



TEST NO.6: THE SPEECH TEST

Rabbi Abraham Heschel once made this, very simple, statement: "Words make worlds."

It's an idea that comes straight out of the Bible itself. Genesis 1 tells us that God spoke the entire universe into being; spoke every plant and animal into being; spoke *you* into being. That's right – you're not here just because your mum and dad got together, did the business, and 9 months later 'ta-da!' There you were! No –

You're here because God said so.

But it doesn't end there. Because what we say, what we do, how we look, how we see ourselves, are all a product of the words that have been spoken into our lives. And for some of us, that will have been a generally positive experience; for others, a negative one. Even traumatic. Whoever said, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me," was either deaf, or lying. Words have the power to build up, and to tear down; to start wars, and to end them. The Civil Rights Movement began with words; so did the Holocaust.

So words are powerful things. Which is why the Book of Proverbs says, "The tongue has the power of life and death" (18:21).

It's also why James makes this – what we do with our tongues – the 6th test of true faith:

Jacob / James 3:1-12

If you're familiar with James, you'll know he's not a man to mince his words! Which is what qualifies him to tackle this subject.

You can divide this section of his letter into 3 warnings:

1) The Tongue Has The Power To Condemn. Look again at vs1. Some of you might be thinking, "Well, that's encouraging!" Especially when we're constantly being told, "If you can dream it, you can do it" (to quote a certain gaming strapline I saw the other day). And I can relate to that. If I'm honest, there are times when I don't feel like standing up here anyway – let alone if I think I'm going to be judged for it!

So what is James saying here? Well, he's not saying you have to be perfect to be a person of influence – because if that were the case, no-one could do it! In fact, in vs2 he says, "We *all* stumble in many ways." How many of us? *All* of us! (And that's my disclaimer this morning.)

No, what he's saying is: if you want to be a leader, you have to own the responsibility that goes with it. And if you want to be a *Christian* leader, the reverence. Because anyone can sound like they know stuff – all you need is a YouTube channel or a Twitter account. But this is not about *our* prestige, it's about *God's* prestige. This is not about *us* being seen and heard (we already are!); it's about *Jesus* being seen and heard.

We live in a time when a lot of people have a lot to say. But in the Bible, it's not the quantity that matters ... it's the quality. So, let your words be few (Ecclesiastes 5:2).

2) The Tongue Has The Power To Control (vs3-6). Next, James paints 3 pictures for us, a trio of metaphors that kind of say the same thing: a bit, a rudder, and a spark. What's the link, the connection? They are each a small object capable of controlling something much, much bigger.

Similarly, the tongue might be a small part of the body ... but it has the power to cause a *lot* of trouble! Which is why the Bible refers to it as a wicked tongue, a filthy tongue, a cursing tongue, a blaspheming tongue, a foolish tongue, a lying tongue, a boasting tongue, a crafty tongue, a flattering tongue, a backbiting tongue, a gossiping tongue, a slanderous tongue, a bitter tongue, an angry tongue, a complaining tongue, and a contentious tongue (not to mention, a tired one! Joke). And because it's so powerful, if we can master the tongue, we can master anything. Eating. Drinking. Spending. Screen-time.

Now James recognises that this is easier said than done. As he says in vs7-8, we might be able to control the creatures we share this planet with, but the tongue? It is a "restless (or 'unsettled') evil", James says here. It makes us speak harshly to our spouses, snap at our kids / parents, and dishonour our friends behind their backs (and don't even get me started on what we put on social media).

Which is why we all need a bit of help – as we'll see.

3) The Tongue Has The Power To Convey. Convey what? Convey where we are with God (vs9-12). What we say to God, and what we say to those who are made in His image, are linked. They are both forms of worship, and can either honour God – or dishonour Him.

Not only that, but the things we say convey what's going on in our hearts; what really matters to us. As James says here, a plant's fruit will correspond to the nature of that plant. Jesus put it this way, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45). If you want to know how you feel about God or how you feel about others, listen to how you speak about them. If you use God's name like He means nothing to you, then He probably doesn't. If you talk about other people like *they* mean nothing to you ... well, you get the gist.

So it's not enough to install a swear-box or find alternative words to the ones we commonly use. We need to deal with the content of the heart; we need a spiritual heart-transplant. And that means we need to go to the greatest heart surgeon there is, and ask Him to change us.

From the inside, out.

The Score

Now this may have been a difficult message for some of us to hear today. Perhaps we've been made to feel 'less than' by the words of other people: parents, spouses, teachers, friends. Or conversely: perhaps we know we've been the perpetrators, not the victims. What do we do?

- **Be frank.** Be honest about the pain that you're feeling. And if you know you've caused pain to others, admit it, and say sorry. And when they do, forgive them.
- **Be focused.** On Jesus, the One who, throughout His life, spoke loving, true, gracious, wise, forgiving, liberating words. And died for all our bad ones.
- **Be filled.** In Acts ch2, at Pentecost, the disciples' tongues were taken over – by the Holy Spirit. *We* may not be able to tame this thing ... but *God* can!

"Words make worlds," Heschel said. May Jesus so change our hearts, and our tongues, that we begin to speak the language of the world to come. As if it's already here.

And now, those questions ...

- How have words made you the person that you are?
- What do your own words say about your heart / character?
- How can you 'build' someone with your words today?