

The words we use

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

Won't they?

That's one of the things I was taught when I first went to school. I remember being told that when I was upset at something someone had said to me.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

Really?

Because I think society's attitudes have changed in the last fifty years or so, and we have come to appreciate the power of words. Perhaps now we should be saying that sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will give us worse pain than mere broken bones: Words will keep us awake at night, and make us feel small and inadequate and unworthy, words will drive wedges between us and our friends and family. Broken bones will be mostly healed in six to ten weeks, but the wounds caused by words can last years... or a lifetime.

The words we use – the words we choose to use – are important. Far more important than we generally give them credit for. Words can cut like a sword – but words can also build up and inspire and empower.

As we come to the third chapter of the letter of James, he has a lot to say about the words we choose. He talks about the tongue, but he's not just talking about what we say out loud – it's about all the words we choose – whether spoken or written.

He begins by saying “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” (3:1). That's not a comfortable thing to hear – I'm going to be judged more strictly. Yikes. Who would be a teacher?

But what James says here is for all of us, not just Lawrence and I who preach sermons on Sunday mornings. While people who preach have a particular responsibility for teaching the people of God, the responsibility for teaching goes beyond those people.

Do you lead prayers? Do you answer people when they ask why you go to church? Do you give your friends or your children or your grandchildren advice? Do you offer comfort to people you know who are sick? If you do those things, then you are teaching others.

James acknowledges that we don't always get it right – but when we are teaching (in whatever form that might take), we need to be particularly careful. In verse 2, he says “We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.”

Do you know anyone who is never at fault in what they say? I certainly know some people who do a lot better than others, but never at fault? Not really – except for one, one course. Peter (1 Peter 2:22-23) writes of Jesus “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

No deceit was found in his mouth. This is Peter, Peter who was called by Jesus, followed Jesus for years, walked with him, ate with him and talked with him. And in that time, there was no deceit – everything was right and true. It was certainly harsh from time to time (“Get behind me, Satan!”), but it was all good and loving.

Peter goes on “When they hurled their insults at [Jesus], he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” Jesus heard the insults and the mockery. As well as the words, he felt the sticks and stones of physical assault, but even so, he made no threats, no curses, instead, he prayed, his words, even as he was hanging on the cross were full of compassion and love for those who were hurting him, those who were mocking him, and those who had deserted him. “Forgive them, Father, for they don’t know what they’re doing”.

And the challenge that James has for us, is to do the same. It goes beyond not saying bad things. Will our words show our compassion for those who might hurt us? Our words are so often an indication of how we will act.

James tells us that the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. What we say has impacts far greater than the volume of our words. Just like a tiny spark can start a bushfire of great destruction, our words can do immense damage. But on the other hand, our words can do immense good.

He says that when we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. A horse is a big and powerful animal. I have been around horses and you can sometimes do what you want them to do... but if they don’t want to do it, you can’t physically push them around. But put a bit in their mouth and you can get them to move with just a touch of the reins. And you can get them to stop. And turn.

The same with a ship... the ships we have today are huge compared to the ships in the time of James, but the principle remains. Huge ship, small rudder... and a little bit of pressure on the rudder and the whole ship will turn. You can steer a large ship into a narrow docking bay. You can guide the ship through a raging storm. All with the careful use of the rudder.

These images are positive ones as James tells us that the tongue is like the rudder or the bit – and our words can be positive. I’ve certainly felt the positive effects of words in my life – and I’m sure you have, too. Words that people have spoken to you – that have changed your life in some way. Perhaps words preached in church which have given you hope, or comfort or even healing, a friend who has been compassionate and loving – who’s contacted you in a time of crisis, or encouraged you when things are overwhelming, or has told you that they loved you, even when you felt unlovable, or reminded you of God’s good and everlasting promises.

And I think that last bit is particularly important as we read through the letter of James, because, as I said a couple of weeks ago, James is a very practical book: It’s a lot of what we should – and shouldn’t be doing – it’s about how we should be living our lives as followers of Jesus. It’s easy as we read James to forget about why we are followers of Jesus in the first place. We’re followers of Jesus, not because he will help us do all these things, or because he’ll be good to us if we do all these things, rather, we’re followers of Jesus because of what he has done for us. In his great love for us he died for us, and he calls us to follow him. And he loves us, and welcomes us, even if we get everything wrong.

We need to ponder that we think about James’ instructions and his warnings... but we mustn’t ignore the instructions and warnings either.

Particularly his warning about our words, here: “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.” Powerful stuff.

Our tongue – our words – can create a world of evil. With our words we can lie, deceive, show-off, mock, ridicule, hurt, crush, belittle, cheat, and on and on. James tells us that our tongues have the power to corrupt our whole bodies.

The words that lead to violence. The words that lead to broken relationships. The words that lead to pain. All from words. Perhaps carefully chosen to do maximum hurt, perhaps spoken in haste. But all spoken. And once they're said, they can't be unsaid.

The tongue has the power to destroy a whole life.

Words matter. Our words matter.

We might say we need to choose our words wisely. And yes, maybe, but I reckon you can be very wise in choosing words that hurt. You can home in on just the right nerve to touch. Or just the right insult or put-down.

So instead of choosing words wisely, I think we need to choose them faithfully. And graciously.

Of course, sometimes we will need to point out errors – when people are doing the wrong thing we will need to admonish them, and that is a good and faithful thing to do. But we must be careful. The best advice I've received about criticising people is this: Don't enjoy it. If you're taking pleasure in correcting someone else, or taking pride in how much better than them you are, then you're doing it wrong. You're putting them down and building yourself up, rather than lifting them up.

We need to lift others up. That's what God wants. That's what Jesus did. As we are fond of saying in the modern church "Jesus ate with sinners". And Jesus chose his words he didn't say "You miserable sinners, how lucky you are I'm eating with you!" but he did tell people to "Go and sin no more".

None of us is perfect, of course. James tells us in verses seven and eight "All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

No human being can tame the tongue. None of us. We can all be driven to saying the wrong thing – but for some of us it's an easier trip than others.

In verse 9 James points out that "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness." Not all of what we say is good, and not all of what we say is bad. There is always going to be that tension within us – he continues – "Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."

We say good things and bad things. We do good things and bad things. Good and bad can't be together. You can't get fresh and salt water from the same spring. You can't get olives from a fig tree or figs from a grape vine. You can't be good and bad at the same time. They are absolutely different.

If on Sunday morning in church we're singing songs of praise and enjoying fellowship together, but on Monday, we're complaining about how the person next to us in church wasn't singing very well or very loudly or arrived very late or didn't bring any food for Exodus. That's the wrong

thing to be doing. James says: This person, this person who you are criticising, is made in God's image. If you speak badly of them, aren't you also speaking badly of God?

Ultimately, as God's people, people who know and love and follow Jesus, we have to choose the good. Again it is a matter of speaking faithfully and choosing words graciously. Of speaking in a Godly way, because with the right words – with God's words, lives can be changed.

If you look at a fig tree, will you find olives on it? No.

If you look at a grape vine, will you find figs? No.

If you look at someone who loves God, will they be speaking hate?

We know that the answer to that last one should be 'No' as well. But we think we can come up with exceptions – we can hate injustice, perhaps. We might think that we can hate those who exploit others. Or the leaders of countries which invade other countries. Or pedophiles. Or murderers. Or perpetrators of domestic violence. Or those that don't pay their fair share of tax. Or shoplifters. Or people who park in disabled spots without the right sticker. Or preachers who go on too long. Or people who speed. Or people who haven't phoned you, when you phoned them the last two times you spoke. Or whatever it might be.

The truth is, as Paul says, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God".

We often say in our prayers of confession that "we have sinned in word and deed", but when we get down to it, they are the same thing. Our words are a deed. They are something we do – do with our tongues and our lips and our vocal chords. We might like to think that speaking ill of someone is better than elbowing them. But in God's eyes, both are wrong. As I said last week, if we go against God's law, then we are, we are lawbreakers.

Friends: Words matter. Words matter to us. Words matter to God. And the words that we use show what's in our hearts. Back in chapter one, James told us that we should be quick to listen and slow to speak. So let's do that: Let's be slow to speak. And let's choose our words faithfully and graciously, with love and compassion for those we are speaking to and those who we are speaking about. Let's use our words to build each other up, to heal and inspire one another, let's use our words as Jesus used words, always to the glory of God.

Amen.