

Words and Wisdom

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Date: 30 October 2016

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[0 : 00] Well, we continue our series tonight on the book of James, and James is answering the question, how does faith act? And his answer that we got last week was that faith works.

Faith does something. Faith does works. In other words, Christian faith acts faithfully. What we mean is that the gospel changes all of us.

Something about us, we don't believe in a gospel that we simply say yes to claims, knowledge claims about Jesus. Instead, we believe in a gospel that redeems us to walk down the path of redemption.

See, faith acts, faith walks down the road of redemption. The other way that James says this is by using the category of wisdom. So we've said in every week that James, most commentators think that James is like the proverbs of the New Testament.

It's proverbial wisdom. He's mapping a lot of what he does based off the book of proverbs. And in the book of proverbs, you know that there's a sharp juxtaposition between the life of wisdom and the life of folly.

[1 : 12] The life of wisdom simply navigating the world with the skill of acting well. Well, meaning righteously, the way that God intended for us to act.

And that's what James is talking about. How to act wisely. And tonight we come to what may be perhaps the most important aspect of wise action in the book of James, and that's speech.

Language, words. You know, language is fundamental to human identity. This in some ways what it means to be human is to be speakers, to be communicators.

It's the foundation of relationship, language. And in James 3, we're looking at wisdom applied to speech.

What does it look like to speak wisely? And so what we'll do is divide, just look at two things. First, we'll look at the potential of speech.

[2 : 17] In other words, what can words do? The potential is what can words do? And then secondly, we're going to look at the elements of wise speech. How do we become better speakers?

So what can words do and how can we become wise speakers? So first, the potential of speech.

What can our words do? Now in verse 4, he gives you a hint of the answer to this question.

He says that our tongues are small, but they boast of great things. And when he says the word tongues, he's talking about our capacity to speak words. And then he gives, what does this mean? Well, he gives us three metaphors to find out. He says that our tongues are like the rudder of a ship, of a great ship, very small rudder, very big ship, can steer the whole thing.

He says that our tongues are like the bit of a horse. The bit connects to the bridle and you steer a horse by the bit, right?

[3 : 13] But the most important metaphor is about a campfire. See in verse 5, he says that our tongues are like small fires.

Now if you go out in the woods and you build a campfire and you control that campfire and you are steadfast with that campfire and you keep it in its place, it gives you warmth when you're cold.

It gives you the possibility of food when you're hungry. It gives you light in the midst of darkness. So when the campfire is kept in check, traveling down the road, it's supposed to walk down.

It's an instrument of life. But as he puts it here in verse 5, how great a forest is said ablaze by such a small fire.

If you leave a campfire to itself, if you walk away from the campfire, if you leave it, it has great potential. And the great potential is that a campfire becomes a forest fire. And a forest fire becomes a city fire.

[4 : 20] And a city fire becomes a nation fire. And eventually the whole nation is burned down. You see what he's saying? Words have immense potential.

Words have immense potential. When they're steadfast and true, they're instruments of life. And when they're unchecked, they become the power of destruction over the whole world.

Now look, everybody knows how true this is, right? Because wars, you know, wars are fought with ferocious physical battle, but wars aren't started that way.

Wars start through speech, pronouncements, curses, small ideas spoken that fan flames.

Wars end in speech. Wars end with words. You see, death is wielded by words and life is promised again through words, not through physical force.

[5 : 26] Society. You can't have society without trustworthy speech. If you live in a society where all the speech starts to break down, where language and words start to break down, where you can't trust anybody, where nobody tells the truth, maybe that's what happens in your household or in bigger, larger society units at your workplace or in larger society, what happens?

The entire society crumbles. The power of words is huge. It's the foundation of the possibility of having a society. It's that big.

If you read any modern philosophy, a lot of modern philosophers will even say that you can't experience reality without language, without words themselves.

You can't be in a relationship. You can't communicate. You can't understand anything in the field of your experience without the possibility of human speech.

Words, he says in the very next verse, the tongue is fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, standing the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life and set on fire by hell.

[6 : 40] What is he saying there? He's saying this, that words become forest fires and forest fires set your whole body on fire, the whole course of your life. What kind of a fire does he call it?

The fire of hell. The word there is the fire of Gehenna. It's the word that Jesus uses in the gospels to describe hell. Gehenna was literally a place.

It was a place outside of Jerusalem. It was a garbage dump. The way that they would get rid of the garbage is that they would constantly burn piles of garbage constantly. You see what he's saying? Words have the power of turning your life into the most pitiful garbage dump. They have the power of destruction.

Start on the flip side in verse two. What's the potential of words in verse two? For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect person able to bridle his whole body.

[7 : 37] Now the translation here masks it a little bit, but what he's actually saying there is that to be a perfect person means that you speak perfectly, that your words are perfect.

He says that perfect speech has the power of making the rest of you perfect. On the one hand, words have the power to set fire to society, and on the other hand, words have the potential of utter perfection.

They give life, and they take it away. This is the power of our speech, the power of our words. Now James, this is proverbial.

James is a book of Proverbs, and he's probably reflecting on Proverbs 18:21. Proverbs 18:21, the speaker writes, the tongue has the power of life and death.

The tongue has the power of life and death. You see, it was already there in the Old Testament.

Their words either minister life or they minister death, one of the other.

[8 : 49] In verse nine he says that this, he sets the juxtaposition in verse nine between words that are blessings and in verse eight with words that are poisons. You see, that's how James puts it. Now even more than Proverbs, even more than James, Jesus makes clear what's going on here.

And Jesus makes clear for us how serious words are. And Matthew 12:36, I tell you, on the day of judgment, people will give account for every careless word that they have spoken.

For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. Oh boy. Oh boy. You give an account for every careless word.

That idea is what explains what's going on in verse one. Did you catch verse one? Verse one seems like it's weird. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness than he goes off into the metaphors about your tongue.

Why is he talking about teachers at the beginning of this passage? Because teachers are the most vulnerable people for the judgment of words.

[10:01] If we will be judged for every careless word that we have ever spoken, who more than anyone will be judged besides teachers who have been given the very duty of speaking more words than anyone else?

And the most important words, you see, why are words so serious? That's the question. That's the question that we're left with.

Why are words so serious? And there's a hint in this passage to why words are so serious, and it's in verse nine. If you look at verse nine, with words we bless our Lord and Father, and with words we curse people, and here it is, people who are made in the likeness of God.

Now that's a quote. We curse, we bless God and we curse people who are made in the likeness of God, and you'll know the likeness of God. That's a quote. James has probably got Genesis 1 opened in front of him as he writes this.

He's thinking about Genesis 1. And Genesis 1.26 says that we, humanity, was made in the image and likeness of God, and that's the quote. He takes the likeness of God.

[11:08] Now what is it? Humans are created like God. Now the question then becomes, what does it mean to be like God? Well, what is God like? And the one simple thing for our passage that James is drawing from, from Genesis 1, is that God is a communicating God.

It's that simple. God is a speaker. God speaks words. And you see one of the things that simply means to be in the image of God?

To be the likeness of God? It means to be a speaker. To be a human speaker. You see, the human language is one of the great ways that we are, the image of God, the likeness of God.

It's that simple. But even more, even more, what does God do with words? What does God do with words? Genesis 1, what does God do with words?

He creates life out of nothing. When God speaks, creation comes forth. He bestows, in other words, he bestows life.

[12:14] God with his words, the communicating God bestows life. You see what it means to be in the likeness of God? To be a speaker who bestows life.

You're like God when you are speaking. But you're never more like God when you are speaking words that bestow life.

And you are less like God when your words are like campfires left unchecked. Like poisonous darts. One of the great pictures of this reality is, in the Old Testament, is Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel chapter 4. So Nebuchadnezzar, he's the great, he's the king of the world, Nebuchadnezzar.

I mean, Babylon was one of the largest empires that has ever existed. He's one of the five. One of the five greats. There was nobody that conquered the world like him. And in fact, you know, the hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the great wonders of the world, was likely built by Nebuchadnezzar.

[13:15] Nebuchadnezzar standing on his front porch in Daniel chapter 4, and he says these words, Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power, and for the glory of my majesty?

And then the text says, while the words were still in his mouth, he was driven away from humankind to dwell with the beasts, to eat grass like the cattle, to grow hair like a bird, feathers, to grow nails, nails as long as claws.

It says. Now, not only do I think James, James had Genesis one open when he was writing this text. I think he had, I think he had Daniel four open. Because you'll see if you look at James chapter three, verse seven, that he says this, every kind of beast and bird and reptile and sea creature we've tamed humans can tame.

We can tame every beast, but we can't tame our speech. We can't tame the tongues, our tongues. You see what he's saying?

This poisonous speech, the sin of speech makes you more beastly than human. See?

[14:34] Think about Nebuchadnezzar. He spoke the words of selfish ambition, and God gave him over to the life of a beast.

He started to eat the grass, to grow claws, to bear forth feathers. Here's the point, sinful speech is dehumanizing.

See? Sinful speech makes you less like a human because it makes you less like God. And to be a human is to be like God. See?

Sinful speech is, it dehumanizes you. It not only dehumanizes you, it dehumanizes the other people that it's directed toward as well.

You know, is this not what gossip is? To take somebody just a hair down from the pedestal of what it means to be truly human, the good, to cut them down just a little bit, it's dehumanizing.

[15:40] Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. You know that whoever coined that was a little kid on the playground that was coming up with the only possible defense mechanism he could in the moment.

Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will never hurt us. Words may not cut your flesh, but they can kill your soul. They can turn you into a beast.

They can make you less than human. They can kill others. There's a passage in the book of Proverbs I didn't write down so I can't remember, but it's there where it talks about the power of words to break bones.

To even break bones, words can penetrate all the way down to the core and snap the very fiber of our structures.

We need words that give life. We need words that give life. We need words of affirmation. It's a deep human need that we need somebody to tell us we're okay and to tell us that they know who we are and that they love us anyway.

[16:58] If you've raised kids, you know this, a kid cannot live without the affirmation of an adult. It cannot live, it cannot grow.

They will live a life of depression otherwise, and it's true for adults too. We need words that give life. This is why one of the worst punishments is solitary confinement.

Even more than brutal torture in some ways, there's an aspect of solitary confinement that's even worse because human beings need speech.

We need to be spoken to. It's who we are. We can't live without it. We can't live without it. It feels like death otherwise. Now, Matthew 12, 36, we speakers of careless words will be judged for every single one of them on the day of judgment and condemned.

Oh boy. What are we to do with ourselves? What are we to do with our tongues? You know, Jesus was beaten, Jesus was beaten by a very particular Roman will, my scholars will say, to the point that it usually made somebody look like something other than human.

[18:22] It was the torture device of dismemberment, of disfigurement, like a beast. No, too cruel for a beast. See?

He was beaten like something less than human. He was murdered like something, he was, you see, he was dehumanized precisely because of the speech that we've uttered that dehumanizes ourselves and others.

God became human to be ultimately dehumanized for our beastly tongues. Even more, the Son, Jesus, you know, Jesus needed affirmation to, he was a human, he was fully human, he needed affirmation.

This is why one of the reasons that at the baptism of Christ, God the Father speaks, this is my Son and I am pleased with him. He came, we learned last Sunday night, Jesus came to his Father so regularly in prayer, he needed affirmation.

He needed affirmation of his mission. He needed to be told and when he goes to the cross, he went to the ultimate, most ultimate solitary confinement one could imagine.

[19:42] His Father became silent, utter silence. Even more, our speech set the campfire by what she was burned as a sacrifice, you see.

Just our tongues that lit the very fire that burned him. We set the fires of the sacrifice so that, and he underwent them so that we might receive the fire purification rather than the fire of judgment.

So for you who speak carelessly today, yesterday, this week, tomorrow, for you who speak carelessly, first, what do you do first?

First you do nothing. You repent. First you have to know that your words have been judged in the judge who was judged in your place.

Know your speech judged in the fires of his death if you want to become a wise speaker. That's the first thing, the potential of speech. All right, secondly and finally, the elements of foolish and wise speech.

[21 : 01] Now, after seeing how the gospel relates to our tongues, how the gospel regenerates our speech, really all I want to do in the second point is give you a very brief survey of, through James 3, of what the Bible says about wise speech.

So all we're going to do is scrape the surface of it and give you kind of a matrix for how the Bible wants you to think about it and become a practice, become a practicing wise speaker.

Now, what is good speech? What is it to be a person who speaks wise words? What is good speech? What is bad speech? In verse 8 and 9, we're given that there are two objects of speech. In other words, there are two places that you can direct speech towards. Verse 8, sorry, verse 9, with speech we bless our Lord and Father and with it we curse people.

So here's the two objects of speech. You can speak about God, you can speak bad speech about God, and you can speak bad speech about creatures. So those are the two objects that we can speak poorly about, creator and creatures.

[22 : 15] And creatures specifically here is focusing on humans. In other words, what Jesus calls our neighbors. So those are the two objects of bad speech. When we talk badly about God, we call that blasphemy.

When we talk poorly about God, we call it blasphemy. Bad speech about God is blasphemy. It's careless words applied to God's name. Careless words applied to God's name, and it takes all sorts of forms.

And then when we utter bad speech about creatures or humans, specifically our neighbors, it takes all sorts, there's all types of ways of categorizing those ways of speaking. So we call things like gossip, slander, defamation, things like that.

We'll get into a couple of this in just a second. But there's a matrix that the New Testament offers us of what it means to be a wise speaker. And it's implicit in this passage, but not explicit, but it's very explicit throughout most, a ton of the New Testament.

So and it's simply this. Wise speech is filtered through the matrix of truth and love.

[23 : 25] So Ephesians 4, Ephesians 4, 15, speak the truth and love. It's also repeated in Ephesians 4, 25, 1 John 1.

It says that a couple of times in John 14 to 17 when he's talking about friendship. And it's implicit, I think, even here in this passage. So if you look at James 3 verse 14, but if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

You see, the ultimate criterion of knowing when to speak and when not to speak, you're saying there, is when you're going to be false to the truth. Don't talk. We'll come back to that in just a second.

So that's truth. You see, it's implicit there. But then at the end of the passage, he gives us a list from verse 17 to 18 of his own version of the fruits of the Spirit.

What does it mean to be wise for James? The wisdom from above is pure. That's the word holy, actually. Then peaceable, then gentle, then reasonable. In other words, it's not reasonable as in logical, but willing to admit that you're wrong is what that word means.

[24 : 36] We're willing to admit that you're wrong, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. This is James' way of defining the fruits of the Spirit that we see in Galatians, that we see Jesus list many times.

What are the fruits of the Spirit? Verse Corinthians 13, if you have not love, you have none of the fruits of the Spirit.

He's talking about agape there. He's encapsulating agape in a list. Truth and love is the matrix of good speech.

What is it to speak truth? What does the New Testament think it means to speak truth? Speaking the truth and the logic of the New Testament is not simply accurate speech.

If you get pulled over by the cops, by the police, and they start to question you about what you've done, what do they want you to do? They want you to tell the truth.

[25 : 34] Hopefully, you tell them the truth. What do they mean in that situation? What is the truth for them in that situation? It's an accurate representation of the events for which they have pulled you over for.

They want you to speak accurately about what's just happened. That's not what the New Testament means by truth. It means something more than that.

Speaking truth is not just accurate representations of past events. It's something more than that. You know this intuitively, right?

Have you ever said the right thing, the true thing, at the wrong time? Have you ever said the right thing at the wrong time?

That's what the New Testament has in mind about what it means to speak truth. You can say accurate things all the time, but sometimes it's the wrong time.

[26 : 28] Truth-telling is not just accurate representation, but it's accurate representation always combined with agape, with love, with the love of Christ, the love that Christ bestows.

In other words, if you look with me at verse 13, B and 14, by his good conduct, let a person 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. You see the juxtaposition there?

Truth-telling is more than accurate representation. It has something to do with your motivations for speaking. So it says here, if you have selfish ambition in your heart, don't speak.

It's not truth. It doesn't matter how accurate it is. If it's for the sake of a selfish ambition, then it's not truth-telling. In other words, truth without love is not truth, you see.

[27 : 28] Just think about it this way. It matters when you say something, who you say something to, how you say it, and ultimately why you've said it.

So you can speak accurately to a friend. You're walking with a friend, and you can speak very accurately about a situation in the life of another friend to that friend.

But if you do it with the wrong motivations, if you do it with what James calls selfish ambitions, what do we call that? That's gossip.

You see? You can talk about that person in a perfectly accurate way, but if you do it in selfish ambition rather than agape, that's gossip.

Or you can speak accurately directly to a person about them, for instance. But if you can even critique them.

[28 : 27] But if it's out of selfish ambition, what is it? It's spite, you see? Or you can speak accurately about yourself to other people.

And if you do it in the motivation of selfish ambition, what is it? It's self-absorption. Right? It's turning the conversation back to yourself constantly, constantly, constantly.

Talking about your merits, turning the conversation. They can be truth. You can speak accurately about your merits, but if you do it with the wrong motivations, it's self-absorption. You see?

Truth is not simply accurate representation, but it's speaking with deep, unselfish love for other people. It's speaking out of a heart that loves other people, that wants life for them.

You see? Proverbs 27.6 puts it this way. Wounds from a friend are faithful, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

[29 : 28] You see what he's saying there? Wounds from a friend. If a friend takes a sword and stabs you in the gut with his words, cuts you down.

With a sword, these are righteous words the author says. You see what he's saying?

When you speak truth out of agape, even the most critical cutting, the things that are meant to slice your heart are righteous.

Friends speak the truth in love. They speak the truth in agape. And then on the opposite side, an enemy multiplies with kisses. An enemy multiplies with kisses.

I think he's getting at one of the sins of speech that is most common for us, especially in our context here. Enemies multiply with kisses.

[30 : 23] This is speaking love without truth. What do we call that? That's flattery. You see? It's speaking love because you want their approval, but it doesn't actually contain the truth.

It's an overstatement. Then you're an enemy. You come and you kiss the cheek. You kiss the cheek. You kiss the cheek. And what's really happening? You're saying, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me.

That's what flattery does. Or love without truth is also sometimes exhibited in silence. One of the great sins of speech is the sin of silence.

You see, people who can truly speak the truth in agape, they don't keep their mouth shut for the sake of a friend.

The sin of silence is the sin of cowardice. It's the sin of cowardice. True friendship, true speech is categorized by agape.

[31 : 24] It wants life for the other person. It is not self-interested, you see. Okay, three minutes and we're done. Now how do we, that's a brief taxonomy, a brief guide for how the New Testament thinks about what wise speech is like.

Now very briefly, I just want to give you three ideas. I'm just going to basically list them kind of for how to become a wise speaker. How to work at this.

This is something to do. First is this, very simple. Remember this, your words can be forgiven. Your words can be forgiven. They must be forgiven. They have been forgiven lavishly by Jesus. And if that's the case, you have to be very quick to forgive other people's words. You have to be a person that can be insulted, not in a state of agape and forgive. That's the first thing. Second thing, how do you move forward?

[32 : 28] After repentance and forgiveness, we have to move forward. We have to walk down the path of redemption. How do we walk? First, we have to remember this. Words, nevertheless, even though they can and are forgiven, are irrevocable.

They're irretrievable. So one of the great late theologians, John Webster, who many of you are aware of from St. Andrews, puts it this way. What is said may not be unsaid.

It sets up meaning in this world which may not be retracted. It may be recanted or withdrawn or renounced, but it may not be unsaid once it has been said.

Because that which has been said is irreversible. If I am called a fool by someone, I am the one who has once been called a fool.

And that person is the one who once called me a fool. And this place is the place that I was once called a fool by that person.

[33 : 27] And what's he saying? Words are sticky. And we talk about that all the time in our own idioms. You know, when you have a heart to heart with somebody, they talk about the words that have stuck with them throughout all of life.

Important people say things to you that stick forever. They'd never go away. The person that called you stupid will always be the person that called you stupid. Words stick.

They don't go away. But they can be forgiven. They can be forgiven. All right, thirdly and finally is this. It's the paradox of the passage and we'll close with this.

What do we do? How do we become wise and faithful speakers? James is giving us two ways very briefly to do it. The first way was in verse two. We read it earlier where he's explaining to us that perfect speech makes the rest of your body perfect, the rest of your action perfect.

You see what he's saying? When you speak perfectly, it affects you and makes the rest of you change. Okay? That's the one way. That's verse two. The opposite in the passage, verse 18, he says something very different.

[34 : 38] He says something very different. A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. Here what he has in mind is Jesus' words, that the words of our mouth are reflections of the state of our heart.

That what we speak pours forth out of the spring that is our heart. Whatever state your heart is in, that's the kind of speaker you're going to be. Now you see the juxtaposition? At the beginning of the passage, he wants us to see that when you speak perfectly, it makes the rest of you change. It makes your heart perfect. And then at the end of the passage, he wants you to see that you're only going to speak things that your heart already has. If your heart is virtuous, then you'll speak virtue.

Perfect speech makes perfect, but you only speak what comes forth from the heart. You see? It's a paradox. And both are true.

They exist in reciprocity with each other. And the point is this, you have to strive for habits of wisdom.

[35 : 44] One of the habits of wisdom that we have to take up is we have to be very conscious about our own sins of speech. In what ways are you prone?

Do you turn the conversation back to yourself? As soon as that person walks away, are you quick to make the subtle comment to see if that your friend bites? In what ways are you prone to particular sins of speech?

Working on killing that speech will make you change, you see? That's the first way. It's habits of consciousness and being very aware that this is what I am prone to speak like.

This is where my problem with sins of speech is. And fighting it, attacking it. Just try on Monday, for one day, to whatever it is, if it's always turning conversations back to yourself, say, today I'm going to be very conscious and never turn the conversation back towards me and see how it changes you.

But on the flip side, he's saying this, the only way you can change at the very same time is that you need to work on your heart. You need to be cut by the fires.

[36 : 56] You need the habits of grace, you see? You need the habits of grace to change your heart on the one side. Your scripture, the fellowship of the saints.

And you need to be very consciously working on your particular sins of speech on the other side.

These are the two ways he's telling us to become wise speakers. It takes time.

It takes time. Well, you know, this will make you happy, becoming a better speaker, a wise speaker.

This is what wisdom is flourishing. It'll make you happy in the hardest of times. And you know, we know people. You know people in your life that have been changed like this, don't you?

You know the people in this room right now, some of you. You could name them. The people that you know, their speech patterns have been changed by the gospel. And, man, I was cut down studying this because I'm not one of those people.

[38 : 00] And the future, the horizon that is before us, nevertheless, is a horizon of hope, of change, because Jesus has cut down the horizon of judgment that we created through our beastly talk.

Let's pray. Father, we ask that you would change us, that you would change our speech patterns, that they would conform to righteousness, and that we would be flourishing people because of it. I'm going to pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.