

## *Work of Peace and Power of Speech - Part 2*

James 3:5-12

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This morning we continue in this series in the letter of James to the church as it was gathered in the first century as they were learning what it means to follow the Lord faithfully. What does it mean to follow the Lord faithfully in a time of suffering? Their suffering was one that was related to persecution for their conversion to Christianity. But suffering comes in all kinds and forms, and we're experiencing that now.

What is interesting about this letter is that even during a time of suffering, James does not shy away from calling us to what it means to live faithfully as Christians even during times of suffering. In fact, I think it is a very biblical truth that it is in times of suffering as we seek by God's grace to walk faithfully in dependence on Him to reflect the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in our thoughts, in our words, and in our actions. It is that which gives Him great praise. In a world that seems turned upside down, it seems that the church of Jesus Christ as we seek to humbly depend upon Him to walk in obedience, what a great message of the glory and beauty and grace of Christ could be told.

And so I invite us this morning even during a time of suffering, and I would add particularly during a time of suffering, again to this portion of James's letter. And I would say it is erroneously called the practical sections of James. I don't believe God's word is split between doctrinal and practical for all of God's teaching is of benefit to how we ought to live as Christians. But in this portion of James's letter, he hits something which is for all of us a daily moment by moment reality. And that is the power of the tongue.

We continue in this series Wisdom, Faith in Practice. And we're on the second part of this journey in James 3, the work of peace and the power of speech. Pastor PD Mayfield last week introduced the nature of speech and particularly as it applied to those who would be in the role of teachers and preachers. And I am reminded even as I come to this passage, as I prayed for this morning, I come to this passage with great humility because I recognize not only naturally as God has made me, I am a person of many words. And I have had to do much in my Christian walk to not only ask forgiveness for my speech, but to also seek the forgiveness of those who I have hurt with my speech.

And so I come to this portion of God's word not because it is more special than other parts of His word, it is because it particularly hits not only what I am literally doing in this very moment which is speaking, but also as one who has been called to be a teacher in Christ's church. And so I deliver this sermon to you this morning from a place of humility, a place where I recognize that I am very much incomplete in my sanctification. I invite you as a fellow sufferer, as a Christian but also one who still experiences the very real reality of sin, into this journey of renewal as we look at the destructive power of the tongue.

This morning, we turn to James 3:5-12. Hear now God's word.

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt

water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs?  
Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please join me as I pray as we prepare to hear from God's word.

Now, heavenly Father, the Son the Lord Jesus Christ, and the powerful third member of the Trinity the Holy Spirit, may you be pleased not only by the meditations of my heart but the words of my mouth. May the power of your Holy Spirit tame my speech, but may your Holy Spirit attend the preaching of your word. And wherever your word is read, wherever your word is spoken, wherever your word is taught or preached, may the attending power of the Holy Spirit make that word effective unto salvation, renewal, and the power of God at work by your grace. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

This morning as we consider this very important passage, I want you to see three portions of it that we will look at together. First, the tongue among the members, verses 5 and 6. Then the tongue's destructive power, verses 6 through 10. And thirdly, the call to renewing our speech, verses 10 through 12. The tongue among the members, the tongue's destructive power, and the call to renewing our speech.

And as we begin this morning looking at the tongue among the members, verses 5 through 6, what James does is he's building off the nature of how the tongue is situated literally in our physical body. And what he's trying to draw about is this comparison relatively speaking that a tongue itself is a small member, and yet it has great power. What he does is in verses 5 and 6, James actually outlines the ways in which the tongue itself exerts its power and its impact.

And what I want you to see, and I think it's arguable in the text, is that in some sense he begins with demonstrating how the tongue affects us, subjectively ourselves as people. And then he moves to how the tongue has a power, and in fact a destructive power, in how it brings about destruction on others outside of us, nonetheless impacting ourselves, but how it affects others. And then the call to renewal is how the Lord is calling us. So it's how this speech and the tongue affects us personally, how it affects others, and ultimately how the Lord wants to renew it.

As we look at this together, what I want you to see in verses 5 and 6 is James has a very strong description, three things that he says that the tongue does among the members of the body. He says it stains, it wreaks havoc, and is set on fire. First, he talks about how the tongue among the members, it stains the body. In fact, what he says is this, "How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!" So he's using that. He goes from that and then says instead of drawing a simile, "And the tongue is a fire." It's not like a spark. It is itself a fire. And he says, "a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body." Now, that word there for staining, it's the word "stain," but he then says the "whole body." The word being translated there is "body." It's excellent that it says, "the whole body" because it comes from the word "soma" meaning "the whole person." It isn't just that it affects the flesh, but it also affects our spirit, in fact affects our minds, the way that we think. It affects our emotions. It affects the whole aspect of being a human being. What James is suggesting is that the tongue set a fire, a tongue released in its destructive power can affect our whole body.

But not only does it affect the whole body, but we live a life with these bodies. We make decisions. We exert actions. We have feelings that affect everything that we do. We interact with the world around us.

James goes further to say it's staining not only the whole body, but it also sets "on fire the entire course of life." Now, what's interesting there is James is doing two things. One, he's speaking to those who are of Jewish descent who have now converting to Christianity. But at the same time, he's also speaking to the Greek speaking world. What he's doing is he's using a Greek phrase which was known and used both in the Jewish context as well as the Greek speaking context when he uses this phrase, "the entire course of life." What it literally is translated as is "the wheel of existence," this idea of the wheel of Genesis. In other words, the wheel of existence is the whole course which is being translated there as the

course of life. Literally, it's saying the ups and the downs, the good times and the bad times. In other words, not only does the tongue stain the whole part of our existence as human beings, but it can set ablaze the entire existence and course of one's life.

Of course, it doesn't take much right now during this time of quarantine and being locked down. Many have been talking about the Netflix series that's gone viral *Tiger King*. I do not recommend this show whatsoever. I don't care how popular it is. I do not recommend it. But yes, I have seen it. But that's a different problem.

But here's what I want to say about *Tiger King*. Say what you will, but what is so sad to me, and that I can honestly say as a person who has been changed in his speech and exposed in how my tongue at one time in my life was setting my life ablaze and I mourn, is it is hard to watch someone's life being so affected by what he says. It is very clear to me that *Tiger King* is very much an embodied parable of what James is speaking about here. I don't know his whole existence. I don't know his life. But it is hard to watch because I actually hurt for him because I recognize he is a hurt person who hurts people with his speech. And this is precisely not just what we see exhibited in this Netflix series but in social media, in the news, whether it be in popular culture, in business, or in politics. One's whole life can literally be destroyed by what one says.

But not only can it wreak havoc and cause destruction throughout one's whole entire life, it says here that it is "set on fire by hell." The word here translated as "hell" is Gehenna, this valley of Hinnom just outside of Jerusalem which was a place where trash and all kinds of evil sorts of sacrifices were done. And this is a place that not only is referred to here by James, but it is also a connection to how Jesus uses it. The only other person who speaks about Gehenna in the New Testament is Jesus Himself, and it is a place that is thought of as a place that Satan has literally set this place on fire. So essentially what James is saying here is saying not unlike Gehenna that the tongue itself can be set on fire by the father of lies, and our speech wreaks havoc and sets our lives ablaze.

So what is James saying here about the tongue among the members of the body? It stains, it wreaks havoc, it is on fire. I think it is precisely what John Calvin, the reformed theologian, once said of the tongue, "A slender portion of flesh contains the whole world of iniquity." What Calvin is saying and what James is saying mirror what Jesus said in the gospels when He said this in Matthew 12, "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers. How can you speak good when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." And then later in chapter 15,

And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person." "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone." [ESV]

What Jesus is trying to address is this false concept that so long as we're careful about what we put into our bodies that we'll be okay. But Jesus said that's not the problem at all. The problem is not out there.

And so if you're thinking for just a moment as we describe and hear what James is saying with regard to the tongue, be careful that you're thinking about someone else because the reality is what happens is not first and foremost our tongue. James would very much be in line with this very biblical concept that the tongue speaks out of what the heart desires. Why do we quarrel among us? We quarrel because we do not get what we want at a heart level. And so we lash out at one another with our speech.

This is a very old concept stretching back all the way to the prophets. In Jeremiah 17, he describes the nature of the healthy wise person whose roots are set deep and connected to living water. But the person who's unhealthy, unwise, is the person whose roots are not set into water but are instead very shallow, that come from a heart that is not redeemed or wise looking to the Lord. And what it then says in Jeremiah 17 is, "The heart is deceitful above all things." In essence, no one can understand the heart. Only God can search the heart.

So what James is saying about the tongue actually goes far deeper than merely our speech. It goes to the core of who we are as human beings at the gut level, at the heart level. What do you and I really desire? Our mouths are merely the vehicle of what is actually deeply rooted in the heart.

And so as we consider the tongue among the members, the most dangerous thing James is saying is that while the tongue is small, it is connected to the most central thing, our heart, our will, our desires, our loves. So he is saying by way of teaching us the destructive nature of the tongue on ourselves, be careful. Be aware.

This is why he now goes further to discuss the tongue's destructive power in verses 6 through 10. He continues in the simile, "For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." What is he suggesting? I don't think we can rob James of his very stark statement. You and I and no human being, though we can boast of the ability to build ships that are trained where they will go by a small wheel that controls the rudder, though we can tame the wildest of animals, though we can do and boast great things, we cannot do that which often makes us most human which is the ability to communicate. We cannot tame our tongues.

And he goes further to say what we do with our tongues. And so here in breaking open what James is talking about with regard to this deadly poison of speech, "With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God," it is here I think we must break down the kind of speech to which I think James is referring. First, what I think he is referring to literally as he says here is poisonous speech. Much like we heard earlier in the service as pastor PD led us in the scripture reading, they speak as though they have the tongue and lips of a poisonous snake.

What does poisonous speech look like? It looks and sounds a lot like gossip. Gossip is not what we deem it and define it as but consider the person about which we are speaking, what would they say? Do we have the authority to say about them what we are saying to someone else? It is gossip. But gossip turned upside down is gossip that also becomes lying and false reports. It becomes a form also of poisonous speech, and we seek to build and puff ourselves up in pride and arrogance. But it also has this sense of divisiveness when we seek to separate others from ourselves or separate people groups into groups and set them against one another.

My friends, poisonous speech, I think if it is not patently obvious to us, is not just what we say out of our mouths. It is what we tap with our fingers on a keyboard or on a screen whether it is Twitter, social media of any sort or form, Instagram, Facebook. Friends, can we not be honest in saying that poisonous speech is everywhere? And in fact, our technologies which we now employ to be able to connect with one another are the same technologies that we use to spew our poisonous thoughts, desires, or emotions. Poisonous speech is something which James warns us about.

But there is also careless speech, the flippant and unthinking kinds of speech. Let me give you an example. This example is one which perhaps I know you have experienced. I know I've experienced it many times. But one example of this flippant speech is when we're literally saying things, but what we're saying has lost its meaning. We've just said it without thinking.

Consider this particularly in the sports realm. Consider this honest interaction between a reporter and an athlete. The reporter says, "Congratulations on a great game. Can you take us through that last play?" Athlete, "Thanks. I just want to give all glory to God, all glory to God." Reporter, "There was not

much talk about you personally leading up to the game. It seems like maybe they forgot about you. How much did that motivate you out there today to play?" Athlete, "All week long, everybody was talking about how they were going to walk all over us. Nobody knew who I was. I kept telling myself all week that they will remember me after this game. Everyone will know my name." All glory to God? "Everyone will know my name." "This athlete may have said some of the right things," as Brian Smith, author of *The Assist* wrote, "but he proved he didn't really know or really mean what he was saying when he went from glory to God to glory to himself in the blink of an eye."

Our careless speech includes exactly that. Glory be to God. I'll pray for you. Or, oh, I'm the chief of sinners. It's not that any of those things left to themselves aren't good things. They are good things. But when we say them over and over again, and we say them without thinking, they lose their meaning. And what begins to happen is we become hypocrites, and we scarcely understand of that which we speak.

But careless speech also has another realm, not just a flippant or unthinking speech, but also this which I hear so often, "I'm just being honest," or as pastor Song reminded me this week, "I'm just going hundred." I think that's how I'm supposed to say it. I would never say that. But you get the idea. It's I'm just being honest." Or I'm just being transparent with you.

And here, I want to specifically speak to the Christian community. I've heard this so much even in the Christian community that somehow by prefacing what I'm about to say with "I'm just being honest" means I get a blank check for what I'm about to say. The reality is I heard someone once say that honesty is a thin virtue, meaning this. If I'm just being honest but if what I'm saying is disconnected from my love for you or love about the one that I'm speaking of, then that honesty is disconnected from love and it is honesty standing on its own. And in fact, it will be thin and will crumble under its own weight. Just being honest doesn't mean we get to speak freely whenever we want, however we want, and about whatever we want. Transparency disconnected from love and mercy and grace is just nakedness and being raw, and it can be hurtful. I know this as a person who's had to ask forgiveness more than once by just being honest.

But there is also another. And perhaps you're experiencing this husbands and wives, parents and children, during this time in which we're all being told to stay at home. We're all in a very confined space for much more time than what we would wish. But there's this old phrase that familiarity breeds contempt. Well, this idea of familiarity, family, we are so accustomed to being around one another, our careless speech can easily blend into poking fun, making light of one another, that we mean sometimes to cover with being good and humorous, but in fact they're just little jabs. Our careless speech can be very hurtful.

But another form of speech of which I believe James is referring is abusive speech. We can destroy others by how we abuse them with our words. We tear them down. We critique them without regard of love. We're degrading in how we refer to others. We're disrespectful to those who are over us. We think that it's hip and cool to be angry and disrespectful to those who are over us. Who of us have not felt that? We can wound because we are so competitive. We try to outdo one another. We utter threats, and we call names. And we cover it with being humorous. But the truth is that oftentimes it's just coming out of cynicism.

But I want to say clearly that while physical hands can leave a bruise, abusive speech can leave a scar that can never be healed with stitches or ointment or a band-aid. And if abusive speech and poisonous speech can wound and set ablaze our whole life on fire, James is saying also that if we bless our Lord, but we curse another, we can set their life on fire. Our words, and may we never say this in the Christian community, are never just words. Our words are actions. And actions have shaping power. Our words can abuse.

And if that is you, if you are an abuser, if you realize this, if the Holy Spirit is speaking to you now, I encourage you to go now in confession and repentance asking for forgiveness. And I ask if you need to

Speak to someone, speak to your pastor. If you're in this church, please speak to us. If you are someone who is experiencing abusive speech, you need someone to talk to. And I encourage you to reach out to us.

The tongue's destructive power is an untamed animal, a small piece of flesh which you and I cannot bring under control. And left to itself, the tongue doesn't just poison us. It poisons everyone that we're around who have been made in the likeness of God. James is telling us a hard truth.

But finally, he would also then call us to renewing our speech. He says, "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so." And then he asks this rhetorical question. Of course, the spring does not pour forth fresh and salt water. Of course, a fig tree can't bear olives or grape vines produce figs. But rather, what is he doing by these rhetorical questions? If in nature this does not happen, then those who call upon the name of the Lord must recognize the poisonous power, the enflamed power of our tongues. And he's saying this ought not to be. What is he saying? He's calling us to renewal. He's calling us back to the Lord.

And if he's saying that no human can tame the tongue, he is exactly right. And although he doesn't say it here explicitly, because James is breaking out the gospel of Jesus Christ which he's already begun and described, I think he's drawing us back to the only one who can. And if it is only the Lord who can search the heart, if it is only the Lord that the psalmist says, "Know my meditations of my heart and guard the words of my mouth," then it is only the Lord that can tame our speech.

And I believe it is incumbent upon us to hear the Lord's calling to us. And if we cannot tame our speech, then we must call upon the Holy Spirit who can. And it is as simple as this. Holy Spirit tame my tongue. And then using the only thing which the Holy Spirit does, use the word which has been given, and the Spirit will guide us in the word. And as we seek to devour the word, memorize the word, marinate in the word, then that word begins to shape how we speak. It is a beautiful circle.

And although James is not making this connection, I want to make this connection. If the tongue can set the whole course, the wheel of our life ablaze and wreak havoc, then if we call upon the Holy Spirit knowing that this ought not to be for those who call upon the name of the Lord, if we turn to Him and say, Holy Spirit tame our tongues, and we turn ourselves to the word, then the Holy Spirit can begin to change that wheel and redirect our speech to bring harmony and integrity between that which we say we believe and how we speak. But yes, we're still going to sin. We're never going to be perfect in what we say until the Lord returns. But now can be a day of renewal, and we can call on the Lord to tame our tongues. And today can be a day that we seek to have two things as I apply this word, and those are healing speech, peaceful speech, and empowering speech.

Healing speech. Today, perhaps someone in your home, perhaps someone you're in a relationship with, over Facetime or however it is you contact people, there is someone today that between you and the Lord you can stop today and repent of your speech and how you might have hurt someone else, wounded them. And you can go to them, and you can ask for forgiveness. And you can now utter healing speech of taking ownership over the sin of your speech. It doesn't mean that reconciliation is going to be fast or easy or continuous with that very moment, but it can begin to be the ramp to peace and reconciliation. Healing speech always begins with repentance and asking for forgiveness.

But not just healing speech. There can also be peaceful speech. Consider this week, friends, someone in your life needs an encouragement from you. Pray. Ask that the Holy Spirit would guide you to that person. Bring them to mind. Lay them on your heart. Bring them to your consciousness. And you can call that person. You can text that person. And give them encouragement reminding them of your love, that you're praying for them, that you care for them. That can be steps of peaceful speech. Turn to those in your family reminding them of the word, that our promise is not in the news, our promise is not in our leaders, our promise is not in researchers, although we depend on all of those things. Our ultimate foundation is in the Lord Himself. Turn to the word and use the word as a means to speak peace to others.

But then I close with this. We also can give ourselves to empowering speech. And here specifically, I want to speak to parents and their children. My daughter has been playing music over the last number of weeks, and she's here hearing this sermon. And she and I have had to ask forgiveness of each other. In this season of just being around each other all the time, I can so easily joke at her expense. I've responded to her crassly and rashly. And I've had to ask her for forgiveness. And in God's grace, she has given it. But in preparation for today, I'm reminded of the power of speech between parents and their children.

And so I encourage you with this illustration. This young runner when he was 16 years old, his father was not only his father but was also his coach. He had made such strides, literally and figuratively, in his running that his father was beginning to notice. And he overheard his father one day, and he relates it this way. He says,

"When I was 16 and just getting started in running, I heard my dad telling someone that he was worried that I would run so hard that I would hurt myself. While this might just seem like a comment of a concerned dad, his statement was a seed of self-confidence that grew until I, too, believed that I could push myself beyond my body's pain threshold. Having your father say he thinks you're that tough is extremely empowering. From that moment on, I always believed that I was mentally tough. And I would act as a tough runner as I possibly could be, as my father told me I could be."

Well, that runner who tells this story is no everyday runner. It is Ryan Hall who writes in his book *Run the Mile You're In* about this story and his relationship with his father. Ryan Hall is a confessing Christian. And he writes in this book about the power of words and particularly the words of parents and the shaping power that he now has as a parent.

Ryan Hall after hearing this from his father and this empowering speech would go on. And although he is now retired from professional running, he is still the record holder for the half-marathon. He did the half-marathon in 59 minutes and 43 seconds. He is also the only U.S. runner to break the one-hour barrier in that event. And he is also the only American to ever run a sub 2.05 marathon. In fact, he ran a 2.0458 marathon in the 2011 Boston Marathon.

What's interesting about Ryan is that he's begun to reflect on just that, the power of speech. And he was fortunate to have a father who spoke those empowering words. And not all of us have fathers and parents who have given us that kind of empowering speech. But I say to you as parents that today can be that day for you, where you can be instruments in the Redeemer's hands to speak empowerment to your children, encouragement and love and support.

But whether you're a child or a parent where you don't know what that sounds like and you don't know how to say it, I have good news for you today. Your Father in heaven has said something about you. He has loved you with an everlasting love that nothing can separate you from His love. And that Jesus who has given for our salvation, who has been raised from death to life, and has now poured out His Spirit on us, we are now united to the Lord Jesus Christ in a relationship where it doesn't matter what you and I think of ourselves or what others think of ourselves. What matters most is what our heavenly Father thinks of us. And He calls us His children. And He calls His church the bride of Christ. And Jesus has loved us and has set before Him a joy of pleasing the Father and giving of Himself for us. He is now interceding for us. And the Holy Spirit is interceding for us.

And so I encourage you today if you don't know what that speech sounds like, the word of God is ready and able to remind you exactly what your Father has said about you, that He has loved you with an eternal unbreakable love, that Christ is with us through the unbreakable bond of His bond of sacrifice and death and the power of His resurrection and the gift of His Holy Spirit. This is what the Lord has done for us. And it is only by that that we're able to ask Him, Lord, may the words of my mouth and the

meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight. And may the Lord turn our destructive speech into healing, peaceful, and empowering speech to His glory. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we now thank you for your word. Father, we confess to you together that our words are often said without much thought, that we have hurt others. We've wounded them. We've wounded ourselves. And we've dishonored your name. We've cursed others made in your image. We confess to you, O Lord, that our hearts are often puffed up in arrogance and cynicism believing that our opinions carry the weight of eternal truth. And therefore, we wield our tongues as if it were the law of God. Lord, forgive us for our arrogance. Forgive us for our cynicism in forgetting that our words are more than just words, but they are actions which shape not only our lives by the lives of others. Father, forgive us for the father of lies seeks to distract us that we might forget just what a powerful member this slender piece of flesh really is. It's connected to a heart full of desires and idolatry and loves, and yet we turn to you then, the Father of truth, the Father of love, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Father who has given us His Spirit. Now we ask you, tame our tongues. Bring a season of renewal and integrity between our actions, our desires, our beliefs, and our speech in what we type, in what we say, in what we think. Do this, O Lord, because we cannot. And may you glorify your name through our words and our hearts. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.