**O Brother - Week 3 - Words**

**Series Big Idea:** James, the half brother of Jesus, shares wisdom on how to overcome challenges that can trip us up as Christ-followers and keep us from from growing to maturity.

**Message Big Idea**: Our words are powerful and reflect the depth of our maturity.

**Scripture:** James 3:1-12, Luke 6:43-45, James 1:19

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**Introduction: Words**

Lets start today with a little game. I’ll share some famous quotes and then you tell me who said them. Now, don’t just blurt out the answer. I’ll read the quote THEN I’ll ask, “Who said it?” and all of us can respond together. Sound good?

Let’s start with one from someone we like a lot around here:

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” …Who said it? *(All together)* That’s right, *(add)* Jesus

Great job! Let’s try this this one:

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of skin but by the content of their character” …Who said it? You got it! *(add)* Martin Luther King Jr.

OK, one last one:

“Yo, Adrian!” *(Say in your best Rocky voice)* … Who said it? Of course… *(add)* Rocky

Words can etch themselves into our minds.

Words can evoke images, emotions, and memories.

Words can inspire movements and shape history.

Words are powerful things packed with big possibilities.

For for good or bad… for healing or harm.

When I think of the power words, I think of those moments in my life when someone has spoken words of truth, hope, or encouragement. But I can also think of hurtful words I’ve received. Words that I’ve tried to forget. Words that are like unwanted stowaways sneaking around my brain.

Word’s like: *(build small word cloud)*

* “You’re not good enough.”
* “You’re a failure.”
* “You should quit.”
* “You have no business doing that.”

I also think of hurtful words I’ve spoken to others. Words I regret. Words that somehow now seem to hurt me in return.

Words are powerful. And sometimes it seems like we can’t control them… In fact, there are few things that are harder to control and carry more weight than our words. “Sticks and Stones” are the least of our worries. Which is exactly why what we’re talking about today is so important.

**Series Recap**

*(Series Graphic)* Today we’re continuing our series **O Brother**. Throughout this series we’ve been looking at a letter from the New Testament named after its author, James.

James was the half-brother of Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary. And during Jesus’ ministry, James thought that Jesus was a little out there. Now I personally think we should cut James a little slack. I mean, how hard would it be seeing the kid you grew up with claiming to be God? It would be a little hard to swallow, right?

But after Jesus’ death and resurrection, James was convinced that his half-brother was, in fact, God and so he became a key leader of the early church in Jerusalem.

In fact, James was so convinced of Jesus’ divinity that he was ultimately martyred for refusing to deny this belief. Historians tell us that in 62 AD the Jewish religious leaders tried to persuade James to recant. They took him to the summit of the temple and told him to deny Jesus. When instead, James gave testimony to Jesus, an enraged priest had him thrown from the temple. The crazy thing is the fall didn’t kill him, so they had him stoned to death. And at his death, he prayed just as his older brother had done: *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

Before his death, James penned a letter to the 1st century Christ-followers who had fled persecution and been scattered all across the region surrounding Jerusalem. He wanted these Christ-followers to flourish in their faith, he wants them to become *(“…so that you might be mature and complete…” –James 1:4)*  **“mature and complete.”** You see, James knows there are tons of potential pitfalls that can trip Christ-followers up and keep them from maturing. During this series, we’ve been examining five of these pitfalls, and today we're focusing on the pitfall of **Words**.

**Word: James 3:1-12**

Let’s turn to James’ letter, starting in chapter 3 verse 1. James writes:

**“Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 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.” -James 3:1-2**

Ok let's stop there for a minute. I think we all know that our words can have tremendous impact. Our words can influence and affect people in ways we don’t always see or understand. So right out of the gate James warns us that… **Words Can Be Problematic**.

Here’s the thing… every one of us will stumble with our words from time to time. I mean it’s inevitable that at some point we’re going to say something we regret. Who here will admit to being very skilled at putting your foot in your mouth? *(Show of hands)* Yeah, same here…

*(James 3:1-2)* Now, how many of you noticed the part about *“teachers?”* Some of us probably let out a small sigh of relief because we don’t really see ourselves as **“teachers,”** so we think this warning about judgment doesn’t apply to us. But I want to clarify something here.

You see, in James’ day the teacher was simply the one with a platform, and I don’t just mean like the one I'm standing on right now. ☺ A teacher is someone who gets to speak into the lives of lots of different people – not just their circle of close family and friends.

As I was thinking about that, I was struck by the reality that we all have a platform far more powerful than any that existed in James’ day. It’s called **social media**. Today, every single one of us has a platform we can use to speak into the lives of both friends and complete strangers.

Now, social media in itself is not bad, but it can be misused. Words can have destructive power online. Think about this: our words have become so pervasively problematic on social media platforms that we’ve actually had to create new words just to describe our “word problem.” Words like:

* Cyber-bullying
* Trolling
* White-Soxing – Which is the term for all those endless posts about the White Sox.

A decade ago these words didn’t exist and now they’re part of our every day language!

Words can be problematic. And just in case we aren’t yet recognizing the extent of their potential for harm, James continues:

**“When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 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. 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. 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. 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.” -James 3:3-8**

James wants us to see that **Words Can Be Powerful**. And to make his point, he uses a ton of imagery.

*“Improved” Option for the teacher: Have physical objects as props.*

*(James 3:3 and picture of horse)* First, James says words are as powerful as the small **bits** we put in the mouths of **horses.** How many of you have ridden a horse? Yeah, then you know just how big and powerful those animals are, right?

However even though horses are massive and strong, a small piece of metal called a bit, placed in the horse’s mouth over his tongue can control this giant animal. On the surface, this doesn’t seem to make sense. How can a small piece of metal be that powerful? But a bit is that powerful, James says.

And just in case we didn’t get the animal analogy, *(James 3:4 and picture of ship)* James comes at us with another example. He compares our words to a small rudder on a giant ship. As you think of this analogy, I don’t want you to picture a little paddleboat… think of an enormous cruise ship like the Titanic… or one of those massive oil tankers. Those ships are GIGNATIC!

In comparison to the whole ship, the rudder is very small. Yet, the slightest movement of the tiny rudder can mean the difference between cutting through the waves or crashing into a pier. James tells us that our words have the same power as that tiny rudder!

A word may seem small, but it can steer something big.

* One word can wreck someone’s **reputation**.
* One word can fracture a **relationship**.
* One word can destroy someone’s **career**.

Words are powerful!

But James doesn’t stop his imagery there… *(James 3:5-6 and picture)* he also says that our words are like **fire.** A fire that gets out of control quickly. All it takes is just one little spark to ignite a full-blown wildfire! Just think of some of the destruction we’ve seen by wildfires in California over this past year.

The same is true of our words. My guess is we’ve all been in situations where somebody says one little thing, then the other person says something back, and pretty soon... whoosh... people are getting burned all over the place.

Yet if the horse, the ship, and now the fire didn’t convince us, James uses one more image. *(James 3:7-8 and picture)* He says that our words are like a wild animal, and he picks a **poisonous snake**.

I don’t know about you, but I hate snakes! The thought of seeing a poisonous snake terrifies me. And I think that’s why James uses this image here. He wants us to have an emotional, visceral reaction to just how potentially poisonous our words can be! If we’re not careful with our words, we can easily find ourselves spewing venom on all those around us.

Our words are powerful! We all can be people who knowingly or unknowingly use words that:

* Hurt…
* Deceive…
* Insult and…
* Destroy.

And when we do, people get trampled, relationships crash, friends get burned, and all kinds of poisonous things happen.

Yet, even if we acknowledge the potentially damaging power of our words, it seems at times these words still slip from our lips. Why? James leads us to the answer. He writes:

**“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. 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.” -James 3:9-12**

What James is telling us here is that our **Words Can Be Revealing.** The type of water we find flowing tells us something about the spring. The type of fruit we find growing tells us something about the tree.

Our words put on full display what actually lies at their source deep within our hearts. Jesus, himself, taught us this when he said:

**“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briers. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” -Luke 6:43-45**

Our words reveal what is in our hearts.

All we have to do is stop and think about how this has played out in our own lives. We’ve all blurted something out in a moment of frustration that we would never have said otherwise. We all know what it’s like to immediately regret saying something as soon as it left your lips. We regret it because we know we hurt someone, but what both James and Jesus are telling us is that hurtful stuff came out of here *(point to mouth)* because there is something not right in here *(point to heart).*

Words are revealing. If what’s coming out of your mouth isn’t what you want it to be…if you find yourself saying words that are hurtful and destructive to those around you…then maybe it’s time to ask: What’s going on in my heart?

**Healing Words and Challenge**

The truth is, our words matter.

The author of Proverbs tells us:

**"Death and life are in the power of the tongue." -Proverbs 18:21**

Words can bring death! Words can be the death of careers, friendships, marriages, families.

But words can also bring life. They can be catalysts for hope, bringing health and reconciliation.

So if our words have such potential, how can we use them well?

To answer that I want to give us 2 challenges today. The first is to, **Speak Healing Words.**

Words can bring life. In fact, in Proverbs 15:4 we read: *(add)*

**“The tongue that heals is a tree of life, but a devious tongue breaks the spirit.” –Proverbs 15:4**

* Healing words reconcile people.
* Healing words can make marriages sweet, families strong, and churches healthy.
* Healing words can give hope to the heartbroken and help people find their way back to God!

*(Personal example)* Years ago I was struggling in my job and wondering if I even should be in ministry at all and I had breakfast with a mentor who told me, “You are exactly where you need to be doing exactly what God made you to do.” I still think about that conversation and the words that my friend shared with me. Words can bring more hope and healing than we realize!

It’s up to you and me to decide which type of words come out of our mouths…words of harm or words of healing. If we find it difficult to speak words of healing, we need to remember Jesus’ words and take a good look at our hearts.

* A critical heart produces critical words.
* A self-righteous heart produces judgmental words.
* A bitter heart produces sharp words.

But…

* A grateful heart produces gracious words.
* A faithful heart produces truthful words.
* A peaceful heart produces reconciling words.

How do we fill our hearts with the right stuff so that what flows from us are healing words? We ask God to fill us with his love and grace. We soak in the truth of God’s word. We ask him to refine us and heal us of our own wounded-ness.

And then we pray as the Psalmist prayed:

**"Take control of what I say, O Lord, and guard my lips.” –Psalm 141:3**

So the first challenge is to **speak healing words** and the second challenge is to **Speak Healing Words Often**.

A healing word can be worth its weight in gold! But here’s the even better news… unlike gold, healing words aren’t a limited resource. We can be and should be generous with our healing words. We don’t need to budget them! We don’t need to be stingy! We can let them flow out freely and never run out!

Don’t let pride, awkwardness, or just plain old carelessness stop you from being generous with healing words!

So here’s what I want us to do… I want us to start small by just looking at this week. I want us to commit to speaking healing words every day this week.

* Picture where you’re going to be this week… home, work, car, coffee shop…
* Now picture the faces of the people who’ll be in those places with you…
* Think about the conversations you’ll likely have.

Let’s commit to speaking words of healing, encouragement, and life to those people in those places every day this week. Will you commit to that with me?

**Conclusion**

Let’s be honest, the world is full of words of harm.

Let’s be a church with hearts full of healing!

Let’s be a people who speak words of grace, love, and hope.

We can start by committing to speak healing words every day this week, but let’s close by thinking about the big picture…the long term effect of our words over the course of our lives.

If we accumulated all our words over a lifetime, what kind of story would they tell?

* A story of destruction? Or a story of encouragement?
* A story full of harm? Or a story full of healing?
* A story full of death? Or a story full of life?

Let this week be the spark that lights a fire for the revolution of our words… so that the story of our lives will be filled with the same life-giving words we’ve received in Jesus!

**Communion Idea**

As we receive communion together, I’m reminded of the words of scripture I read earlier, "What you say flows from what is in your heart" (Luke 6:45).

If we want life and healing flowing out of us…we need life and healing flowing into us… A life and healing that we ultimately find in Jesus.

And there is perhaps no better illustration of this than communion. Today, as we take in these physical elements (the bread and the cup) may take in the love of Jesus and let it be what flows out of our life and words…into the people and the world around us.