

Speaking on Speaking (James 3)

Join me in prayer:

God of perfect wisdom, we come to you today incapable and unworthy. And yet, you are the God who loves us. You sent your son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for our sins. As we look in your Word today, we pray that we would gain wisdom, self-control, and a greater desire to become more and more like you. We praise you for the Holy Spirit that dwells in all your saints, and we look forward to the day when you glorify us, making us perfect in all that we think, say, and do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

(Tell people they may be seated)

When speaking on a text like James 3, it feels wrong to actually *preach* a message. This text is the text that lends itself to being passed over when preaching. I feel, by necessity, inadequate to preach a message like this. I'm sure you'll see why. Turn with me to James chapter 3. I've been teaching the Sunday School kids to find where the books of the Bible are without looking at page numbers. So if you go to the back of your Bible, and go 8 books back, you'll find it. It comes right after the book of Hebrews. Again, that's James chapter 3. And with a text like this, which is a text that speaks to preachers, I ask that you both stand, as I read the text, and respond, in the traditional response of a text being read. I'll say, "**this is the Word of the Lord,**" and you'll respond, "**thanks be to God.**" So I ask that you please stand for the reading of God's Word.

[Read James 3] "**This is the Word of the Lord.**" (Wait, then tell them they may be seated)

When we were last in the book of James, in November, we were walking through this New Testament wisdom book. We saw James is concerned with the idea of true religion. We talked about joyful steadfastness in trials. We saw the danger of dead faith. Now, as we come to chapter 3, I am convinced James has landed on his central focus. I think he's showing us this: *What comes out of us displays our true religion.* I'll repeat that for you, *what comes out of us displays our true religion.*

James starts this section with a heavy and sober warning. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways.” So as I stand before you as someone who has often and openly shared my insecurities and anxiousness about being a pastor. Not many of us should become teachers... Yet here I am, teaching. By standing here and preaching to you this morning, I’m being held to a greater strictness, *knowing* that I, as the text makes clear, stumble. Just like every one of you. So this is a warning to me, but also important for every one of you too. Our text this morning gives us some points for reflection that confront us as we learn to live lives of integrity.

What comes out of you is what displays your true religion; therefore, **be vigilant in your God-given position**. Though this text focuses on pastors and teachers, it applies to all of us who bear the name of Christ. You may not be a teacher in the church office, but you are someone who has been called by Christ to preach the gospel. Pastor Kenny taught on that last week. We have the privilege and responsibility to proclaim the glory of God’s good news to the world: “Christ died for our sins, and rose from the dead.” Speaking of, if you do not yet believe Jesus died on the cross, taking your sins, and rising again for your salvation, I invite and urge you to come and believe.

Saints of God, are called to speak and act as those who have been given the greatest gift from God the world has ever known. We have received Jesus, in all his perfection, and he has taken all our sins away. A message for us, and a message for the world: Believe and live! So wherever you work, to whomever you meet, and whatever you do, you have a responsibility from God. And you cannot take this duty lightly. You must **be vigilant in your God-given position**, because it’s so easy to stumble.

I don't want anyone to become fearful, thinking nobody should be teachers, or that you should avoid teaching. James says “**not many**” should become teachers, which means some *should* be teachers. And Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 3 that it's a noble thing to desire to be a teacher. We have both the encouragement to aspire to ministry, and a warning that most of us should not become teachers. Though they appear to be saying opposite things, they really work together to equip and protect the church.

In 1 Timothy, Paul encourages those who desire to serve and sets out the list of qualifications to serve. I believe Paul gives this list to, first, inspire people to the office of teachers but, second, warn those who want to set themselves up as teachers who aren't qualified to lead others. I also want to encourage you: Read that list and become the person this list describes. Be **above reproach**. Be **faithfully devoted** to your wife or husband. Be **self-controlled, respectable, and hospitable**. Learn how **to teach** well. Be **upright** in your character, not being a **drunk**, or **violent**, or **quarrelsome**, or **greedy** for gain. Be **gentle**, and hold **dignity**. **Manage your household** well.

Though Scripture limits the office of elder/pastor to qualified men, we are all called to live self-controlled and upright lives that are conformed more and more to the image of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Yet sadly, there are groups of people who do not do this. They want to be teachers, but should not.

There are wrong reasons people want to be teachers. They think they can change a church and “fix” issues that matter to them, building the church up in their image rather than God's. They may seek to have power and control others. Perhaps they desire fame, fortune, or respect from others by presenting themselves before the church. Pushing their own agenda and sharing their own words instead of letting the Bible, the word of God, speak to the church.

Our text here in James warns us against that kind of conduct. Against the abuse that comes from such teachers. Teachers who have “faith” in their words, but not in their actions. Just as he warned in chapters 1, and 2, and again here in 3: worthless, demonic, false faith.

The end of the chapter mentions this, too. Look at verses 14-15. It says, “**But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.**” My dear brothers and sisters, do not let your faith be false. Be on guard against the schemes of your flesh and the desires of your heart as you represent your God. Live your whole life with integrity, being upright both privately and publicly. As Christians, we are children of the light. And our God is the Father of lights, exposing all darkness and wickedness. As representatives of him, we must reject duplicity, being double-minded deceivers. And if you are not **vigilant in your God-given position**, God will expose you.

Our text mentions, as we return to verse 2, “**we all stumble in many ways.**” This is a reminder that we *all* need the gospel. None of us are able to achieve perfection or are worthy of God’s favour. Yet God freely offers the gospel to all to believe! We all need Jesus as our Saviour and redeemer and I hope you receive him as yours. And it is those who *have* been redeemed by Christ and seek after him wholeheartedly who can share that good news to others. We get the honour, privilege, and responsibility of announcing the good news. And among us, there will be some called to teach and preach. I’m thankful that you have called me to be an elder here. I know the rest of our elders are also thankful and don’t take that responsibility lightly either. We’re not perfect. But we serve a God who is perfect, knows our imperfections, and grows us as we seek to stumble less and less, as he finishes the work he has started in us.

James gives us another warning, and he does this through pictures. He says to **beware of**

dishonouring God in your conduct, for what goes into you will come out of you. James uses three illustrations to cement this picture for his readers. We are ambassadors for Christ. How we act is how Christ is seen by the world. We are his representatives. It's a high honour, but a sobering responsibility. Considering this, you are living, speaking, and acting, on God's behalf to the world. **So beware of dishonouring God in your conduct.**

I used to think that James was joking when he says, **"If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body."** Like... Come on. Perfect? Nobody is perfect. I considered doing a bit where I shout out someone I know and say they're pretty close, but I'm almost certain every person who comes to mind would rebuke me for even joking about that. And when we just heard that we **"all stumble in many ways,"** I read this passage convinced that the next line was mocking the complete inability for anyone to control themselves if they can't even control what they say.

As I've spent more time contemplating the verse, the less I've been convinced of that. I think James is instead showing how overwhelming our speech is. If we can rein in our mouths, we show overwhelming restraint. Consider Proverbs 18. It says many things about our tongue. Verse 2 criticizes individuals who prioritize self-expression over comprehension, stating, **"A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion."** Or consider verses 6-8 that warn us to beware of acting like fools with our mouths,

A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating. A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul. The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.

Finally, in verse 21, it tells us, **"Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits."** Do you want to have power over life and death? Because you do. And it's done through your tongue. You may be Christ's ambassador, dear brother or sister, but your tongue is *your* ambassador. What's it saying?

(I really hope you ask your loved ones. Or perhaps discuss this in your small groups.)

James talks about bits in horses, and rudders on ships. Put a bit in the mouth of a horse, and you command the horse. If you control a ship's rudder, you've seized the ship. You could put cars in this illustration as well. Be it the keys, the steering wheel, or the pedals, if you do not control them, you don't control the car. These pictures are pictures of your tongue. Whatever controls your tongue controls you. That's why James can say, verse 5, "**So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.**" Your conduct matters for so many reasons, but most of all, it matters because God matters and you're his ambassadors, church. How you conduct your life, and how we conduct our church, is seen by all and is guided by your tongue.

Growing up, I would hear the song, "Oh Be Careful Little Eyes, What You See." Its message was about living a holy life before God. It was a reminder that God, our heavenly Father "**up above is looking down in love,**" so we should obey him and live right. We are before the world, as God's ambassadors, but we are—most importantly, dear brothers and sisters—before God as his beloved children. So be careful little eyes, what you see; little ears, what you hear; little hands, what you do; little feet, where you go; and what James is warning us here: little tongue, what you say. Blood-bought children of God are free *to obey* God. Jesus died so you may be free, and that you may please the Father, who is looking down in love, dear saint.

We continue, halfway through verse 5. It says,

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.

I can't help but think about when you get paper cuts, slivers, or hangnails. For being so tiny (sometimes even microscopic), the pain that wells up is unbelievably disproportionate. Pain spreads, or fire spreads, and they have devastating effects. As you consider the many

illustrations, consider: How are you conducting your life? Are you taking seriously the call to control your whole body?

When I was young, I woke up and saw that my backyard was completely engulfed in flames. Rather... My neighbour's, Mr. Rak's, orchard. He had a grove of trees behind his house, and I looked out to my backyard that morning, staring into the flames. I went to my mom and asked her about it. But she knew he would sometimes set his backyard on fire. My neighbour knew how to firescape and use controlled burns to his advantage for the health and flourishing of his garden. He knew the danger and speed of fires like that. He controlled the ignition point, the spread, the containment area, and thus controlled the fire's spread. But if he didn't have control over everything else, that fire may have spelled disaster for him, his house, and the rest of our neighbourhood. That's the control we're called to have over our own body. The control that saves us from the danger of our tongue is just like Mr. Rak held control over his whole yard to contain the flames.

“The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.” Just like a fire spreads, the tongue spreads words, and it sets ears ablaze. An out-of-control tongue is as dangerous as a forest fire, spreading wildly with all kinds of destruction in its wake. And if the tongue is, as it so often is in the heart of mankind, selfish, bitter, jealous, or unrighteous, it stains us. James says that our tongue is **set on fire by hell**. Hell is where our wickedness is unrestrained, and we suffer the full consequences for all the wicked and evil sins we commit, forever. There is an eternity of torment that we build up for ourselves through our tongues. That's the danger of our unrestrained tongue. We must be vigilant against its misuse. Beware its great power.

Our tongue is our ambassador, representing us. Luke 6:45 says, **“The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces**

evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” I asked this earlier, but again, I ask, what is your tongue saying? What is the state of your heart? What flows out of you?

If, as you reflect, you realize that your heart is *not* where it should be... What can you do about that? Tame your tongue? I wish. That would be a splendid solution... If it were possible. But James delivers us some rough news in verses 7-8, which say,

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.

I often wish I knew how to tame my tongue. It would save me from getting myself into trouble, and I'm sure most of you can heartily echo that same sentiment. I imagine most of us at some point asking ourselves, “why did I open my big mouth?”

When I was looking at this verse, I was thinking about the monstrous reptilian sea creature, the Leviathan. It was one of, if not *the*, most deadly creatures to exist. Nobody can restrain it, or keep it as pets. But the passage isn't talking about that. It's not taming creatures to make them docile or domesticated. The passage is referring to the power and authority God gave man over all creatures. The creation mandate, where man was created to keep and *subdue* the earth. The taming we see here is exercising power and dominion over it. Killing it, keeping it in a cage, restraining it, removing its power, having control over the circumstances. And that we *can* do. God made us pretty incredible. There's a reason that when he made us, he declared creation “very good”. We can do a lot of things and have power over so much. He made it that way, in his perfect design.

But we cannot tame the tongue. It is more uncontainable than the Leviathan or any other creature in all creation. This is, on the one hand, a great discouragement. But it's also a comfort to hear that I'm not alone, and neither are you. As you look around this room, know that every person here stumbles in many ways, and one of those ways is that they, like you, cannot tame the

tongue. But if it's true that we cannot tame our tongue, then how do we make sense of the next few verses? Look at them with me, starting in verse 9:

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.

How can we control what comes out of our mouths? I thought we just learned that we can't tame the tongue. What gives?

Though we cannot tame the tongue, we can reflect on who we are. God doesn't leave us unable to grow. Besides, first, giving us the gospel that brings life when we deserved death, we are also promised that God will, and is, growing us. We call that sanctification. Sanctification is the process of becoming holy. It's our God-sourced growing in righteousness. God started the work for us when he saved us. There are things that change in an instant, we were once enemies of God, following after other passions. But God removed our hearts of stone and gave us hearts of flesh. And, as Philippians 1:6 says, "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." Though who we were remains, we are — right now — becoming more like Christ. So there are two sources in us. Our tongue communicates what the two selves are seeking after.

Our dual natures duel within, and this ought not be. Paul shares his experience with the internal struggle in Romans 7:

I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

There's an old folk legend of the two wolves within you. One wolf represents your negative traits, and the other represents your positive traits. And the one that wins is the one you

feed. I think that, though lacking, is a decent illustration of the two natures that war within Christians. We can either serve our flesh, or we can serve the law of God. Healthy Christians, by the power of the Holy Spirit, see their new man slowly gaining ground against the old self.

However, this *is* unnatural. The war within us should be settled. We are *created* by God to do his work, yet we yearn to serve ourselves. With the mouth that you use to pray to God for provision for you and your family also speaks maliciously against others. The mouth God created for you to sing praises to him whisper profanities in secret. What comes out of us are both blessings and curses. It's both wrong *and* unnatural. That's why James illustrates with two things that cannot happen in nature. Water cannot be both salty and fresh. Trees don't grow different kinds of fruit by nature. Yes, we can pump saltwater and freshwater into the same pond, and you can graft some fruits together on the same tree, but they're unnatural. And so too is creation rebelling against its creator. We are God's craftsmanship, yet we rebel. That's unnatural. Even with the rise of AI, and the way it has grown out of control (how's that for another illustration about a small spark setting forests ablaze?) it only ever does what it was created to do.

You were created by God. You have a purpose. You are Christ's ambassador, and it is your duty to represent him well, therefore, **beware of dishonouring God in your conduct**, for what is found in you will be what comes out of you.

It's rarely helpful to tell people to beware of something without looking to something else, better. You want to point people in the direction they want to go. Not just to avoid where they shouldn't. James isn't telling us we can't tame the tongue *simply* so that we know that we're failures, leaving us to ourselves. No! He's telling us so that we can be equipped to fight the battle against our tongues. So here in James's concluding section of chapter 3, he teaches us

to **be prudent to seek God's Wisdom**, for that is what produces true, undefiled, religion. Being prudent means to show care and thought for the future. And what better wisdom to seek than the wisdom that comes from the omniscient (all-knowing) and omniscient (all-wise) God? By recognizing the good for us now, in our near-future, and in the life to come, we can chase after the morally upright, perfect, holy, and righteous God. By doing that, we will set ourselves up well to honour God as his ambassadors. **Be prudent to seek God's wisdom.**

James teaches us what it means to inquire and reflect on God's wisdom. Here in verse 13 to the end of the chapter:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

In biblical counselling, we're encouraged not to focus on the symptoms of brokenness and sinfulness. We're told, instead, to seek the source. Where is the start of our disordered thinking, brokenness, sinfulness, or whatever else may have led to the issues? James is telling us that very thing. He's asking us to reflect on our hearts. The tongue is not our culprit. Recall that our tongue is our ambassador. It speaks for the heart. And since we all stumble in many ways, the heart has a lot of problems that need sorting.

We're being called to reflect. How do we live a holy life? How can we become wise? Here's what you do: Live out your faith. Show your work. Display what you wholeheartedly believe, not just in your words; talk is cheap. This reflects chapter 2: Don't have a dead faith. Be meek and humble as you seek wisdom. Not the "wisdom of the world", but the wisdom of the God of heaven. Be gentle, quiet, humble, and submissive to God, and steadfastly seek God. If you don't have this kind of wisdom, then ask! That's what James teaches us in chapter 1.

If you store up bitterness, jealousy, selfishness, or anything that puts yourself in the center, brother or sister, you are failing your responsibility to serve God as he has commanded you. It is your God-given duty to put yourself away and radiate the glory of God! And you do that, not in power, but in humility. You do that in meekness. You do that by seeking God's wisdom given to you in his word, and by the Holy Spirit working in you as you contemplate the God who is, as we just read, **pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, merciful**, full of **good fruits, impartial**, and **sincere**. If you seek yourself, you put this out of order. You're practicing evil, hiding God and his glory for a chance to stand in the center. So I hope you really take time to reflect, and find someone who you trust to speak words of wisdom to you: How are you seeking the wisdom of above as you grow in your faith right now? How are you putting your bitter jealousy and selfish ambitions to death, instead putting God in his rightful place at the center?

I want to conclude with hope and reminder of the declaration of peace given to us by God. This section ends with this unassuming but joy-filled line: "**And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.**" We are the people of the God of peace. And though I've talked a lot about how we stumble in many ways, that's not how God sees us. If we were serving any other god or seeking false religions, this chapter would be crushing. We, on our own, cannot find freedom from this body of death that has sinned and fallen into disfavour. But you've been given peace by the God of Peace, and he has offered freedom and salvation through his son, Jesus, the prince of peace. And he has peace with us, who were once his enemies. And not just enemies, but we have become friends with God. He has become *our* Father. And if that wasn't enough, he let us tell the people *we* love that they, too, can have peace with him.

I find the privilege and duty of preaching daunting. It's heavy, and scary. I want to do my best to represent God as well as I can. Not many should become teachers, but God is worth that greater strictness preachers take upon themselves. I'm, in many ways, inadequate. We're all inadequate. But he's sanctifying us. He's growing us into the people we were designed to be. And one day, we will be completely glorified.

God lets us be instruments in his peace-filled, loving, and all-wise redeeming hands. How could I, a recipient of grace like that, not preach? It is my God-given position to celebrate what he has done for me. And your life is your God-given position to proclaim what God has first done for you, as you tell the world of the joy that comes from knowing him, as his ambassador.

We're Imperfect vessels, but we have a perfect God, and he gives us a glorious message. That's why we labour on. That's why we conduct our lives to honour God. And that's why we seek his wisdom. Because there's no one that out-sins his grace. There's nobody so wicked that he can't transform completely. There's nothing that outshines his beauty on full display. May we all look to him, and show others the beauty of his peace. Amen.

God, we praise you for the privilege to be your ambassadors to the world. Yet we are sinful creatures that continue to sin. We ask that you renew our minds. We pray that you transform our hearts. We pray that you would make us more like your son, Jesus Christ the righteous one. And we pray the Holy Spirit sanctifies us, continuing to do the work in us that was first started when we received the gospel. We pray for those in this room that have not yet come to believe in you, and that their eyes would be open to your beauty, love, and kindness to them, and to us. And we pray that your will be done, on earth, through us, that you may be glorified as you glorify us. And we joyfully pray this all in Jesus' name. Amen.