

## TURNING THE CASUAL INTO THE ACTUAL

### Part V: Molding Changed Lives through Words James 3:1-12 (NLT)

*Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:17)*

One of the first American phrases I learned when I immigrated to this country was, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Basically what this phrase means is that what people say about me won’t affect who I am and how I perceive myself to be. I would rather get hurt physically than to believe what people negatively say about me.

The ironic thing about saying this phrase is that we speak it because people have hurt us with their words and we believed it. I remembered one American kid making fun of my ethnicity in fourth grade, pulling his eyes back supposedly to mimic my Asian heritage. And he was making strange noises, copying what he thought the Chinese language sounded like. I shouted this phrase at him and walked away, feeling proud of my accomplishment. But, I actually didn’t feel any better. What the kid said to me really hurt me. Saying the “sticks and stones” phrase did not encourage my spirit. I said the phrase because I was acknowledging to him that I was different than everybody else and that I wished I was not. The kid won because he got me to react in such an ugly manner; his words did in fact *hurt* me.

It is amazing how words can have a dramatic effect upon people’s lives. Many of us are who we are today because of the words that people had spoken about us in the past. Unfortunately, many of these words only promoted self-destruction within our very souls. Being called “fat,” “loser,” “amounting to nothing,” etc., shapes our identity that is far from the one God designed us to be.

James warns us over two thousand years ago the power that words have over our lives. Chapter 3, verses 1 to 12 says:

<sup>1</sup> *Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged by God with greater strictness.*

<sup>2</sup> *We all make many mistakes, but those who control their tongues can also control themselves in every other way.* <sup>3</sup> *We can make a large horse turn around and go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth.* <sup>4</sup> *And a tiny rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot wants it to go, even though the winds are strong.* <sup>5</sup> *So also, the tongue is a small thing, but what enormous damage it can do. A tiny spark can set a great forest on fire.* <sup>6</sup> *And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is full of wickedness that can ruin your whole life. It can turn the entire course of your life into a blazing flame of destruction, for it is set on fire by hell itself.*

<sup>7</sup> *People can tame all kinds of animals and birds and reptiles and fish,* <sup>8</sup> *but no one can tame the tongue. It is an uncontrollable evil, full of deadly poison.* <sup>9</sup> *Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it breaks out into curses against those who have been made in the image of God.* <sup>10</sup> *And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right!* <sup>11</sup> *Does a spring of water bubble out with both fresh water and bitter water?* <sup>12</sup> *Can you pick olives from a fig tree or figs from a grapevine? No, and you can’t draw fresh water from a salty pool.*

There are a number of spiritual principles to highlight here.

1. Our words and our actions are **intricately linked together**.

- We choose our words to explain what we experience in our relationships with people.

The words we use are often a reflection of how we relate to one another. The power of words goes beyond mere description. We use words to justify why we act in certain ways towards each other. I remember another kid in fourth grade who had trouble with his weight. Many kids would make fun of him because he was overweight. They would isolate him during lunch hour; nobody wanted to hang out with him. But, when it came time to play football this kid almost always became the first person chosen because he could block people effectively.

How we describe one another is an expression of how we deal with each other. We like to belong with those who are pretty and handsome because for some reason we believe that with looks come prestige and popularity. We stray away from ugliness because we deem that to be of no value to us. A father may call his son a “loser” because the son is not meeting up to the standards his dad had set for him. Let us not fool ourselves to believe that words are just words. Words are developed to project an image of what our relationships are to one another.

2. Our words have the power **to define a person’s identity**. (verses 2-5)

All it takes to direct a horse is through a small bit. All it takes to turn a huge ship around is a small rudder. Can you imagine what our words can do to shape a person’s identity?

- Words can influence the direction of a person’s life.

We seem to think that words remain bottled up in the context in which they were spoken. We like to believe that words cannot penetrate through time and impact a person’s whole existence. That is far from the truth. Isn’t it interesting that many events in life that have shaped us are based upon words that people have said to us? We may not remember exactly what we did fifteen years ago, but we remember that time when a teacher said we will amount to nothing. We may not remember exactly what our friends’ names were in grade school, but we remember when our mother repeatedly called us “stupid.”

The power of words can last for a person’s lifetime. The words we use to label others mold and define that person’s character and personality. Without knowing it we are shaping the destinies of people through our words. James aptly says it: our tongue may be a small piece of the human body, but it has the power to form a person’s identity.

- Words can determine a person’s future.

3. Our words have the power **to create damage exponentially**. (verses 5-6)

The power of our words creates great impact upon other people. We can clearly see this is a mathematical expression:

- $3 + 3 = 6$ ;  $3 \times 3 = 9$
- Our harmful words will be reflected in destructive behavior against someone else.

One spark is all it takes for a fire to consume a whole forest. The same is true with our words. Again, our words are not just words; they have the power to construct vicious implications upon a person's life. Our words can nastily chew apart a person's self-worth. More importantly, our words have the muscle to tear down one's identity in Christ Jesus. Be very sensitive to the power of words; it can either set people free or it can destroy a person's existence forever.

4. Through our words we have the power **to choose right over wrong**. (verses 7-12)

- Right and wrong cannot exist together at the same time.

It is common sense to know that a fig tree produces figs and not olives. It is a universal understanding that fresh water cannot be drawn from a salty pool. The same is true when it comes to our words. Our tongue cannot create words that are both right and wrong. It either produces words of encouragement or words of deceit.

- To choose God means to choose to have right relationships with others.

If we are to praise God that means our words and actions must reflect right relationships with others. To bless God with our words means we are also choosing to bless people with our words.

- To hurt people with words means we are also cursing God.

But, to destroy people with our words means we are also cursing God. Our words must choose what is right. Obviously this signifies giving our praise to God alone. But, our praise to the Lord must also manifest itself in loving words and actions towards others. For James these are one and the same. Hence, the last point is this:

5. Our words must choose **to shape and encourage** rather than **to hurt and destroy**.

- What words will you use to build up the person you may not like?

Focus intently on the words we use towards others. How can we turn what is evil into something that will set people free? Do our words manifest actions that strive for encouragement and hope? Remember that God calls his church to exist in active faith, a faith that brings transformation into people's lives. Many individuals are broken because of words that have deeply affected them all throughout their existences. May the words of our mouth offer healing and nurture to these wandering souls. Let us turn what is casual into something that is truly actual through the power of our words.

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