

The letter of James, the brother of Jesus, is very practical, as we have seen over the last few weeks. It gives us a picture of how a Christian life should look like. It is covering all kinds of subjects, such as faith and deeds, no favouritism in church and in our chapter today: how and what we speak. James gives us quite a lot to think about! He says things in a very straightforward way as well. Remember: he is speaking to Christians, those who confess that they belong to Jesus Christ.

Some people have said in the past: the letter of James is very legalistic, it's about rules for living as if we can earn our salvation by works. Paul is different, they say, because he emphasizes salvation by grace and that works don't count. Pieter explained this a number of weeks ago, when we started our series on the Book of James. But there is no contrast between Paul and James, they just emphasize different things. James speaks to Christians, to his brothers and sisters in Christ. And what he does is painting a picture of a Christian lifestyle and urging his readers to take their confession of faith seriously in everyday life. Paul emphasizes that we are saved only by grace, but ... he also always adds some very practical guidelines at the end of his letters, how to work out in practice what it means to be a follower of Christ.

So the passage today is one of those practical passages Christians have to take to heart if they really belong to Christ. It's about speaking, about the words we use and how powerful words are. In verse 2 James admits that we all make mistakes in our speaking. We all say things we shouldn't have said. That's very realistic. James then goes on, in verses 3-6, to explain how powerful the tongue – that is our words – is. What comes out of our mouth has an effect we often do not realize. The effect can be either good or bad. In any case: words have power, it's not 'just words'. You can harm someone by what you say, or you can bless them.

It's hard to forget nasty things people said to you, isn't it? And think about yourself, your own words... How many times have you said to yourself: 'Oh dear, I shouldn't have said this!' And how many times have people said something really nice to you? You don't forget that... I guess you remember the negative things you or someone else said better than the positive ones. Nasty things people say to us stick with us and it's very hard to forget them.

James makes three comparisons when he speaks about the working of the tongue/the effect of our words. He mentions three things that are small, like the tongue is, but have enormous power and can direct the whole course of life.

1. Look at a bit in the mouth of a horse, James says. It is small, yet it controls the whole animal.
2. Look at a rudder on a ship. It is small, but directs the very direction the ship goes. And for both examples we can think of the disastrous result if they are *not* directed well – the horse can ruin anything, being uncontrolled, a ship can end up on the rocks!
3. Then there is the example of a wildfire – think of the big fires that destroy woods and forests. Such a fire starts with a little spark, but look at the effect!

Our words are equally powerful. They can produce good, healthy, uplifting things, they can destroy, making someone miserable and unhappy. They can even destroy people. I was thinking of what people put on Facebook or Twitter, or whatever people use to communicate. There are dreadful examples of how people have ruined others just by writing negative, destructive, threatening things about someone else. Victims of this even consider or commit suicide. Can we still say: Oh, it's only words, they don't harm?!

James also mentions how inconsistent our words can be, see verses 9-10 – praise God, the Father and curse his children, made in his image? Where does that come from? What is in our heart? If the source is good, then what comes out of us should be good as well.

Words have power, we saw. How much power, politicians know! For us, the hearers of political debate, the question comes up where truth is found. Is anyone reliable – in word and deed?

I suddenly realised how important words are. I found many sayings about speaking and using words in the Book of Proverbs (look at Proverbs 10:11, 18, 21; 11:13; 12:18). That book contains much practical wisdom, just as the Book of James.

This leaves us with a challenging question: do we speak words of life, or words with disastrous results? Who can ever be completely good in what they say? This question reminds me of the prophet Isaiah. When he saw the holiness of God (Isaiah 6) he cried out: 'Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips...' When we start seeing things in God's light, we suddenly realize how unworthy we are to enter into God's presence. We realize how many times we failed in what we said...

However, Isaiah's problem is solved by one of the seraphim (a kind of angel) going to Isaiah with a live coal... He touches Isaiah's mouth 'and says, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.' In this way, Isaiah was free to deliver God's message to his people, to pass on God's words that bring life! God himself intervenes and gives Isaiah what he needs, so that he can speak God's words!

These words from Isaiah give us hope: God is the One who can forgive our sins. In the New Testament we read how Jesus made atonement for our sins. That also applies to the 'sins of the tongue', things we have said which we shouldn't have said, things we regret saying. God is also the One who can help us to say things that are good and true and reliable.

Let us look at Jesus, the Son of God, and notice how He spoke and acted. Jesus was completely reliable in what He said and did. Everyone who met Jesus sensed that this Man's words had power. He never lied, he didn't manipulate people with his words, he didn't gossip, he spoke words of life. He healed people by his words and even raised Lazarus from the death with his word, because he had God's authority. When Jesus spoke, there was hope for the hopeless, healing for the wounded, life for the dead. In 1 Peter 2:22 we read: Jesus ... 'who committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth.' Jesus has shown us that it is possible to change things by words of life, words from God, words of healing and salvation.

And it is clear that as his followers, we can be expected to be people who also speak words full of love and compassion in God's name.

James has pointed out very clearly how important our speech is, how far-reaching our words. But when we feel the negative impact of some of the things we have said or others

have said to us, we may know that Jesus' words of forgiveness are also true for each one of us.

So, there are three things to consider after having reflected on the theme of 'words' and 'speaking':

1. Let us pray with Isaiah: Lord, I am unclean of lips, but in Jesus' name I ask for forgiveness. Make me clean in what I say and do.
2. Let us pray for the Lord to heal our memories of painful words spoken to us.
3. And let us pray for the Lord to guide us in our speaking – for the glory of His Name!

Proverbs 10:11 reads: 'The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life...'

May the Living God, the source of all life, give us words that are bringing life to those we meet. Through the Holy Spirit God can do this work in us and through us.

'Take my voice, and let me sing
Always, only, for my King;
Take my lips, and let them be
Filled with messages from Thee.'

Amen