLIDE:
"Speech Act"

And what a speech act is, is when language performs an action, when saying something is actually doing something. So, examples of speech acts are:

SLIDE:
Types of Speech Acts:

- **Promising**
- **Ordering someone**
- **Bequeathing**
- **Greeting**
- **Requesting**
- **Complaining**
- **Inviting**
- **Complimenting**
- **Refusing**

And it's not only in regular speech that we see all of these kinds of speech acts, but there are many biblical speech acts that the Bible records thousands of years before John Austin started talking about speech acts. Some of the biblical speech acts are:

SLIDE:
Biblical speech acts

- **Blessing**
- **Praying**
- **Encouraging**
- **Cursing**
- **Slandering**
- **Gossiping**
- **Lying**

And so today as we open up the book of James, chapter 3, James is going to bring to our attention how important our words are. That they are not empty receptacles of information, but they are hugely important because they do something. They are a form of action. I've called today's talk, "The Difference Our Words Make." Let's Pray.

TITLE SLIDE:
The Difference Our Words Make
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James 3:1-12
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'What Difference Does God Make?' Series

If you have your Bible, please open up with me to James, chapter 3.

SLIDE:
James 3:1-12 (TNIV)

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 We all stumble in many ways. Those who are never at fault in what they say are 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. 5 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 person, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by human beings, 8 but no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

9 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.

And so James is letting us know why our words matter.

SLIDE:
Why our words matter

That there are reasons why words are so important. And the first thing that he says is that words matter because they carry great responsibility.

SLIDE:
Words carry great responsibility

And so in verses 1 and 2, he talks about the responsibility of being a teacher. Using words as you lead people.

SLIDE:
James 3:1-2 (TNIV)

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 We all stumble in many ways. Those who are never at fault in what they say are perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

So he says that there is great responsibility with words, particularly when we are influencing other people with our words in leadership in the church. And so we should not presume to be teachers or preachers in God's church. Now why is this? How do we align this with Paul's mandate that we should eagerly desire the gifts of the Spirit in order to build up the church? Well there is a healthy desire to want to be used by God to bless other people and to extend the kingdom of God in the world. But James is saying that when you teach, when you speak the truth of God's Word to people in the church, that you are judged more strictly by God. We will be judged more strictly about how we are living out the truth of God's word. There is a connection here between the words that we speak and the life that we are living.

And so this is why there is a higher bar for leaders in the church. That if you want to step into leadership, there are more requirements for you. You do have a higher degree of responsibility to be living up to God's standard of holy living. Now of course, the standard of holiness is the same for all Christians. God calls everyone to holiness, which means a life that is lived in obedience to him. That is the standard for all Christians, but as we step into leadership and, particularly as we begin to teach others God's word, there is a greater responsibility that we actually are living a life that is faithful to Christ.

Now it's totally possible to not be doing this and to still be used by God. It's simply not the case that God would never bless your ministry unless you are living faithfully with him. Unfortunately, there is not a tight causal link between holiness and gifting. Between faithfulness and success in ministry. For some reason, God still blesses ministries that are led by people that are in sin. And there is great temptation to think that if my small group is going well, then it must not be that big of an issue to God that I'm getting drunk on the weekends, and looking at porn and have sex with my boyfriend.

Your small group may be going well, but what this text says is that you will be judged by God more strictly. You will be judged by God. And that's so much more terrifying than if other people really knew what was going on inside of us.

It's so much more terrifying that we might be judged more strictly by God for sins and disobedience in our life as leaders than if another person were to find out. And so this is why it's so important for us, as leaders, to really yield our heart and our full life over to Jesus and allow him permission to heal us, to bring full repentance from our hearts, and to reshape us into his likeness.

What James is not talking about is perfection because the very next sentence, he says we all stumble in many ways, even leaders. We all stumble in many ways. But, if you step into leadership and begin to teach God's word, if you begin to teach God's word in your small group, that is no light matter, but comes with more strict judgment on your life. And so James says that the way that we can begin to stop stumbling, to get our whole lives as he says, in check, is if we begin to get our tongue in check. He says those who are never at fault in what they say are perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. He is saying that the key to unlocking holy living, faithful, righteous, living before God, the key to that is in our mouth, with the words that we speak. Because this next point is that words have great power.

SLIDE:
Words have great power

And this again is something that the Bible speaks a lot about, like in Proverbs 18.

SLIDE:
Proverbs 18:21 (TNIV)
The tongue has the power of life and death

The tongue is among the most powerful instruments that God has given to you to affect other people's lives. And the strongest and most catastrophic example of how powerful the tongue can be, we saw in the last century with the rise of Adolf Hitler. Here was a man that was a poor student in school, was rejected by the college he wanted to go to because of his poor performance, and yet he was able through the power of his tongue to overthrow a government and rally together an entire country to wage war on the world. He was one of the greatest orators of the last century and he used his power for evil. And the destruction is beyond what the mind can comprehend. He was able to convince an entire culture that it would be acceptable and a good idea to eradicate an entire group of people, the Jews. Words have great power, don't they?

And the first way that James talks about the power of words is that he says that words can redirect your life.

SLIDE:
They can redirect your life

And so we see in verse 3, James uses the analogy of a horse bridle and a rudder steering a ship. Let's read.

SLIDE:

James 3:3-5 (TNIV)

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. 5 Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

So, he's using two illustrations to make the point that the tongue is very small in terms of its size in the body, but its influence and its power is huge. First of all, he says, look at a horse. A horse is way stronger than a human being, a horse is way larger than a human being, it's thousands of pounds, it runs faster, it can pull more stuff, and yet, when we put a small piece of iron into a horse's mouth and attach on to it some strips of leather, we can make that horse do whatever we want by a small flick of the wrist, we are directly the entire course of where that horse is going.

The ship. In the ancient world, this would've been the largest vessel that they knew of. It could take hundreds of tons of cargo, hundreds of passengers, and it had massive sails to catch the wind and propel it forward. But, then you stick a small piece of wood below the back of the ship and that small little rudder directs the course of the whole ship. In proportion to the ship, the rudder is miniscule, it's tiny. But if you've ever steered a sailboat, all it takes is the smallest, slightest movement of that small little rudder in the back and the whole ship turns.

James says that is what the tongue does in our lives. That our tongues have great control over the rest of our body. And we can redirect the course of our lives based off of how we begin to speak and how others speak into us. Think about your favorite teacher growing up in grade school or high school. Did you have that one teacher that spoke life into you and redirected you academic life? I did. Her name was Mrs. Horning and the class was Literature. I entered Mrs. Horning's class conceiving of myself as more of a math person. I didn't like English, I liked math. Mrs. Horning instilled a passion for literature in me and told me that I was good at it. That I had talent and insight into literature and that I wrote well. That changed my life. I became a Comparative Literature major in college, that's what I got my undergrad degree in. Mrs. Horning redirected my life by what she spoke into me.

I know that I had the great blessing of having parents that spoke life into me, redirected the course of my life based off of telling me that I was smart, that I was valuable, that I could do anything that I wanted to in life. When you have parents speak that into your life at an early age, you start to believe it. You start to conceive of yourself as being able to pursue whatever you want to pursue in life.

Words can redirect your life. And you have a responsibility even if you aren't a teacher on stage, you aren't a small group leader, you still speak into the lives of your family, the lives of your friends, and you do have the power to redirect people's lives by what you say.

I want to stop and say a word to you as a community, Joshua House. When I came to Joshua House for the first time 3 years ago, I thought that the service was cool, but there lots of churches with cool services. What struck me with astonishment about this place was the people of Joshua House and the culture. You are a people that are so devoted to Jesus and so radical in following after Him, that it was like a breath of fresh air to me. I was so used to fighting against the current of apathy, and the current of wanting everything that the world has to offer...and Jesus, that it had made me a bit cynical honestly, and jaded. And it is here in these relationships, that I have found such encouragement and passion in my own relationship with Jesus. Because you are a group of people that really love God and really want to serve him faithfully with your life. I love that most of the Tanzania mission team is made up of people from Joshua House. I love that most of the Amsterdam mission team is made up of people from Joshua House. I love that a significant percentage of the team going to North Africa are Joshua House people. This really is a radical community of people that are sold out for Jesus Christ.

That is who you are. And for those of you that have sensed God calling you to missions, God calling you to church plant. God calling you into pastoral ministry, this is a great community to grow in and develop in before you are flung to the far corners of the world.

And so there is great power in words to redirect life, but there is another side of the power of words. Words can not only redirect your life for good, but words can bring great destruction.

SLIDE:
They can bring destruction

And so James tells us in verse 5.

SLIDE:
James 3:5-6 (TNIV)

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 person, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

So James is switching illustrations now to talk about the destructive nature of the tongue, that the tongue is like a fire, like a forest fire, set a flame by a small spark. Now ancient Palestine was dry and arid in its climate, much like California

is today. And in the last several days, if you've been watching the news, there is yet another forest fire spreading throughout the hills of Santa Barbara that began small, but then winds kicked up and the fire quickly got completely out of control and burned many homes. And James is saying this is the kind of destruction that can happen with our tongues. That it can very quickly get out of control and grow larger than we ever intended.

So, when you speak a word against somebody. When you speak a small spark of gossip that tears somebody down to one of their friends or to one of your friends, then that begins to grow and they gossip and they tell others and you're shaping more and more people's minds against this person and shredding their reputation, slandering their character. And so what started a small spark, I just wanted to "vent", has grown into a forest fire that is destroying somebody's character. You start with a spark of anger at home with your husband or wife, with your girlfriend or boyfriend. You have a spark of anger, and you just fan those flames, you just speak it out, you just say whatever's on your heart, unfiltered and you just lash out at your spouse. And then they react back to you and pretty soon, what started as a small, silly little spark has grown into a category ten forest fire of conflict.

And James tells us that *destructive words corrupt the whole person*. Now why would he say this? Isn't he exaggerating? Well, many of you know this all too well. That someone spoke something to you in frustration about some issue, but it penetrated you to your core, and marred your whole concept of yourself, of who you are. When you were a child your parent told you that you were ugly. That you would never amount to anything. A bully at school told you that nobody likes you, nobody wants to be around you. You are different. Maybe a teacher, insecure about their own ability to teach, told you that it was your fault that you were failing in their class, and they told you that you were stupid. That you would never make it in college.

And it marked you, it shaped you. The way that you think about yourself has been shaped by words that others have spoken into you. This happens to all of us, to some degree. It is impossible to get through childhood without getting hit by the destructive arrows of negative words.

When we do this, James says, that it sets the whole course of one's life on fire and is itself set on fire by hell. Did you know that when you allow your words to bring destruction to tear people down, to slander people, to attack people with anger, that you are being used by Satan in the forces of hell. You are unleashing a little bit of hell on earth when you allow your words to perform actions of evil. You are releasing a little bit of hell into your family. You're releasing a little bit of hell into your marriage. You're releasing a little bit of hell into your own life when you speak ill of yourself. Some of you are so much harder on yourself, than you would ever be with anyone else.

And so James uses the image of a wild forest fire to demonstrate the great destruction that our words can have as well as how quickly we can lose control of that destructive power of our words.

And he goes on to compare our words to wild animals that can't be tamed. He says in verse 7 and 8.

SLIDE:

James 3:7-8 (TNIV)

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by human beings, 8 but no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

So, Siegfried and Roy might be able to tame some tigers, some crazy circus performer might stick his head under the foot of an elephant. Wild animals might be tamable, but the human tongue cannot be tamed without the help of God. Left to ourselves, we simply cannot gain control of our tongue. Maybe you've tried it, but it is so hard to reign in our tongue from speaking lies, from speaking gossip against people, to speaking anger over petty things, from speaking profanity and swear words when we are in traffic, from speaking lude, sexually inappropriate comments with our friends. It is so hard to speak only things that are right and true and godly and life giving.

Without God entering into our lives and getting a hold of our tongue, we will never be able to tame it. And without allowing god to enter our lives and quench the burning forest fire of words spoken against us, we might live for the rest of our lives under the lies and slander that people have spoken over us. The great news is that God has a word to speak over us, and his word is a word of affirmation. A word of love. A word of how incredibly valuable and gifted and wonderful you are.

And so James says that our words matter because words carry great responsibility because words have great power and lastly, because words bring praise to God.

SLIDE:

Words bring praise to God

James tells us this in verse 9.

SLIDE:

James 3:9a (TNIV)

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father

And so this is the greatest thing that we can do with our tongue is to praise our Lord and Father. We can bring praise and glory and honor and pleasure to God by our words and by our tongue. When we sing to God, when we pray to God, when we declare and proclaim how awesome and amazing and good He is. When we declare his attributes, when we declare our love for him. When we declare his sovereignty over the world to those that don't know him or acknowledge him, we bring praise to our Lord and Father through our tongue and our words. And yet we have just gone through a litany of all of the wicked ways that we use our tongues, all of the ways that we bring destruction, we bring hell on earth, we bring poison through our tongues in the words that we speak and then James turns and says, "and with it we praise our Lord and Father." There is a tension developing. And so James recognizes this and he is telling us the goal of our speech, what we ought to strive for is consistency with our words.

SLIDE:

The goal of our speech: consistency with our words

That we ought not to be doing both blessing of God and cursing of others. We ought not be praising God, but then destroying others with our tongues. We should be consistent. He says in verse 9.

SLIDE:

James 3:9-12 (TNIV)

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.

He is again drawing on provocative illustrations to prove his point. And so he says, "can fresh water and salt water come from the same spring?" Of course not! "Can a fig tree bear olives?" Of course not! "Can a grape vine bear figs?" Of course not! The fruit of a plant comes only from the plant that produces that kind of fruit. You can not get a piece of fruit from a plant that does not produce that kind of fruit. And so he uses that to say if we have salt water flowing out of us. If our words are destructive, are polluted, then how can we ever expect fresh water to come out of that spring? How can we ever expect the holiness and righteousness of Jesus Christ to really take hold of our insides if we do not allow the purity of Christ and the goodness of our speech come forth through our words on the outside.

The goal is that we might be a spring of freshwater that produces a flow of fresh water. That we might have a righteousness of Christ within us that flows out in the abundance of good, pure, holy speech from our mouth that is life giving, that has the power to summon life in others, and the power to redirect the course of

our own lives toward goodness and righteousness. And if we are to grow in our spiritual maturity, we need to bring together the consistency of our speech with our actions and our internal heart. It simply is not the case that you can grow in your faith and in your spiritual maturity in your heart, but never change your speech. But never change the way that you talk about other people. You never change the profanity in which you used in college. If that stuff does not begin to change, you will stunt your spiritual growth, because saltwater is not going to flow out of a freshwater spring. And so if you find saltwater flowing out of your mouth, it is a sign that there is some salt in your spring. That you do not have a pure spring of freshwater, of the righteousness of Christ in you if it has not come forth in your speech.

The Difference Our Words Make

Jonathan Rue

James 3:1-12

05.10.09

'What Difference Does God Make?' Series

What words “do”

Why our words matter:

Words carry great responsibility (v. 1)

Words have great power (v. 3-8)

They can redirect your life (v. 3-4)

They can bring destruction (v. 5-8)

Words bring praise to God (v. 9)

The goal of our speech: consistency with our words (v. 9-12)