

Disordered Speech, Reordered

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Date: 08 March 2026

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[0:00] I'm going to invite Vicky up who's going to read scripture for us. So Vicky's going to read the passage that Corey's going to preach from. This is James chapter 3 verses 1 to 12.

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, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also. Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 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.

[1:08] 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. Well, we read from James, the letter of James, and this is a passage about speech that Vicki read for us.

So James is writing this letter, and he is the little brother of Jesus Christ, biologically the little brother. And he grew up in the same house as Jesus, as the Son of God. And so that has to mean that he would have shared so many meals with Jesus, and he would have very probably slept in the same room as Jesus, and shared a room with Jesus. And that means that James is writing to us as someone who has heard, the only person in human history who has spoken perfectly, who never sinned one time with the way they spoke, the words that they spoke.

[2:22] And so he knows what he's talking about when he writes to us about perfect speech. The central question of this book, I've been saying each week is, what does a person who has faith in Jesus Christ look like in the way they live?

So what is lived faith? So James has said many times that a disciple of Jesus doesn't just believe certain things, but their faith is manifest. They actually act out their faith. So faith has a tell. Faith is a lived. Faith without works is dead faith. And we've seen so far three things.

This is a summary of all five sermons we've already had in the book of James in about 45 seconds. Three things that James has told us is the tell of living faith in your life.

Number one, you are a person who can suffer differently than the way the world suffers. So you suffer in a way where suffering actually can grow you, not devastate you, not destroy you.

[3:22] And the second way he's told us is that you're a follower of Jesus living out your faith when you are shaped by the word of God. So you're ingesting the word of God, hearing it, and also doing it to the point where your opinions, your personal opinions, become less and less important.

And instead, what the Bible says is far more important for you. And then the third way he said that faith has a tell. Faith shows up is through good works. So faith without good works is dead faith. And so those good works are especially works of mercy to the afflicted, to the poor, to the widow, to the orphan, James says. Now, in all of that, he is talking about the wise life, what it means to live a life of wisdom.

So he mentioned the word wisdom in chapter one. And we said at the end of chapter one that he introduces everything he's going to say in the rest of the book in chapter one. And so now he's returning to the concept of wisdom and really just saying, all I've been talking about in this letter is how to live a wise life.

And that's the difference between a wise life and a foolish life. So I've tried to go out of my way a few times to say that the letter of James is not just the Proverbs of the New Testament.

[4:29] I have preached on James in the past and said that, and I've realized I don't think that's right. I think that's wrong. Instead, James is not aphoristic. He has one whole argument that he's making. But it is like Proverbs in that this is New Testament wisdom literature.

So he's teaching us about what it means to live the wise life. Now, in the Bible, there is law in this life. There are laws, there are laws in our land. And laws tell you very specifically things to do and things not to do.

So if you're wondering, should I murder? There is a law for that in the Bible. Thou shalt not murder. It's very clear. Should I commit adultery? No, thou shalt not commit adultery. Should I steal? No, thou shalt not steal. That's law.

But wisdom is something beyond law. So what is wisdom? Wisdom is how to live life skillfully before God, living for God into this world when there are no laws telling you what to do in every situation. So the Bible has all sorts of laws, but then it doesn't tell you who you should marry or whether you should get married. It doesn't tell you what job you should take. It doesn't tell you if you should live in the city or the suburbs or rural.

[5:36] The answer is city, by the way. I'm just kidding. We love the suburbs and the rural communities. The Bible doesn't tell you all that. There's a thousand things you decide all the time, every day.

What should you eat? When should you wake up? These are questions of wisdom, not of law. And so James is here trying to say that a Christian is seeking, walking the path of becoming a more and more wise person by becoming what?

A doer of the word, ingesting the word so that it pours out of you in your decision-making. You live instinctively wise. Now of all the domains of wisdom that there can be, and there are so many, speech, language is the final frontier.

And what I mean by that is that words are the hardest, James is saying, to get control of. Now we don't think that way intuitively, but it is true. It's so easy to control our bodies from violence.

Most of us do not struggle walking around in the city, getting frustrated and punching people in the face. We don't struggle with that. We don't. We can actually restrain ourselves physically in so many ways, but boy, is it hard to restrain your words.

[6:47] And even in a moment where that colleague, that friend, that person, that neighbor is saying that to you, and you just want to tell them what you think about them, you want to turn around with an insult, maybe in the moment you hold it in, but the domain of speech goes so deep that we know we don't just have words existing externally, externally, spoken, out loud.

We have this whole invisible domain of speech, the internal dialogue. And in the internal dialogue, we might be withholding what we really think about somebody in their face, but boy, is it raging on the inside.

Internally. See, the domain of speech is internal and external, and what tends to happen is that the external leaks what's really going on in the internal eventually. Words are the final frontier.

They're so hard to get a hold of. They're really the last domain of wisdom James is telling us here. Jesus said it so plainly, out of the heart, the mouth speaks.

And so words are the premier revelation of what's true about our hearts. And James comes and says something very plain to us today, and that's that our hearts are disordered as sinners, therefore our speech patterns are disordered.

[8:00] So let's think about two things. We're going to spend, we're going to look at speech in James twice, and today is, we're going to see the power, the potential of speech. That's what James talks about in these 12 verses, and then the real source of that power.

And then next time when we come back, we'll get into some real practicals about how to grow as wise speakers, but that's not for today. Today, the potential and the power of speech, and the source of the power of speech, because that's what these 12 verses are really about.

So let's look at it together. First, the power of speech. Now we children learn, we maybe teach, I don't know, we children learn, the famous rhyme, sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

And it's probably been said a million times that whoever originally wrote that was somebody that was deeply hurt by words, and doing anything they could to conjure a defense mechanism, a coping mechanism, a strategy on the playground somewhere.

We know it's not true. Sticks and stones can break our bones. Far worse than physical pain is pain that can come through words. Far deeper. The soul is so much harder to heal than the body.

[9:10] And so words have a power that sticks and stones do not have. Now James tells us that in four images at the heart of this passage. So you'll see the first image, he's trying to teach us that in verse three.

So if you look with me at verse three, if we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. As much as it's true that out of the heart, the mouth speaks, James uses an illustration here to say, from the mouth, the heart is formed.

And so when you put a bit, a little metal bit into the mouth of a horse, you have this tiny little instrument that can steer a massive horse around. In the same way, the tongue, he says, is very small, but it has the power to form you and to form other people.

It's got great power. So if you are constantly speaking words of bitterness, you become a bitter person more and more. If you speak words of rage, you become an angry person more and more. If you speak words of encouragement and gratitude to people, you become a grateful person and an encourager more and more. You see, it's so small, yet it has such power of formation. The second image is in verse four.

[10:18] So he keeps going. These are just going to build on each other. Look at the ships also, though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder where the pilot directs.

Same exact idea. The tongue is so small, yet he's escalating the image because a big seaship is a lot bigger than a horse. So he's saying, not only do the words have a great power to form you, but words have such a power to form the world, to shape the world, like a little bitty rudder that moves the Titanic.

So your words have great power, great potential. He keeps going the third, and I think probably the most important is in verse five and six. He makes the point in verse five. So the tongue is small, but it boasts of great things.

It has so much potential, so much power. But then here's the third illustration he gives us. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire. Now in Scotland, I meant to look this up and I forgot, but I'm not sure all the rules of making fires out in the highlands.

But I know that if you go walk in the highlands, if you go walk Monroe's, you get very cold. And you know the power of a great fire. You're walking, you're freezing, you're hungry, it's dark.

[11:30] You put a great campfire and you sustain it. You put it where it's supposed to be. You surround it with rocks and it feeds you when you're hungry. It gives you light in the midst of darkness. It heats you when you're freezing cold.

It's a wonderful instrument, an instrument of life. James says the tongue can be a campfire, an instrument of life, giving life in all the right places it needs.

But he says, when you do not tend to that fire in dry conditions, it gets out of control and it burns down the forest and then it burns down the city and then it burns down the nation and becomes a national fire.

He's saying that your speech has such power to give life and to burn down a nation. And he's probably taking this straight out of Proverbs 18:21.

So this is where James is the New Testament Proverbs. The tongue, the writer of Proverbs says, has the power of life and death. And that's exactly what James is saying here. Now there's one more, the fourth and final image.

[12:31] And just notice as we read it, the escalation of the verdict. He hasn't given us a clear verdict yet. He's only talked about how much potential our speech has. But in verse seven and eight, he gets to the verdict.

Every kind of beast and bird, every reptile, every sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by humanity. But no human being can tame the tongue. It's a restless evil full of deadly poison. Now, he said, your speech has such great potential. It's like a fire. It's like a rudder on a mighty ship. It's like a bit in a horse's mouth. You can form people.

You can turn nations. You can do all sorts of things. But then he gets to the point, the verdict. And he says, we have gone out and we have tamed every type of animal there is, including reptiles. I didn't really know you could tame all the reptiles, but it says here, you can tame all the reptiles. We've tamed snakes. You can charm a snake, a poisonous snake, and get it to stop spitting its venom. But he said that the tongue cannot be tamed. Here's the verdict. He says, no human being can tame the poison of the tongue of speech.

[13:36] And what is he doing there? He's thinking back to the Old Testament and he's quoting, he's summarizing Genesis 1 to 3. Because in the beginning, God made humanity in his image and said, I give you dominion over the birds and the fish and the reptiles and all the animals.

And he said, we've done that. We've been able to tame all the beasts. But the one beast that captured us was our speech. And remember, the serpent himself came into the garden and by speech, he questions God's speech.

By speech, he said, you can't really trust what God says. And Adam and Eve fell for that. They believed that. And it's by speech, by the speech of the serpent, that we became serpent-like speakers.

He's saying, you can tame snakes, but you cannot tame the snake of your speech. It spits poison. It's like a viper. So that's James' mighty verdict. The power of speech, the potential of speech, and yet the instrument of fire, of destruction that human beings have created from speech.

Now, let's prove it for a second. How do wars start? Wars don't begin with violence. Wars begin with words.

[14:46] Wars begin with propaganda and lies. And how do relationships break? Relationships break through a long history of words, ill-spoken, through words that diminished the other, that dismissed them, that betrayed them.

That hurt them, that wounded them in a way that they couldn't heal. How do companies collapse? Companies collapse internally through a culture of gossip, through a culture of not telling the truth, of infighting, of rumor, of deceit.

How do friendships break? How do churches split? How do denominations get started? Quite often through gossip and deceit and words that wound and words that break relationships.

Violence can break the body, but words destroy souls and it is far harder to heal from that than from the violence or sticks and stones that hurt the body.

Let me take this even further. The philosophers of the 20th century very hopefully helped us understand that all of our life is mediated through words.

[15:53] The power of words, it's so deep. All of life is mediated to us through words. You don't, when you walk into St. Columbus, this building on a Sunday morning, you don't just see metal and cloth.

You see chairs and you don't even have to think about it. You don't come into this building and see data of different bits and atoms and particles of wood. No, you see a church, you see a building, you see beauty.

You interpret it immediately. You don't have to be told. You know what you see, right? Because all of our experience is mediated through words. God has given us this gift of language by which we interpret all reality.

We never see anything or think anything outside of the vehicle and medium of language. The power of speech, it's the very thing by which we interpret all of our reality and it's got great power to give life or to take it away.

We possess something more powerful with more potential to give life and more danger than we ever think about in our daily ability to communicate. Now, he gives us the very clear diagnosis.

[16:56] I already mentioned it in verse 8. Nobody can tame the tongue. He says it in verse 2. If you look back with me at verse 2 before we move on to the final point, we all stumble in many ways and if anyone does not stumble in what they say, it's a perfect person.

So he says, we all stumble in so many ways and if you are able to be a perfect speaker, you would therefore be a perfect human being. You see, speech is the final frontier.

It's the great test of sin and he's given us such a clear diagnosis. Is there anybody here today who has not wounded another with their words? Is there anybody here today who has not flattered in order to receive it back?

Is there anybody here today who doesn't slip in the humble brag at the end of their conversations, trying to turn the conversation back? Do any of us here not struggle with sinful speech?

And James says, no, no, not one. There is none righteous. Paul's simple idea. There's none righteous. No, not one. We are broken speakers. We speak sin, sins of speech all the time.

[18:03] That's his clear diagnosis and what he calls, what he says about that diagnosis is so clear in verse 6. He calls our sinful speech hellfire. So the word in verse 6, the tongue is a 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. That's the word Gehenna that Jesus uses in the gospel.

He says, our speech is so serpent-like it's been set on fire by Gehenna. Now what does he mean by that? Gehenna, hell, it was a physical place in Jerusalem. It was a dump outside the city and Jesus uses it metaphorically to point to ultimate destruction and in that dump there would be fires burning perpetually to get rid of all the rubbish that is heaped up in the city.

It stinks. It's nasty. It's vile. And he's saying from the time of Genesis 3 our sinful speech has been set on fire so that we spit out words like rubbish heaps.

Our tongues are on fire in the sense that it's like refuse burning quite often, all the time. He's saying that's what's going on in the human heart and it's coming out in our disordered speech. He's so serious about it.

[19:12] That's why in verse 1 and 2 he says not many of you should become teachers. He means in the church because you will be judged for your speech.

And so if speech has such power, such ability, such potential, it is a dangerous thing he's saying to get up front and preach. And so he's talking to people like me and others.

He's saying if you are speaking far more and you have the power to get people to listen to you, your speech has far more power to bring life, but yes, but to also bring death. And so it's a great warning about the reality of speech that comes out of the human heart.

John Webster was a late theologian in St. Andrews who died a few years ago. His son actually used to be a member of this church. And John Webster throughout his career in theology wrote on speech quite often.

And he wrote a couple famous articles that are all titled The Sins of Speech in different publications. Let me summarize to you what he says about the power of our speech and your speech.

[20:16] He says that one of the realities of what makes our language so powerful is what he calls its irrevocability. Irrevocability. The inability to bring it back once it's spoken.

So this is what he says. Words have a generative power that cannot be undone. They set up meaning in the world a real relation between a speaker and a hearer that cannot be erased.

You can recant your words. You can apologize for your words. You can repair based on what you've said but you cannot unsay what you've said. And this is what he writes.

The person who called you stupid that day is always the person who called you stupid that day. That room is always the room where that person called you that. And here is the asymmetry that

makes this so devastating.

It takes years to build a reputation. It takes seconds to ruin someone's reputation. You can destroy a person with a single sentence in only a moment.

[21:18] The irrevocability of words. James calls it hellfire. You'll remember last semester we worked through the book of Daniel. And in Daniel chapter 4 there's this great moment that illustrates this truth.

And it's when King Nebuchadnezzar the great king the mighty king of Babylon he walks out onto his balcony and he looks out at the greatest empire the world has ever seen the hanging gardens of Babylon in fact he was probably looking at and he says this is this not Babylon the great which I myself have built as a royal residence by my mighty power for the glory of my majesty.

And then the text says this while the words were still in his mouth he had barely breathed them out. While the words were still in his mouth the sound still in the air he was driven from human society to live as a beast he ate grass like an ox and he grew feathers like a bird.

Now what do we mean Nebuchadnezzar is the great illustration that we were made to be speakers that give life but the more and more we speak words of hellfire we destroy with our words the more and more we become beast-like.

In other words we're being told here that beastly speech dehumanizes us. Secondly, finally why? The source of the power of speech.

[22:37] Now the question that James then deals with at the end verse 9 to 12 is why have we come to possess such great power? And so if you look down at 9 to 12 especially 9 he says with it we bless our Lord and Father with our speech and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

He is taking us again back to Genesis 1 with our words we bless God we worship God with our words we curse people and then he said who were made in the likeness of God.

So there he's quoting from Genesis 1:26 where we learn that every single person has been made in the image of God and the likeness of God and he's thinking along the lens the logic of Genesis 1 to 3 and he's saying that you were made to basically do two things with your speech one bless God worship God and bless people to praise to affirm to encourage creatures people other people made in the likeness of God but he says what we actually do is we will come to church and he says bless God worship God and then turn and curse people gossip about them speak poorly of them behind their backs and then he goes on and gives you more images can salt water and fresh water come from the same source can a fig tree produce grapes and what is he doing he's saying no it's contradictory contradictory what's contradictory that you were made in the image of God to be a speaker like God and so we'll worship God with our lips but then gossip about people behind their back and he's saying that is salt water and fresh water coming out of the same source and it can't work you can't be a fig tree producing grapes and figs at the same time and he's saying we are walking contradictions because of our sin that we will worship yet curse people simultaneously and he's pointing us to this where do we get such power where does what is the ground of the power of human speech human words and it's this we were made like God we were made in his image we were made as speakers and God is a speaker he's the divine communicator

God we see from Genesis 1 is the great speaker so how does he create he says let there be light he speaks words and the world comes about and so he's saying the great power of our speech comes from the fact that God is the divine speaker the ultimate speaker and he has given us the gift of being like him and so the more and more we use our words to encourage to build people up to affirm to tell people that we love them to speak the truth and love in the right context the more and more we are imaging God into the world the more and more we are being like God and becoming like God the more and more we use words to defame destroy gossip insult rage the less and less we are like God and the less and less we image God we why the story of Nebuchadnezzar becoming a beast why did that happen to him he's a walking illustration in history of using the tongue the great instrument the greatest clearest reality of what it means to be made in God's image the more we use it beastly the more beast like we become and so we were made to be speakers like God is what we're being told how does God give life now you come today to church you're listening maybe to a sermon right now how does God give life we're told in the Bible that God gives life in three ways and they're all through word so the Bible says that God gives life through the word preached through the word of the gospel being told the word of the gospel being told you see

we take life away with our words with disordered hearts but God reorders through the word through the word preached through the word taught that's called the preached word the second way is through the inscripturated word the Bible the threefold form of the word the preached word the inscripturated word that God gives life through the words of the Bible by the Holy Spirit and the third and the most ultimate form of the word the eternal word himself so don't miss that when Jesus Christ came to earth what was he called the word made flesh

God's speech made visible into this world Jesus Christ is divine speech he is the speech of God the Father sent into this world see God what does James say he says no human can tame the tongue but he leaves one thing silent no human can tame the tongue but God can so God can fix our speech God can heal our speech God can forgive our speech God can reorder our speech and he does it through the preached word the inscripturated word but ultimately through the eternal word himself Jesus Christ now that means that when Jesus came into this world in the incarnation that was a pronouncement of verdict over us human beings as speakers Jesus Christ was born the son of God the word became human to first pronounce a verdict over our sinful speech and you can hear that in Matthew 12 36 and this is a devastating moment in the gospels he says

[27:48] I tell you on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they have ever spoken for by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned I don't know if you've ever had the experience of sending a text message I know you've had that experience sending a text message to a friend and you accidentally sent it to the person you were talking about the few times that that's happened in our lives that is one of the most devastating moments talk about the irrevocability of words there's nothing you want more than to be able to dive into the digital world and grab that text and bring it back but you can't and typically that does often produce a great wound between you and whoever you sent that message to do you have sins of speech in your life in your background in your past Jesus Christ comes in the incarnation in his very presence is a verdict that we are not the speakers

God made us to be have we created wounds have we never asked for forgiveness for something we said at that time to that person or are we coming today carrying those wounds because of things that people have said to us undoubtedly everyone in this room will have a wound that someone has said to them at one time that they've never really gotten past we are wounding and wounded people when it comes to words and Jesus comes and says you will be judged for every careless word you ever spoke how and there's one of two ways either to stand before God and have an account of every careless word truly taken set out loud like a tape recorder being replayed at the end of your life or another way and that's this that Jesus Christ the word himself the divine speech of God who came in the middle of history he was treated as less than human because of our dehumanizing speech now he says he Isaiah 53 tells us he was one from whom we had to turn our faces away when he was on the cross he became beastly not because he deserved it but because we do Jesus Christ the word of God who had total fellowship with his father who had never heard a single moment of silence from his father at the cross he said my God my God why are you silent why have you forsaken me he heard divine silence he heard the sound of silence the sound of hell itself in that moment because of our evil speech Jesus Christ was bitten by that ultimate serpent the great venom the cup of poison that our speech has poured and filled he drank it for us see when he says in Matthew 12 on that day you will be judged for every careless word you can be judged in him for every careless word you've ever spoken meaning you can be forgiven today for every word that should have never been said that you said I know I need that and I think every single one of us needs it to be forgiven by Jesus Christ for every single careless word we've ever spoken look that's not all that's not all I'll finish with this the resurrection of Jesus says even more than that the cross says you can be forgiven for every careless word you've ever spoken but the resurrection what does it say in the moment of the resurrection

Jesus Christ is vindicated when he comes out of the grave God the father says this is my beloved son with whom I'm well pleased he cannot stay dead he is my son and when you're with him when you are walking with him he says the very same thing to you it's not just that you need words of forgiveness many of us today especially also need words of healing because maybe we've never

been told in the right ways that we're loved maybe we've never been affirmed maybe we went through a childhood and didn't get what we needed and you see the gospel says that in the resurrection when you're with Jesus God the father looks to you and says you are my beloved son you are my beloved daughter I can heal the wounds from all the sinful speech you've ever received today in this moment you've got to see that your words are on record before the throne of God above that they are irrevocable that we will be judged for them but when you turn to Christ those words have been judged past present and future in Jesus judgment and that means you're forgiven you can be healed you can be restored there's a judge there is a judge in the middle of history who took your judgment who took the mockery who took the screams who took the cries who took us shouting crucify him we used our words to crucify him so that he could say to you today you are my beloved you are forgiven your words can be healed let me ask you as we finish what sins of speech do you need to mortify in your life based on the gospel based on the fact that you really can be forgiven and your speech can be healed the wounds can be healed what sins of speech this week before we come back to it again do you need to mortify is it lies gossip flattery defamation blasphemy ridicule omission false promises manipulation intimidation cruelty the silent treatment self-deprecation boasting that's just a short list of the many and we'll look at more next time but what sins of speech do we need to mortify what who do we need to ask forgiveness of who do we need to extend forgiveness with our words to in what way can we become people who give life with our speech encourage tell people that we love them give them affirmation come today to god as we pray now in prayer and repent of your sins of speech this week turn to the lord again know that jesus christ really has dealt with all of it and provides every resource we need to heal and to grow as speakers let us pray father we do come now and take up just that prayer we are sinners that set hellfire with our speech quite often and so we confess to you even this week all the ways we have spoken carelessly we have many of us will have struggled in different ways we struggle with gossip we have struggled with defamation we have struggled with lies small lies maybe big lies lord maybe somebody here today is living through a long lie some of us come having never asked forgiveness today for something we said that really hurt another the list feels pretty endless we come today lord and bow our hearts before you and look again to our savior jesus christ the man who died on the cross who took the poison of the cup of our bitter speech so that we might hear the pronouncement beloved son beloved daughter so lord we there are people in this room today who have never heard that before we need to hear it come lord jesus give us new hearts change us heal us fix the wounds we've created and teach us to be new speakers lord may we be people who are growing into speakers who use our words as instruments of life and we pray all this now in jesus name amen