

## JAMES: FAITH THAT WORKS

### The Power of Our Tongue

James 3:1-18

Layne Lebo

February 6, 2022

#### James 3:1-18 The MESSAGE

Don't be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends. Teaching is highly responsible work. Teachers are held to the strictest standards. And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths. If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true, you'd have a perfect person, in perfect control of life.

A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse. A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain sets a course in the face of the strongest winds. A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it!

It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell.

This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue—it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth!

My friends, this can't go on. A spring doesn't gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it? Apple trees don't bear strawberries, do they? Raspberry bushes don't bear apples, do they? You're not going to dip into a polluted mud hole and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you?

Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom—it's animal cunning, devilish plotting. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats.

Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results *only* if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.

Clearly James thought the tongue was important...he devoted most of a chapter to it in a letter that only consists of 5 chapters. Now, before any of us begin to beat ourselves up over the lack of control we may feel we have over our tongue, I want to assure you that my desire this morning is not to make you feel back. Guilt, shame and embarrassment are terrible motivators. They don't bring about lasting change. As we study this passage together, I want us to focus on two pieces of good news. First, if we struggle with controlling our tongues, the good news is that God is interested in helping us. Secondly, when it comes to our tongues, the

opportunity to bless and build others up is available to every one of us. I'll talk more about those pieces of good news later. I wanted to touch on them as we began to assure you that the goal of today's sermon wasn't to browbeat you and have you leave here feeling like a terrible person.

Admittedly, when I read this passage, my first thought was of ways in which I too often fail to control my tongue—when I'm cycling and feel like drivers of cars or trucks endanger me, when I'm driving and I don't like how other drivers drive, at sporting events, and at times when my kids or wife frustrate me. Hopefully, identifying those areas right away—I know I'm not the only one who struggles to control my tongue—will allow us to acknowledge our shortcomings and move on to what God has for us. I'd like to explore this chapter section by section and position us to receive God's truth for us. I'll begin by reading verses 1 & 2...

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

James begins this section by warning teachers. The phrase, "*we who teach will be judged more strictly,*" is a daunting one for those of us who preach and teach in the church. There's already pressure in seeking God's will and direction for people who will be paying close attention to what we say and hopefully seeking to apply it to their lives. And yet, I don't think James is trying to discourage teachers and preachers by making them feel the weight of their task. I think he's warning everyone of the reality that teaching and preaching God's Word isn't something to be taken lightly or done flippantly.

We can tap into the seriousness of teaching when we think back over our lives and consider teachers that have impacted us. Can you think of teachers, professors, coaches or pastors who impacted you in a positive way? I recall a 9<sup>th</sup> grade biology teacher, Mr. Sanderson—who was also our school's former high school basketball coach—he watched my team play a middle school basketball game and the next day called me out of a study hall to tell me how well I played and to encourage me to keep practicing hard. I remember a college professor, Dr. Terry Brensinger, who sat with me in the Falcon at Messiah and urged me to consider attending seminary as I prepared for pastoral ministry. I recall a seminary preaching professor, Dr. Demaray, who after a sample sermon in class, told me I had a gift for preaching. I'm sure many of you can recall teachers, coaches, professors, Sunday School teachers, and pastors who

significantly impacted your life. James wants us to understand that influence is a double-edged sword that can encourage and build up and that can tear others down or lead them astray. Those of us who teach, preach and influence others can't take that responsibility lightly, we will be judged on what we share with others and the influence we have on their lives, as well, I would assume, on the opportunities we missed to have a positive impact.

After that brief two verse introduction, James then launches into his main theme of this section, the power of the tongue. I'll read verses 3-8.

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

These verses don't need a lot of explanation. James' simple point is that the tongue is powerful. What James hasn't said yet, which we'll get to in the next few verses is that the tongue doesn't act independently. It's really just a fatty piece of flesh. The tongue is the vehicle through which the thoughts and attitudes of our heart are revealed to others. Granted, some of us are better at holding our tongues—keeping our thoughts and attitudes to ourselves—but if someone has a “tongue problem,” they really have a “heart and mind problem.” In verses 9-12, James addresses the “root problem,” and he begins to point to the positive effect our tongue can have on others...

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

Here James highlights the incongruity of praising God with our tongue, while also cursing people. And then he asks a series of questions that pinpoint the absurdity of blessing and cursing coming from the same source. “Can fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?” “Can a fig tree bear olives?” “Can a grapevine bear figs?” Of course not. Then how can our tongues be used for both good and evil? James wraps up this chapter with verses 13-18...

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do

not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. James 3:13-18

You may recall that the opening week I preached on James I noted that James is considered Biblical wisdom literature, along the lines of Proverbs, and that like Proverbs, it can be difficult at times to discern a coherent theme. Reading Proverbs and James can feel like we’re reading a bunch of truisms that have been placed side by side. That’s partially true of James, but there are also threads of themes that run throughout this letter. And one of those themes is wisdom. 4x in these 6 verses James refers to wisdom. He notes that wisdom will be seen through how we live our lives.

James also distinguishes between real wisdom and false wisdom—“wisdom” in quotation marks. It’s obvious in our day that people define wisdom in different and sometimes even in contradictory ways. James challenges this head on by saying don’t mistake bitterness, envy, selfish ambition or attempts to deny the truth with wisdom. We’ve all seen and heard that, right—people’s whose passion, finely honed arguments and erudite speech appear wise, but in reality they’re spewing foolishness. If you don’t know what I’m talking about, turn on your radio and listen to talk radio. Not all talk radio hosts subscribe to this, but if you scan sports talk radio, political talk radio, talk radio that focuses on cultural topics, and even Christian talk radio, you’ll see what I mean.

James is building on his argument that like produces like—that olives don’t come from fig trees and grapevines don’t produce figs. Jesus made this same point in The Sermon on the Mount when speaking of false prophets He said, *“By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.”* (Matthew 7:16-18) And in Matthew chapter 12 Jesus said, *“For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”* A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.” (Matthew 12:34 & 35)

James goes on in verses 17 & 18 to explain what wisdom that genuinely comes from God looks like. It’s pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial

and sincere. And he concludes with the statement, *“peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”*

My challenge for myself and for all of us this morning is to live into our identity as sons and daughters of God—as Jesus followers. I want to repeat the good news I began with at the start of the sermon. First, if we need help in controlling our tongues and/or in having our hearts and minds cleaned up, Jesus is longing to help us. He is eager to provide us with his wisdom and his life transformation. Listen to these words again from James chapter 1 verses 5 & 6, *“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.”* James 1:5 & 6

The 2<sup>nd</sup> piece of good news I shared with you as we began today is the potential our tongues have to impact others for good. We can use our tongues to encourage others, to build people up, to strengthen them, to provide people who are struggling with hope and joy. And I could go on. Our words—our tongues—have power to build people up, to allow them to step into the calling and destiny our Heavenly Father has for them. As I read James 3 in preparation for preaching today I was immediately reminded of a song sung by Toby Mac, called “Speak Life.” I encourage you to listen to the powerful words of this song.

### **"Speak Life" by Toby Mac**

Some days, life feels perfect.  
Other days it just ain't workin'.  
The good, the bad, the right, the wrong  
And everything in between.

Though it's crazy, amazing  
We can turn a heart through the words we say.  
Mountains crumble with every syllable.  
Hope can live or die

So speak life, speak life.  
To the deadest darkest night.  
Speak life, speak life.  
When the sun won't shine and you don't know why.  
Look into the eyes of the broken-hearted;  
Watch them come alive as soon as you speak hope,

You speak love, you speak...  
You speak life, you speak life.

Some days the tongue gets twisted;  
Other days my thoughts just fall apart.  
I do, I don't, I will, I won't,  
It's like I'm drowning in the deep.

Well it's crazy to imagine,  
Words from our lips as the arms of compassion,  
Mountains crumble with every syllable.  
Hope can live or die.

So speak life, speak life.  
To the deadest darkest night.  
Speak life, speak life.  
When the sun won't shine and you don't know why.  
Look into the eyes of the broken-hearted;  
Watch them come alive as soon as you speak hope,  
You speak love, you speak...  
You speak life, you speak life.

Lift your head a little higher,  
Spread the love like fire,  
Hope will fall like rain,  
When you speak life with the words you say.

Raise your thoughts a little higher,  
Use your words to inspire,  
Joy will fall like rain,  
When you speak life with the things you say.

Lift your head a little higher,  
Spread the love like fire,  
Hope will fall like rain,  
When you speak life with the words you say.

So speak life, speak life.  
To the deadest darkest night.  
Speak life, speak life.  
When the sun won't shine and you don't know why.  
Look into the eyes of the broken-hearted;  
Watch them come alive as soon as you speak hope,

You speak love, you speak...  
You speak life, you speak life.

You speak life, you speak life.

Some days life feels perfect.

I want to send us out today with these words from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippian Church...

"Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life." Philippians 2:14-16